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PETS IN SPACE

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PETS IN SPACE 8

A SCIENCE FICTION ROMANCE ANTHOLOGY



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FROM THE EDITOR

Blast off into adventure and romance with Pets in Space 8!

We are eleven bestselling and award-winning authors who love science fiction romance stories, especially when they involve pets. Pets in Space® authors are proud supporters of Hero-Dogs.org, a charity that trains and places support dogs with disabled veterans and first-responders. 10% of the first month's sales go to this fabulous organization.

Thank you for choosing Pets in Space. If you're feeling frisky, please post a review of our anthology at your favorite bookseller. Just a few sentences about your favorite stories would really help.

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EXPERIMENTAL VOYAGE

BY RJ BLAIN

DESCRIPTION

When a crash causes xeno-botanist Camellia to lose her hearing—and the space exploration career she dreamed of—she jumps at the experimental program that will restore her hearing. The good news is that she'll finally get the chance to explore space. The bad news is that she'll be both a crew member and a test subject to the benevolent alien scientists who saved her.

Once the expedition is underway, she is amused by the alien crew and adores the Andean mountain cat whose DNA gave Camellia her life back. She doesn't know what to think about the sometimes rude, sometimes kind expedition pilot Waldren, who is also cat's handler.

When the expedition's mission gets a radical reboot owing a malfunctioning stellar gateway, Waldren is determined to get her and the expedition to safety. Can Camellia solve the mystery of the uncharted world they landed on? And can the crew figure out how to get back home again?

Most important of all, can Camellia trust her heart to the sweet cat and grumpy pilot who have come to mean everything to her?

I SAT in a silent concert hall and observed the symphony play. When I'd purchased the tickets six months prior, the thought of no longer being able to hear had never crossed my mind. After the accident, everyone in my life had suggested I skip the concert. Why go when I couldn't hear the performance? Why torment myself? I'd received offers to venture to museums and other activities involving my eyes or hands rather than my ears.

Why attend something I couldn't enjoy?

I lacked an answer beyond one: I had saved for years for the box seat ticket, where I could view the performances like a bird high in the sky, surrounded by the one thing I'd loved most before fate had twisted on me.

The symphony came to the planet once every ten years, and they stayed long enough for everyone to witness their performance if they wanted. Those who couldn't afford tickets worked behind the scenes to pay for their seat in the back rows.

Instead of listening, I felt the applause as a vibration through my seat, and I took in the shifting emotions on the faces of those around me. Sometimes wonder lit their eyes, and in the moments the music took a swift turn to some darker side, apprehension and dread clawed at the audience.

Except for me.

In a way, my attendance reminded everyone, myself especially, I had already beaten the odds. I had survived what most had not. Nobody had expected a spacefaring ship to plummet to the ground, which had resulted in an explosion. Nobody had expected the crash at all.

One moment, I had been participating in a wildlife study, registering plant DNA as part of a test to see if I qualified for space adaptation genes for the purpose of venturing to some new world. As a single-planet human with ninety percent pure genetics, I would have been a willing test subject on an experimental voyage to test modern human adaptability while seeking out new life-sustaining worlds. My job would have

been to study and categorize wildlife, plant and animal alike, on any planets we ventured to. For our first venture, we would have gone to known planets in controlled landings. Later, we would have journeyed to unexplored worlds on the edge of the explored universe.

For the following three weeks after that fateful moment, I'd clung to life in an orbiting medical clinic, a mercy ship that serviced planets lacking facilities for extreme trauma. Had I been on another world, one closer to the center of the universe, things would have been different. Even with a mercy ship heading over upon hearing news of the accident, it had been too late for me.

A shard of evolvulite remained embedded in my brain, as the mercy ship lacked the facilities needed to attempt the operation—and the places they'd consulted had given the same verdict.

Operating would kill me, where leaving the stone where it was might allow me to live a long but silent life.

Somehow, the evolvulite had preserved my life. When the ship had plummeted through the atmosphere to crash into the ground, I'd been on the edge of the survival zone. As such, I held the dubious status as the one closest to the impact point to emerge from the wreckage alive. From my understanding of the situation, I should have died.

Nobody knew what to think about the crystal lodged in my head. Nobody knew what to do about it, either.

Would I die without it? Would an operation, if I could find someone bold enough to perform it, restore my hearing? For every answer the doctors found, ten more questions cropped up. As I'd beaten the odds already, every surgeon I'd inquired with refused to tackle my situation. They wanted me to keep living—even if it meant I lived without ever hearing another note of music, the sound of laughter, or the whisper of the wind through the trees.

After the concert, I would be ferried back to the mercy ship for one last appointment before they ventured off to some other portion of space to do what good they could.

Once I went in for my final appointment, they could move on, waiting for the next mass incident in need of a portable hospital.

Without knowing what kind of evolvulite shard resided within my skull, there were few tests anyone dared to do. Each color resonated under different circumstances. What would happen to my brain if the shard began to resonate?

The doctors admitted nobody had tried embedding a shard of the dynamic crystal deep into someone's brain, and there were no medical records indicating anyone else had survived a similar injury. Without knowing the crystal's color, their hands were tied.

Perhaps elsewhere, someone might be able to do something for me, but the mercy ship and those on board had done all they could. If I wanted more care, I would have to venture away from my home world without a single guarantee of success.

I appreciated their caution and refusal to gamble with my life. However, I wanted more than my memories, and the concert reaffirmed my desire and willingness to reclaim what I had lost through no fault of my own.

Without risk, I couldn't win any rewards, and until I had lost my hearing, I had not realized how important sound had been in my life. My fingers could feel a cat purr, but I would never again enjoy the soothing rumble. Dogs still barked, but I could no longer tell if the animal expressed joy or anger.

The loss of bird song might be the one to break me. Without the peaceful morning symphonies, my days started on the wrong foot. Having to install a vibration buzzer on my bed and use a light box to jar me awake only worsened the problems for me. I adapted, but I resented my situation.

No, I resented my inability to do anything about it.

In most cases, medicine could restore lost eyesight, even for those who'd completely lost their eyes. Hearing could likewise be cured—but only in most. Medicine had progressed

to the point humans could be hybridized into an entirely new species.

With one twist of fate, with one stroke of luck, both unfortunate and fortuitous, I'd become an exception.

I might change my fate and my luck, if only I could identify what color crystal lurked within my head. The doctors had informed me, using a pen and a paper at my request because it felt more personal and real, that the crystal had somehow attuned to me, sparing me from the blinding headaches and other symptoms most with foreign objects embedded in their skull endured through.

I'd retained my memories. If anything, I'd become more advanced in terms of dexterity and physical strength.

One of the doctors claimed I'd been given a gift.

I longed to claw free of the silent nightmare trapping me.

What use was being able to jump farther and higher? What use was there in enhanced endurance? Sound mattered, especially for the members of an exploratory team. Even humans relied on sounds to detect approaching predators, and most explorers honed all their senses to survive the harshest conditions.

Explorers adapted, however.

Even without my hearing, I would follow that same path of adaptation.

Instead of regret over what I had lost, I left the performance hall determined to somehow reclaim what had once been mine. I would forever remain grateful to the mercy ship and her crew, but I wanted more.

Remaining on Schwana Major would not help me. No, if I wanted to hear, if I wanted to claim my place among the stars, I would need to find a way to venture forth on my own, without the expedition force I had spent so long training to join.

I already fell behind the other survivors, who'd worked relentlessly upon recovering from the accident and mourning

those who hadn't survived. A second, painful truth lingered. My presence frightened them, as I served as a reminder of what they, too, might lose if fate twisted the wrong way. Unlike them, I would need to find a new path.

And somehow, I would.

The space port thrilled me. The thrum of spaceships idling resonated in my bones, and while the sounds continued to elude me, the sensation somehow offered hope I might one day experience the discomfort of being on the tarmac headed for a ferry ride to the mercy ship orbiting the planet. I would never remember my first trip on the ferry. I'd been battling for my life, every breath a victory for the medical team fighting with me. As they still classified me as fragile, I got to ride on their ferry, which used specialized evolvulite drives to escape the atmosphere of the planet at a stately pace rather than at the high velocities most ships utilized to enter space.

If all went well, it would be my last journey on the ferry, and I would be cleared to travel to space in the traditional fashion.

Unlike many ships, which used a rocket-shaped body to streamline departure from planets while maximizing their ability to traverse space, the ferry reminded me of a strange disk with a curved top and gently sloping underside. All sides of the hull featured thrusters to allow the ship to hover and change directions. Directional thrusters located at the front of the ship allowed it to reverse as well, giving it the general agility of a hummingbird.

I suspected whomever had spotted the first hummingbird on Earth, prior to its destruction, had decided buzzbird lacked the same linguistical grace, as the sound their wings made was more of a buzz than a hum.

My world had become home to seventeen different species of hummingbirds rescued off Earth, although our stock had long-since evolved away from their ancestors. The bodies of

the original birds remained in the planet's aviary museum to showcase applicable evolution.

Most of our hummingbirds were larger than the Earth originals, with one exception, which had somehow retained its minuscule form. I suspected the general fragility of the species had given us humans reason to make them sanctuaries in which they could thrive.

Eight aviaries across the planet catered to the species, and before the accident, I'd gotten to see them up close and personal.

I'd seen bigger bees.

The pilot of the ferry approached, an older man who'd spent all his life working to save people like me, who'd been caught in the grip of misfortune. I didn't mind being a prize in his career, one of the cases he thought, for certain, he'd lose before making it to the mercy ship. He came armed with a digital blackboard, and he greeted me by name, Camellia.

During one of the quarantine orbits, right after my surgery when I was at highest risk of contracting diseases, he'd taken the time to teach me about the significance of my name, its origin from Earth, and how the flower had grown to have a planetwide meaning of love and affection—and in some cases, yearning or longing.

I'd bloomed into my name in more ways than I cared to think about.

As was our way, he handed me the board, and I greeted him by name, Olivier, a tree of importance to Earth and its many people.

We had olive trees, and the first time I had been able to walk after the accident, I had taken him to see one, showing him his namesake as he had taught me of mine. As a Deltan, Olivier's ship had not carried olive trees, and his face had expressed his delight at having finally seen what had shaped so much of his life.

As a Schwanan, my ancestors had fit every tree and animal they could onto their ship, many of them illegally, pushing the

limits of survivability until finding a suitable home. We'd somehow dodged evolving quite like some of the other generational ships. Some speculated we'd manipulated our DNA from the beginning, making use of cloning techniques to stay as close to *homo sapiens* as we could.

We'd maintained our generally purebred *homo sapiens* designation, although most referred to us as *homo sapiens Schwana* to distinguish ourselves from *homo sapiens Andromeda*, which had been the last of the surviving ships to reach and settle a planet.

In terms of the universal community, not all *homo sapiens* were created equal. *Homo sapiens Delta*, like Olivier, could reproduce with most other *homo sapiens*, boasting a more adaptable and robust reproductive system, gifting them with the highest numbers but least protections.

After we went through our usual greeting, Olivier wrote a longer note, which he handed over.

The mercy ship had sent word to its sister ships and beyond, and they'd received a medical team willing to consult on me about an experimental treatment. There were three primary catches. First, I would need to take part in an experimental voyage to test the general robustness of purebred *homo sapiens*, of which I counted as a Schwanan. As I would be the primary experiment, all costs of care would be covered. Second, I would need to be willing to put my schooling to work and test my xenodiversity rating in a live environment without prior exposure training.

While I'd been aware of other species in the universe, Schwana Major tended to have poor xenodiversity ratings due to our general inclination to keep to ourselves and study our environment without risk of outside variables destroying our experiments.

I had not yet taken the xenodiversity courses or tested my rating.

Lastly, I would need to be willing to keep a *homo sapiens* and his companion company for the duration of the voyage. The animal would be the contributor DNA for the

experimental treatment, and the *homo sapiens* in question supervised the animal.

I'd heard of hybridization, but *homo sapiens Schwana* had zero individuals who had undergone the procedures. There were numerous examples of *homo sapiens Andromeda* who had successfully taken on animal traits while maintaining their status as purebred *homo sapiens*.

I'd found the concept fascinating. I cleared the board and inquired if I qualified for hybridization.

Upon reading my question, he smiled and nodded, then he wrote another note, which he gave back to me.

If approved for hybridization, I would also be granted right to install a link, as the sectors of the brain modified were not close to the shard and the risk had been deemed marginal.

Excitement surged through me, and rather than write anything, I stared at him.

Olivier took the board from me and wrote another note, which informed me that due to the rigors of space, outside of a few trinkets, I would need to be willing to leave the planet without much, including warning.

The longer I waited for the operations, the less likely they were to succeed.

Even my clothing would be replaced at the cost of the expedition.

All they needed to begin operations was the experimental subject: me.

Some choices were easier to make than others, and I said, "Yes."

I would never know if I whispered or shout the word, but the pilot's smile promised I'd gotten the point across, and as was his way, he bowed to welcome me on board his ship.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MERCY SHIP, named *Dauntless* for the captain's tendency to be willing to travel to any sector of explored or unexplored space, resembled a pearl drifting in the planet's orbit. Unlike most large spacefaring vessels, *Dauntless* would forever remain in space until her decommissioning.

Officially, her name was a string of numbers and letters, but nobody used those.

Dauntless deserved better.

In the long tradition of mercy ships, the day her tour of duty ended, she would face one of two fates: she would be decked out with instruments and either propelled into some dying star or into a black hole. In either case, she would go out as she had come into the universe, in an act of service.

Every time I saw her, I hoped the ship made her way to some planet who wished for her to become a glorious museum, preserved for generations to come. The thought of such a vessel coming to a destructive end pained me.

As the ferry approached, a giant door opened to reveal a landing bay within, made of sterile stainless steel. The pilot landed on the pad, and we waited for the doors to close, the landing bay to be pressurized, and oxygen to be flushed into the area. On our way out, the process would be reversed, although I questioned how the ship managed to suck air in and out of the bay.

I'd always assumed large ships came with myriads of various crystals capable of producing oxygen. I regretted not having focused much of my education on evolvulite. The

common name of shiftgems intrigued me. What gave the strange stones their properties? How did the mineral impurities responsible for their variety of colors transform their abilities?

Were the different colors the reason they'd been dubbed shiftgems? Or could the crystal actually change its properties?

Outside of the very basics, I hadn't paid much attention to the stones. With one embedded in my brain, I needed to learn. It would become my responsibility, assuming the color of the stone was determined, to avoid situations where resonance might occur.

The last thing I needed was the crystal resonating while lodged within my brain.

Twenty minutes after we landed, Olivier came into the passenger area, gesturing for me to follow him. I unbuckled my belt, got to my feet, and carried my purse with me, wondering if I'd be able to keep it if I did venture off on some experimental voyage.

On the landing pad, a man with dark hair, vivid blue eyes, and a scowl waited, and at his feet rested a small, spotted cat with rings around its tail. At roughly twice the size of the domesticated cats exported from Earth to take over numerous planets in the universe, I suspected the beast was descended from a wild species. The animal's brown and gray fur, with some white on the tail, chin, and underbelly, shone in the overhead lights. The man said something, and I only knew the pilot replied because he made a gesture towards me.

For the next few minutes, I dealt with waiting, wondering what they discussed and why. The cat eyed me with interest, and after a while, it sauntered my way, giving my shoes a sniff. To keep from startling the animal, I bent over instead of crouching, holding out my hand.

The cat sniffed, decided I beat whatever conversation the men held, and demanded to be pet. As I would never refuse an opportunity to pet something I shouldn't, I sat on the landing pad, ignored the chill of the space-exposed steel, and stroked the animal's thick fur. A vibration beneath my fingers indicated the feline appreciated my attention.

As far as I could tell, the conversation ended, and Olivier wrote something on the board, which he showed me.

The man's name was Waldren, and the cat's name was Palta. If I consented to the experiment, passed the medical tests, and qualified for the link operation, Palta would be the source of my new genetics. I would maintain my status as *homo sapiens Schwana*, something that would offer me certain protections—assuming I survived the operation and the subsequent voyage. According to the note, Waldren belonged to a Veloc clan, and the experiment would involve close contact with the predatory species.

I understood, then, why xenodiversity mattered.

The Veloc tended to terrify most without special training. Most stood at least seven feet tall, boasted talons capable of punching through steel, and could—and did—eat anyone or anything stupid enough to irritate them. I tilted my head, considered Waldren, who eyed me with open suspicion, and wrote a reply inquiring on his species.

Olivier grinned and wrote a reply indicating the man was a variant of *homo sapiens*, and if I wanted to know more, I'd have to wait until after I conquered the operation so he could tell me himself.

How interesting. I thanked him and returned the digital board before giving Palta another pat and a scratch before rising to my feet, placing my palms against my upper legs and bowing deep to indicate my gratitude. I held the posture for the thirty or so seconds as was our way and straightened.

Waldren's brows furrowed, and his lips moved. I wondered at many things, from the tone of his words, the sound of his voice, and his volume. All three things could reveal much of his character, if only I could hear him.

If only.

The doctors had promised, over time, I would adapt to the loss of my hearing. After all, hadn't I grown in other ways? They'd focused on what I could do, accepting my fate. They wanted me to do the same.

Until every possibility proved impossible, I refused.

I decided to take the man's stance, his expression, and the hints of doubt as a challenge. If he thought I'd fail the qualifications, I would do my best to conquer every test thrown at me. If he believed I lacked the gumption and drive to succeed, I would remain, more persistent than any burr. If he said I couldn't, I would.

I engaged him in a staring contest, and to indicate I would not be backing down without a fight, I narrowed my eyes. Otherwise, I kept my body language relaxed and calm, aware animals perceived more than most *homo sapiens*.

His mouth moved again, and Palta lashed her tail. After a few moments, the cat decided the best place for her was stretched out over my feet. After a few moments, while she still beat at the floor with her tail, she rumbled. I couldn't tell if she purred or growled, but something about her behavior irritated Waldren.

I assumed he had attempted to call her over, and the cat had opted against listening to him.

With a rather amused grin, Olivier wrote something on the board and showed it to me.

I almost laughed at the request to see if I could pick up the cat and carry her, as it seems she had opinions, and Waldren had not been wise enough to harness and leash her.

I bent over, petted the cat, and worked my hands beneath her. Once I had a good hold, I hauled her up, situated her front paws on my shoulders, and made certain to cradle her back legs against my arm so she wouldn't claw the hell of me trying to secure her position.

Palta's rumbles intensified, and I stroked her thick fur with my free hand.

Olivier gestured for me to follow. Careful to keep from startling the cat, I obeyed. As I refused to be brought low by some stranger's doubt, I engaged Waldren in another staring contest, and rather than express doubt, I went with open skepticism, doing my best to raise a single brow.

For some reason, my brows appreciated uniformity, so rather than skepticism, I tended towards a more jovial expression. Either I'd managed to get my face to cooperate with me for once or he'd read between the lines, but it was his turn to narrow his eyes.

I allowed myself a smile and gave Olivier my full attention, as he retained control over the one viable way of communicating with me. With my first victory in hand, I worried about handling the cat more than the scowling man with vivid blue eyes who would become a significant part of my future, like it or not.

Rather than return to his ship after leading me through the mercy ship, Olivier stayed, and his job was to write down what the doctors said and handle basic communications. The method worked well, especially as Palta enjoyed being petted and tended to mouth at my hand if I ignored her for more than a few seconds. A rather grumpy Waldren decorated one of the nearby walls, keeping a careful eye on his cat. While I recognized I played with fire and would get burned, I found his jealousy over the animal's affections intriguing.

He resented the feline's abandonment of his person. Personally, I couldn't blame Palta. When given an option between sitting at his feet or occupying a warm lap, I would pick the lap, too. While my loss of hearing scarred me, nothing hampered my vision. If he descended to Schwana Major, I held zero doubt the single women would drool all over him and do their best to take him home.

Every time someone new and handsome came to our world, the single women hunted, often in packs. The man in question typically escaped when the women fought among themselves, resulting in nobody winning. Before the accident, I'd managed to lure off three handsome gentlemen, but I'd never done anything nefarious to them *or* taken them home.

I'd offered them an easy escape route, as I'd gotten the feeling they hadn't gone to the local watering hole to be the latest addition to the menu.

In one of the many waits for the medical staff to clarify part of the procedure to Olivier, I considered what I would have done had Waldren gone to one of the local watering holes. He would have become one of the planet's grand prizes, and had he greeted me with a smile rather than a scowl, I might've been tempted to test my luck. I drew lines, however.

I wouldn't fight other women over a man.

After what felt like an eternity but couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes, Olivier tapped my elbow to catch my attention and handed me the digital board along with a clipboard loaded with papers. According to his notes, the papers explained the procedures, the requirements for the voyage I would take to cover the costs of care, the risks associated with the procedures and the voyage, and the waivers required for the operation to begin.

Then, to my dismay, I learned Waldren was only part of the group that had come calling. He owned and cared for the donor animal, Palta. He also held responsibility for the team of four surgeons and the medical equipment required for the link installation and the genetic manipulation to restore my hearing.

Most importantly, they had the machines required to determine which color of crystal resided within my brain.

I took my time reading through the papers, making notations on the digital board for clarifications, particularly regarding the voyage. The paperwork simply stated I needed to go, not what I would be doing.

I handed the board to Olivier, who spent a few minutes conferring with Waldren and the doctors. I regretted I couldn't read lips.

What did I miss in the conversation? What tiny details did Olivier gloss over that might make a difference for me? I longed to listen to the tone and nuances of their discussions,

identifying what wasn't being said through the subtle pauses and changes in someone's voice.

My inability to be comprehend the discussion added to my resolve. Even if I needed to stay on the mercy ship before venturing out into space, I would. Sending word to my parents would pain me, as the paperwork made it clear they could not control all circumstances and I might never return to my home again.

Some risks were worth taking.

Olivier wrote a note and held it out to me, and I frowned at the indication I would essentially be the experiment, and my job would be to endure being monitored. Should I become bored, I would have sufficient educational opportunities, and if the voyage happened to venture to habitable planets, arrangements could be made to allow me to test my training in a controlled fashion.

I could work with that, and I nodded, returned to the paperwork, and signed in the appropriate places, initialed where requested, and triple-checking everything before handing the clipboard over to Olivier.

No matter what, I would be ready.

Over the next five days, I dealt with test after test. While Waldren's team evaluated my health, probability of survival, and otherwise prepared me for the series of operations that would either kill me or restore my hearing, the mercy ship planned its departure. On the sixth day, I wrote a letter to my parents that Olivier would deliver, acknowledged I understood the risks associated with my impending surgeries, and followed my pre-op directions to the letter, erring on the side of caution.

In the late afternoon the same day, I underwent sedation with the understanding one of three things might happen: I might die, I might live but remain deaf, or I would have restored hearing.

Technology had advanced in such a way where most disabilities, including deafness and blindness, could be conquered through operations. The crystal in my skull changed everything.

For the first time in at least a hundred years, there was a medical mystery. Some people had accidentally been caught in blasts involving evolvulite, but they'd had the shards removed or they were deemed low risk. For those patients, life went on as normal. They avoided situations that might result in resonance, which involved dodging trips into space and picking their home world with care.

After the number of operations and times sedated, I'd grown accustomed to my tendency to pick up where I'd left off. However, something had changed. Rather than snap to full consciousness, I lingered in a disorienting numbness, something I'd experienced few times prior. Training only went so far, and for those who might need it, coping with the consequences of stasis involved undergoing the procedure at least twice. In the paperwork I'd signed, I'd been aware I might be put into stasis as one of many post-op tests. I'd accepted the risk, especially as I rated higher than average in my responses to revival.

My heart and bodily fluids resumed normal operations at approximately twenty percent faster, with my hearing, sense of taste, and sense of touch reviving five percent faster.

What my time in stasis meant for me, I wasn't sure—and until I revived completely, I wouldn't begin to guess.

I'd survived, unless the afterlife was a disappointing continuation of life, outside of the body rather than within it. Time would only tell if I'd be trapped in silence forever, or if I'd be able to adjust to a new way of hearing.

While a struggle, I forced myself to be patient. Nothing I did would change the outcome.

And so I waited.

CHAPTER THREE

SOMETHING HUMMED NEARBY, soft and soothing in its regularity. I suspected it belonged to a machine meant to keep the room an appropriate temperature based on my personal biology during revival. Some people fevered, some suffered through chills, and those who performed frequent revivals had equipment capable of addressing such complications.

A light breeze played over my bare skin, indicating I maintained my temperature, another good sign I would emerge from stasis without significant distress. The relief over detecting some sound and recognizing it washed through me, and I basked in its glory.

Before the accident, such tones would have fallen into the nuisance category.

No longer. After months of silence, the humble hum consumed my attention, distracting from the other issues I should have dealt with, including attempting to open my eyes. I assumed I resided in a medical ward on some ship. Anywhere else would have had more noise.

On Schwana Major, hospitals monitored vitals with beeping machines and other tones, and the staff tended to use those cues to help them determine if a patient required assistance. They would turn the volume down or off in some circumstances, but the times I'd visited before the crash, they'd always been on.

I hadn't done much digging into the why of it. My general inclination to make assumptions often got me in trouble.

Once I got back on my feet, a process that could range between a few hours to several weeks, due to a variety of potential complications associated with restored hearing and altered biology, I'd make a point of changing my way of thinking.

Assumptions got me into trouble, always.

I opened my eyes to behold a feathered muzzle loaded with sharp, pointy teeth. In the few seconds it took me to process the existence of something large and predatory in my space, my brain opted to be of use for once, identifying the green plumage, general nose and nostrils, and the elongated face leading up to a crest as belonging to a Veloc.

The identification of the being helped a little.

Veloc liked humans—and not just for dinner.

I blinked, and the muzzle remained close, tilting this way and that. After a few moments, I realized the Veloc concentrated on something nearby on the edge of the hospital bed. As the predator paid me no mind, I opted to do the basic checks, determining I would be irritated by the IV catheter installed on my right arm given ten minutes and any reminder of its presence. While not truly uncomfortable, I disliked the sensation and would be doing my best to ignore it until set free from the contraption making sure my body kept functioning appropriately.

As they had not contained my left arm, my fingers moved on command, and the predator remained in my space, I decided it seemed fair to discover for myself if the feathers on the Veloc's muzzle were as soft and plush as they appeared.

One day, I would die due to petting something I shouldn't. I'd find out in the next few moments if today would be that day.

Appearances did not deceive, and the downy feathers and fur of the Veloc pleased me enough I settled into the serious business of stroking the entire length of the Veloc's nose before exploring the equally soft chin.

The Veloc blew air, and after a moment, let out a throaty chuckle. “This is the first time a patient has decided I am a pet. How interesting.”

From voice alone, I guessed the Veloc was male.

I wanted to cry, but I wouldn’t—not until I could be alone to cope with my relief. As the Veloc hadn’t removed my hand yet, I continued my petting activities. “Their loss,” I replied, pleased I managed to get the words out, although my voice proved to be hoarse and raspy. I suspected my time deaf contributed to that, as I had been hesitant to say anything upon learning I had zero ability to regulate my volume without the ability to hear. “Veloc species summaries need to be updated. You’re soft enough to be worth risking death to pet.”

“I was under the impression you have no xenodiversity training.”

I swallowed, tore my gaze away from the Veloc, and discovered a tray with a small cup of water and a straw on my left side. Abandoning my exploration of the Veloc’s muzzle, I shrugged and grabbed the drink and went to work relieving the dryness in my throat. Once my tongue resumed proper operation, I asked, “How was my revival time?”

“You revived from stasis in a rather impressive fifteen minutes, and you spent an additional thirty minutes enjoying the hum of the white-noise generator, as our ward tends to be silent. We did not wish to cause panic should the operation have gone as planned. It seems it has done its job well. We have worked with other deafened patients, although the nature of their injuries allowed us to perform more conventional operations. You challenged us, and we’ve learned a great deal about *homo sapiens* biology. This should prove most helpful should others be in a situation like yours, where conventional treatments do not work. Your new ears still heal, so I do ask you try to keep from patting your head for a few days. We kept you under sedation until the itching phase mostly completed. We quickly determined the itch drives you quite close to madness. It is unlikely you remember the episode, as you were still under light sedation.”

When I'd been initially healing from the shard being embedded in my skull, the itching had about driven me mad. "I apologize."

The Veloc trilled. "Don't apologize, for you did nothing wrong. We have a copy of your medical record, and there was a notation regarding the severity of the healing itch you had suffered through initially. We used the opportunity to test alternative treatments for it. They did not help, alas." Pulling out of my easy range, the Veloc straightened to his full height, and his emerald crest rose, displaying a collection of small crystals dangling from decorative chains. "My name is Heserael, and I am of the Emerald Crests. I am pleased to be of service. To enable the mercy ship to continue her good work, we have transferred you to our ship. Her name is *Wild Huntress*, and we typically use her for research, medical rescue, or romantic pursuits."

While I'd heard rumor the Veloc were the undisputed romantics of the known universe, I hadn't thought the stereotype to be serious. I'd thought the predators being willing to eat annoying humans to be more of a concern than any potential to be chased around space by a lovesick feathered murder machine.

The teacher who'd called them feathered murder machines even liked the Veloc—from a safe distance, where he wouldn't be in range to experience the lethality rating of their talons. With a close-up view of said curved talons, I understood my teacher's hesitations.

Should the Veloc take exception to my existence, I wouldn't be worrying about much of anything for long.

I forced myself to focus on the predator, considered his words, and blinked as what he said sank in. "Romantic pursuits?" I blurted. "In a *spaceship*?"

Heserael displayed his teeth in a grin. "My people enjoy lengthy hunts for a mate. This is one of the ships we use if someone in the clan wishes to pursue someone who travels among the stars. Alas, the only single entity among our crew is young Waldren, who is quite picky about females, surly by

nature, and perhaps a little too responsible for our liking. When he was given young Palta as a kitten, he swore he would do his best for her species, originally from Earth. We do our best for the species no longer able to return home. Unlike most of her kind, Palta enjoys traveling the stars, and where Waldren goes, she goes. She had her second litter of kittens an Earth year ago, and they are now fending for themselves with the care of new handlers, so she is free to roam for a few more years. Then she will have another litter of kittens. She's a most excellent feline mother and has strong, healthy litters. I have pictures if you would like to see them."

"I would," I replied, my eyes widening at the thought of kittens. "Are they cute?"

"Oh, the Andean mountain cats define what it is to be cute. Small but fierce, determined, and quite skilled at hunting. We Veloc enjoy taking these small but fierce predators with us on hunts. In the wilds on Earth, they were more inclined to hunt alone unless mating or rearing kittens, but time has changed them as well as the nature of space and space travel. Now the cats partner with a *homo sapiens*, and when a pairing forms, they stay together for life. Palta has not found her previous feline suitors worth taking into space with her, so she encouraged the males to go bother another female. She is quite prideful. Should she find a male worthy of her attention, young Waldren will have two companions for life."

Was Palta prideful? I remembered a purring bundle of fluff desiring attention. Did prideful felines seek attention? I realized I knew little of the animal I'd received DNA for to restore my hearing. "Is there a way to ask a cat if they're okay to have their DNA stolen?"

The Veloc hooted, and after a moment, I realized he laughed. "We were able to instill a basic understanding of why we stole a small vial of her blood, and she got to observe parts of your surgery, including the regeneration of your new ears. As yours are not working anymore, one part due to the catastrophic damage to your ear drums and inner ears, you now have a pair of cat ears much like hers. You also have a tail much like hers as well. You won't have noticed that yet

because of the localized painkillers mitigating the itching at the growth sites. You'll have an interesting time buying your attire in the future. We've noticed hybridization tends to result in tail growth in *homo sapiens*, so we did anticipate that. We were concerned you might grow claws, but we managed to limit the DNA alterations to your ears and tail. You'll find the tail to be useful for balancing once you get the hang of it."

"I have a cat tail now?"

"You do."

I narrowed my eyes. "Will I be able to purr?"

The Veloc's feathers fluffed, and then he whistled, hooted, and bobbed his head. "We are uncertain if your vocals have changed, so we would have to experiment with things that content you. Should you begin to purr, the answer is yes. As it is, we're in relatively new territory. While we can—and do—graft onto species fairly often, we did extensive genetic manipulation coupled with regenerative sciences, something not commonly done on adults. Genetic manipulations are often handled when the subject is young—an infant or still within the womb, to mitigate risk of trauma."

Interesting. If I suffered from trauma from the changes, I couldn't detect any of the signs of it. I expected to deal with trauma from the crash, however. "Do I still qualify as *homo sapiens*?"

"You do. As Palta's species originates from Earth, you will enjoy additional protections. That does lead me to what we need to discuss next. When we were reviewing your medical file, we found some issues likely stemming from the injuries you suffered during the crash. Under normal circumstances, we would have consulted with you first, but as we were using regenerative technologies as it was, we opted to go ahead and repair the organs in question. There were three in particular, excluding your brain, that had undergone significant trauma."

Ah. I had accepted I would die younger than most as a result of the crash. If the evolvulite crystal in my head didn't kill me, the various other sources of damage likely would. "My lungs were compromised, although I was told I would

regain ninety-two percent functionality, which is sufficient for my career. My kidneys and liver were also compromised, but not enough to disqualify me for my work. My hearing was the issue.”

“There is the issue of your ovaries and reproductive system,” the Veloc stated.

I stared at him. “I have one ovary left; one had been completely destroyed. My uterus was damaged beyond repair.”

“We corrected that,” he announced. “While we could not help you traditionally with your ears, we were able to use regenerative operations on all organs damaged in the accident. As such, you’re going to suffer from some hormonal fluctuations. We will need to do some treatments until your body regulates itself.”

My mouth dropped open, as I’d read the documentation the mercy ship had provided to me. They lacked regenerative machinery, as those tended to take a long time per patient, and their job was to save as many lives as possible. I’d occupied the entire ship for long enough. “I can’t afford that.”

The treatments started at a minimum of a hundred thousand standard galactic tokens per organ, a sum far over what I earned working for the school and taking on side jobs as needed for luxury spending.

The Veloc cooed, and he came close, bumping his soft muzzle to my cheek. “Do not stress yourself, little flower. You will not have any debts from your treatments. You are willing to let us experiment, and this in turn will help us save lives later. You will come deep into space with us while we introduce you to new species and monitor you, who has had no xenodiversity training. That I do not terrify you is a marvel. Waldren’s reaction to us the first time we met? Delightful. He can run quite far, quite fast. Not as fast as a Veloc, but he provided us with some good sport. He was under the impression his sister needed to be rescued. In reality, she was being romanced by one my kin and found him to be pleasing. As such, she kept him.”

I grinned at the thought of the feathered murder machines chasing after Waldren and scaring the life out of him. “That sounds like quite the story.”

“I would be pleased to tell it to you, and I will do so when he is present so you can delight in his reactions. His face tells a story as well, and I would not wish to rob you of such joy. Now that I have confirmed your revival statistics for our registry, we will begin preparing you for life in space. You have not been conditioned for space, correct?”

“Those courses would have been next year,” I replied, fighting off the surge of disappointment. While my schooling and plans were on hold, probably permanently, I had something better: a guaranteed ticket to the great unknown. “I’m insufficiently trained for my intended role in expeditions.”

“You are perfect for our needs. There are few *homo sapiens* with a willingness to venture into space without conditioning, and those who do are victims of trafficking or kidnapping. We help them overcome their trauma, but we do not learn about the consequences of space without conditioning. I did not expect your natural xenodiversity rating, but I am sure you will be tested on the journey somehow—and we will be watching your reactions when that moment comes.”

“Where are we at now?” I asked.

“We are in orbit around your home world. Waldren suggested that we should make certain you can see the planet in her full glory before we depart. The mercy ship has long gone, but we have access to a ferry for supplies, and we have gone to the surface as needed.”

Huh. The surly Waldren had wanted me to be able to view my home before our departure? The unexpected gesture gave me pause, and I considered my initial impression of the man. Upon determining I would need to study the man and his cat further, I asked, “How long has it been?”

“You’ve been sleeping for three weeks,” he reported.

I appreciated the strange sense of balance the time offered. For three weeks after the crash, I had battled for my life, emerging deaf and without prospects. Three weeks to gain back my hearing was a small price to pay. “Well, that’s going to involve rehab,” I muttered.

The Veloc hooted a laugh. “Less than you think. We made use of some new techniques to minimize the damage bedrest typically does. You should be stable on your feet without much work and ready for most activities within a week. You’ll be able to start walking as soon as I remove the catheter and bring you clothes, although I will help you dress. You may experience vertigo from your new ears. This is something we have little experience with, as most who gain these adaptations are not otherwise deafened. We did do what we could for your eardrums and inner ears, but I can’t promise if the evolulite embedded within your brain will ever allow for you to hear as you once did. But before that, I have questions, and they will surely drive you mad by the time we finish.”

“Do your worst, Heserael. Anything to repay my debt to you and everyone who helped me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

HERSERAEL QUESTIONED everything about my life, from my first memory to the moment of the crash. He evaluated my education with an intensity my professors would appreciate. Halfway into being grilled on the flora and fauna of Schwana Major, a scowling Waldren stepped into the room with Palta at his side. The cat abandoned him, jumped onto the bed, and flung herself across my legs, purring loud enough I questioned if I could talk over her. Rather than try, I began the serious business of petting the feline.

She kneaded at the bed, and her purring strengthened.

“You were supposed to update us three hours ago,” Waldren announced, engaging the Veloc in a glaring contest.

The Veloc flattened his crest and hissed at the human, his feathered tail fanning. “I have been busy questioning the patient.”

“About plants.”

“It is important to establish her recall, especially considering the damage done to her brain. A thorough exercise in recollection is vital in determining mental acuity.”

Waldren stepped into the room, and the Veloc swiped at the man with his claws. With a low chuckle, he sidestepped, twisted, took hold of the Veloc’s wrist, and somehow managed to floor the predator, dumping him into the hallway. “You could have taken the five minutes to give us an update, including her revival times and if there were any complications.”

I blinked, struggling to comprehend how a human, one the fraction of the size of the Veloc, had managed such a toss. “Are you a sorcerer?”

“Sorcerers aren’t real,” Waldren replied, raising a brow my way. “But I’m neither a psychic nor do I possess psionic abilities. That is a self-defense move I was taught as soon as it became clear I would not be rescuing my sister from her Veloc tormenter.”

“Husband,” Herserael grumbled from the floor before picking himself up, fluffing his feathers, and huffing at Waldren. “Husband is not another word for tormentor or torturer. I assure you, your sister is cared for and beloved.”

According to Waldren’s grunt, he didn’t agree with the Veloc.

What had I gotten into? Perhaps without the fuzziness in my head, a side-effect of the painkillers and remedies meant to keep my new ears and tail from itching, I might have been able to discern something about the situation. I scratched Palta behind her ears, which she seemed to appreciate. I held up my arm, displaying the removal of the catheter and the bandage covering the puncture wound. “I’ve been told once we finish testing my mental acuity, physical therapy will begin. Physical therapy also includes trauma therapy if seeing myself with Palta’s ears has consequences.” I shrugged. “There’s also the issue of adapting to my tail and determining if I have the ability to purr.”

“Purring is a priority for her,” Herserael stated, and he stepped back into the room. “But as you are here, her revival time was fifteen minutes, although she did not become active for quite some time after. She enjoyed the sound of the white-noise generator, so I let her be while she adapted.”

“You should pet him, Waldren. He’s quite soft.”

“You pet him?” the man blurted, and his eyes widened.

“I even kept both hands. That’s how I’m inevitably going to meet my end. When I opened my eyes, his muzzle was right there. Why *wouldn’t* I pet him?”

“He is a sentient being,” Waldren replied in a dry tone. “That alone is reason not to pet him.”

“But he was in my space. If he hadn’t wanted to be petted, he wouldn’t have put his muzzle *right there*.” I used my left hand to demonstrate how close he’d been when I’d woken up.

Herserael whistled, his feathers settled, and he regarded Waldren with his head tilted to the side. “Before this turns into a misunderstanding, I needed to correct an issue with some of the hoses near the top of the bed, and that was the best place for me to get a view of the problem. I understood I ran a risk of being smacked by a flighty human. Her curiosity and general inclinations should make our xenodiversity tests rather... interesting.”

Waldren eyed me before focusing on the Veloc. “Xenodiversity is an individual trait. It is for her benefit should she prove resilient when introduced to new races. But this may change the scope of our research.”

“I have been training to leave Schwana Major from a fairly early age. I’ve been aware that I would encounter other species. For some, even the various subspecies of *homo sapiens* are problematic. While I haven’t had the courses for xenodiversity yet, it’s something I’ve considered for most of my life. What use am I as a researcher of biology if I run away from every species I encounter? Of course, I may need to go through remedial training. I really will die from petting something or someone I shouldn’t if I’m not careful. In good news for you, I do not typically have any irresistible urges to pet other *homo sapiens*.”

Waldren sighed. “Please try to avoid petting people without their permission.”

Hooting a laugh, the Veloc went to one of the walls and pressed his hand to a square panel, revealing a storage closet. He pulled out a set of folded clothes. “Go, so we might finish this today. Physical therapy will take up the rest of the day. I will make certain she is appropriately fed. Go bother one of our other clan mates.”

Waldren grunted but he whistled, which caught Palta's attention. She flattened her ears and hissed at him.

I grinned and rewarded the feisty feline with another few strokes before saying, "Go along with Waldren, Palta. I'm sure physical therapy will be worse than boring. You can keep him in line for the duration."

While I had no idea how much the cat could understand, she hissed again but hopped off the bed. With her tail lashing, she swiped a paw at the man, who stared down at her with a raised brow. He emerged unscathed, and Palta spat a few more curses before settling into her spot at his side.

"Her methodology bears fruit," the Veloc observed. "Perhaps you should retire to your quarters and engage Palta with her toys and give her the petting she is obviously owed."

Waldren retreated, and I fought my urge to laugh at his surly ways. "Why is he so grumpy?"

"He grew up as part of a failed colony, and by the time my clan found him and his sister, they were both a bit wild. They were the only survivors. Now he is surly, as he was raised to be a free spirit. You'll find his attempts to hunt Veloc amusing, I'm sure. Don't worry about his abrupt behavior. He means no harm. He simply sees no need for the niceties of humanoid societies. He would rather fly his ship, chase the stars, and only interact with people he deems to be worth his time. His xenodiversity rating is rather low—the lowest allowed for frequent space travel, truth be told. But he is good at what he does, and if he decides he likes you, he is a worthy companion." Leaning beyond the doorway leaving the room, the Veloc called out, "You probably taste as bad as you stink!"

Waldren responded with a snort, which drew hooted laughter from the oversized predator.

"Dare I ask?" I grabbed the folded clothes, which were in a similar style to the grays and greens the staff of the mercy ship wore but a pale tan color. Without bothering to waste the time on asking the Veloc to leave, I went to work getting dressed, wincing at the stiffness in my joints. "I'm going to need to walk this off."

“After you eat so you are properly fueled,” the Veloc replied, keeping an eye on me as I finished pulling the garments into place. “After you adapt to wearing basic space attire, we’ll get you fitted for a proper suit. The color choices will not be ideal, but you will have some choices. Black, dark blue, a few greens, and so on. As your teachers and family indicated you become troublesome should you be permitted to become bored, we’ll be training you for doing salvage in addition to space walks.”

“Salvage?” I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“When opportunity allows, we serve as a rescue ship. When it does not allow, we fund our expeditions salvaging from derelicts. We recover ship parts, shiftgems, and so on. It will give you something productive to do, and after our voyage, you will have an additional career path open to you.” The Veloc’s crest rose. “If you wish to irritate my featherless kin, you will express interest in learning how to fly. This ship is his baby—a present from our clan for daring to steal away his sister, his only family. He does not yet realize or accept he is part of our clan. Don’t fret overly much about his general attitude. It is no fault of his, nor is it fault of yours. He came to the clan troubled, and that is the armor he wears to protect himself and his feline friend.”

I’d just assumed Waldren had been jealous I’d petted Palta. As it was no business of mine, and I needed to focus on what was important, I replied, “If he wants to be friends, he’ll be friendly. If he doesn’t wish to be friends, this is no problem of mine. I would rather focus on repaying my debt.”

“You will find that is simple enough for you to repay. Some humans can accept such a loss. Your spirit could not. We have seen it, time and time again. And so, we were contacted. They identified your inability to cope.”

“I love music. I love birdsong. Most of the things I love require hearing,” I replied.

“Yes. And when such things are usually within the realm of science to cure, it would be even more damaging for you. If

it had been your sight, you likely would have been able to accept the injury.”

“I wouldn’t have done well being blind.” I grimaced at the reality of my situation. “I do not wish to sound ungrateful.”

“You do not sound ungrateful. You are merely honest about yourself and your personality. Now, we will begin with a short walk to the galley, where you will sit while I make you a nourishing soup.” Herserael positioned himself so he could help me if needed. “Take your time with each step. You will be weak, and it is not abnormal for balance to be compromised after such an operation.”

“Was the link installed?” I asked, and mindful of his directions, I took care with walking. Within a few steps, I understood his concern. I’d lost a lot of muscle during the operation, complicated from the loss of fitness I’d endured following the crash. Physical therapy would keep me busy, and I’d work hard at it, along with every other obstacle they tossed at me.

“Your link was successfully installed, and while you were under sedation, we tested your chips. Right now, we have it turned off, but you’ll begin your training soon. The chips were a gift from the owners of the ship that crashed on your world.”

The crash had been an accident and nothing more, but the company owning the ship had made efforts to make amends, funding a great deal of the operational expenses of the mercy ship of their own volition. Linker chips cost a small fortune—more than I’d ever owned in my entire life. “Oh. Please thank them for me. Did they also help cover the cost of the link?”

“They’re funding a great deal of the research on this voyage,” the Veloc admitted. “We were going to be the primary funders, as we could, but they suffered from a great deal of remorse.” Herserael patted his feathered chest with his hand. “I have some abilities as an empath, and I have some abilities to sense the truth. They were earnest in their remorse. You have been gifted with the best link money can buy, and a full set of chips so you can learn without being overcome from

too many inputs at once. But first, it is time to feed you—and then the voyage begins in earnest.”

Herserael’s soup contained tentacles.

In good news, after a few minutes, the tentacles no longer moved, which greatly increased my ability to choke them down. The broth itself appealed, but the idea I needed to battle my dinner baffled and alarmed me.

The Veloc hooted his laughter over my predicament, and he took notes on my reactions. “Your xenodiversity rating for sentients unlike yourself is high, but I see you may struggle with the culinary portions of the voyage.”

“Why are there tentacles?” I whispered, poking one of the clusters with my spoon. It remained still, although I couldn’t help but notice that they’d curled around a bright orange vegetable. While we had orange vegetables on Schwana Major, none of them were covered in lumps and lengthy protrusions. “Some of these tentacles had it out for the orange things in their final moments.” Setting aside the spoon, I picked up a knife and began the process of freeing the tentacles from the part of the meal I might actually like. “What *are* these things?”

Herserael hooted his laughter, and his crest rose. “This is an exposure experiment. This dish was found in one of the old Earth records on a generational ship. The ship also had stocked the ingredients necessary to create it, and we maintain the stock on Veloci Minor. The orange things are carrots, a root vegetable highly favored by *homo sapiens* living on Earth. The tentacles are from a marine creature, although we lab grow the tentacles rather than the entire animal. It’s part of medical regenerative experiments and DNA cloning work. The movement is from general stimuli to the nerves still within the tentacles. We are not precisely sure how this works, as there is no centralized nervous system.”

“There’s no brain,” I deciphered, giving the tentacles another poke. “Will I starve to death if I don’t manage to eat this?”

Shaking his head, the Veloc went into the galley and brought another dish with him, which he sat beside my bowl. “This should be more comfortable for you.”

I investigated the plate to discover a roasted bird of some sort, smaller than anything I’d eaten before. After freeing more of the carrots from the various tentacles attacking them and giving everything else a try, I went for the grand prize of the meal, although I took the time to investigate to make certain there were no surprises lurking within the cavity.

Following hooted laughter, Herserael said, “There are no traps or tentacles, I promise. This is quail, another Earth bird that adapted well to our world. We raise them in massive flocks, wild and domesticated, to take into space with us. The birds are small and make excellent treats for the deserving. We made certain to bring a large supply of frozen stock for you. We have shelf-stable rations for ourselves, and while nutritious, we have found that pleasurable foods enhance healing. Of course, we are testing your tolerances at the same time. You did better than young Waldren.”

A snort behind me revealed the man had come calling. “You took it easy on her. I had the entire animal, and you’d decided to merge dinner with a science experiment to determine how long the tentacles would keep moving after confirmed death. The answer to that was longer than anyone felt comfortable with. I found the experiment to be useful, however. I learned to cook so I would never be exposed to your evils again. Camellia, do not take him too seriously. If he shoves you far beyond your comfort zone, I can cook for you. Veloc have opinions when it comes to what they’re willing to eat. You do not have to eat those things. The quail is good, though.”

I grinned at Waldren’s general attitude, which blended irritation and gratitude. His words implied he resented the Veloc, but the fond exasperation in his tone hinted at another story.

Just to see what he would do, I mustered my courage, took up my weapon of choice, the noble spoon, and scooped up one of the singular tentacles, braced for the worst, and shoved it into my mouth.

The broth, which was on the spicy side, did a good job of masking whatever flavor the tentacle had, although the texture had me wrinkling my nose. I chewed, and once certain I wouldn't gag, I swallowed. As that piece went down without attempting to murder me, I vanquished my foe, nose wrinkled the entire time. As I was wise, I saved one of the carrots for last, as I liked its almost sweet flavor. "I would like to pass on any other dishes containing tentacles. If I wanted to consume rubber, I would chew on a spaceship."

The Veloc trilled before hooting his laughter. "Did you know rubber comes from plants? Across the known universe, there are over thirty thousand species of rubber-producing plants. Veloci Minor, my home world, has a thousand common species of rubber-producing plants, and we're considered to have a less diverse stock. Earth had well over two thousand different species, and one of the generational ships had a seedbank with their variants. Many consider Earth to be of little significance in many ways; beyond its status as a premier evolvulite producer and target for planet busters, it offers little on the universal stage beyond interesting sentients. Rubber is one of the few resources valued, and Earth's stock was completely diverse from other stocks. Earth also has a reputation for interesting culinary choices, for which we're grateful for. We Veloc do appreciate variety. While *homo sapiens* are interesting enough, they're a little like fleas. If left to their own devices and permitted to do as they wish, they become an infestation."

I snickered, as even on my world, which was predominantly *homo sapiens* with little interaction with other species, we had a similar joke we tossed around with glee. "It's been well over a thousand years now, but people still tie *homo sapiens* with the world we cannot return to. Why?"

"It is always important to remember where you came from, and that is the birthplace of your species." Herserael regarded

Waldren, who joined me at the table. Palta hopped up onto the chair beside me and began purring.

I fell prey to the cat's charms and put aside my meal long enough to pet her and assure her she ruled over the ship and its denizens, most of whom I had yet to meet. Once satisfied she wouldn't feel completely neglected, I returned to my meal. "Can she have a piece of the quail?"

Waldren scowled, grunted, but nodded. "She loves hunting them on Veloci Minor. I usually buy or catch a few for her and set her loose in one of the storage rooms with a course set up to challenge her. If opportunity allows, I'll take her to a rocky area and set loose a bird with clipped feathers so she can practice hunting."

I pulled off a piece for her and offered it to her. To my amusement, she bared her teeth and moved with slow and deliberate care, accepting the treat.

The instant I released the meat, she jumped off the chair and ran off with it to feast.

"She's like a larger version of a house cat."

"Earth's contribution of cats and dogs to the universe is truly cherished," the Veloc stated. "And the breeds enjoyed a great deal of genetic manipulations to diversify them and improve their chances of survival among the stars. Except for one species we worked with, which had no genetic diversity and did not appear to suffer from the lack of diversity. The species still struggles, but as they have so limited genetic diversity, we experimented with them. We have successfully cloned and bred hundreds of the animals with great success and minimal genetic therapy required to keep them happy and healthy. A breed of spotted cat, quite lovely. Much larger than Palta here, but a delightfully cunning and fast predator."

Waldren's surly expression eased to something close to amusement. "The Veloc like any predator capable of keeping up with them at a run, and these cats can. But the animals are also not much smaller than *homo sapiens*, and they require a great deal of care."

“He is trying to state they are not pets, and you would be wise to avoid petting them should you encounter them unless the animal happens to be leashed and you’re invited,” Herserael translated.

“I see. Pet a Veloc once, and I’m branded for life as an irresponsible petter of the furred and feathered among us.” I considered my statement, shrugged, and added, “It’s not an incorrect judgment. Had you corrected me with a bit of violence, I probably wouldn’t have been inclined to continue testing my luck. And because you *didn’t* protest, I’m going to test my luck. You should pet him, Waldren. He’s really soft.”

“As I have been dragged, while struggling and screaming, into a nest of Veloc to give my sister a hug and participate in their evening displays of affection, I’m aware Veloc feathers are soft. As I’m aware Veloc feathers can be quite plush and enjoyable, I don’t judge you for your drugged inclination to continue to pet him. Had he wanted you to stop petting him, he would have stopped you one way or another.”

“At some point, when I can comm with my family, I’m going to tell them I pet a Veloc and did not die.”

The Veloc’s whistle reminded me of a giggle. “We have muzzles for my clan we wear when distressed or ill to keep incidents at a minimum. If you wish to impress, I would be willing to wear one for you so you can show me, your new pet, off. My mate will find my behavior most entertaining. When I entertain her, she entertains the idea of new chicks. Ours are fledged and have gone to nests of their own.”

I eyed the Veloc with interest. “How do you teach them to fly? Throw them off something and see how hard they hit the ground? You don’t have wings.”

Herserael hooted fluffed his feathers, and replied, “The younglings go on a short venture into space, use a glider, or otherwise engage in some form of activity that mimics flight. We complain early and often that we are most marvelous predators stuck on the ground.”

Waldren snorted. “Don’t listen to him. Most Veloc are horrified of traveling into space, so it’s a rite of passage for

them, proving they are brave and strong enough to go to the stars. The misfortune of preparing the young Veloc for their first flight tends to be mine. I suspect that Herserael's mother threw his egg around in early development—he is one of the few Veloc who truly enjoys going to space. The rest of the crew is one part insane, one part driven to help others. They are not quite as enthused about space travel.”

The Veloc's crest lifted, and he mock swiped a claw in Waldren's direction. The man ignored the feathered predator, his focus remaining on me. Later, I would take some time to think about their strange relationship. I took a small bite of the quail to determine the Veloc worked magic with food, as the skin was crisp, the meat was juicy, and the flavor enticed me enough I planned on sucking at the tiny bones until the bird had nothing left to give. “Thank you for the meal,” I said before digging in.

“It seems she likes quail,” Waldren stated, not bothering to hide his amusement over my behavior. “I was sacrificed to inquire when we can schedule our departure.”

“After the meal, so she can take some time to view her world. Please plan for a comm so she can speak with her family prior to our departure. It will be quite some time until she can return.”

“I'll see it done. Enjoy your meal, Camellia,” Waldren replied before retrieving Palta, scooping the cat up so she wouldn't be able to delay him, and leaving the galley.

The Veloc waited until certain the man had departed before sighing, giving himself a shake, and saying, “Please do not mind his behavior. Palta was gifted to him when it became clear to us that he struggled after his sister became part of our clan. Your situation has reminded him of the mortality of all things, and while we have taken great care to extend Palta's lifespan through genetic manipulation, I suspect that he gets reminders he would rather not have when he sees you with her tail and ears. And he is much like you—such an injury would render him unable to cope with his life's circumstances. He will adapt to those fears in time, I'm sure. His bubble of security has been popped. We can accomplish so much, but

your situation is a reminder that we cannot truly control life and death.”

“And I live because I have an evolvulite crystal embedded in my brain, but at the cost of my hearing.”

“It is a clear stone, we suspect as perfect as such shards come. We don’t know if the stone broke or was part of the cargo, but yes. It is a life-giving stone offering you life. It defies categorization as well. It simply will not do what stones of its nature should do. When we did our tests, we searched for evidence of resonance to identify the color, and it did not respond—not in ways we expected.” The Veloc paced, and his tail lashed from side to side.

I wondered at the motion. Canines lashed their tails when excited. Cats lashed their tails when agitated.

What did the Veloc say with his body language?

“What does my crystal do, then?”

“We’re simply not sure. Anything that it does that might cause you distress, it stops doing. The instant resonance begins, the stone becomes inactive. We only caught this because we had so many pieces of monitoring equipment on you, searching for any changes in your brain activity. When exposed to anything that makes clear shiftgems resonate, your brain activates in the damaged sector. What we don’t know is if we can induce a state of light resonance to restore your base ability to hear.”

“You can induce light resonance?”

“We have pieces of health monitoring equipment that can, yes. Clear stones are ideal for our work. We still don’t fully understand what makes evolvulite so versatile, but we have a theory. Because you live, it lives—and it does not want to die any more than you do. We’ve known the stones are capable of bonding with a living host, but we’ve never seen it bond in such a way as you have with your stone. But the universe is a strange and marvelous place, and you add to the mystery of the wonder that is life. Take your time finishing your meal. I will go help young Waldren make arrangements for you to

“speak with your family—and we will brief them on what not to say or do.”

“Like gush over my new ears?” I guessed.

“Precisely, as I would like to work with you for a while to acclimate you to your new circumstances. Within a few days, you will be ready to behold yourself in a mirror. Today is not that day. But do not fear, we have been keeping your family updated with your progress, so they know you are alive and will be well soon enough.”

CHAPTER FIVE

AS I WAS BARRED from using mirrors, Herserael handed taming my hair, which had suffered from a significant amount of general neglect. What would have taken me ten albeit painful minutes cost over an hour, as once the Veloc decided I needed to be made properly presentable, he refused to accept anything other than perfection.

Near the end of the process, Waldren came to check that I'd survived the feathered menace's tender care. He caught sight of me and broke out into laughter. "Human heads are not crests to be adored, Herserael."

"Blasphemy. She deserves adornments, and it is our clan's honor at stake. Her crest needed a great deal of work, and she has suffered much, so she is deserving of a few baubles."

"At least you gave her baubles in clip format. I've seen what you lot do to my sister's head, and those trinkets do not come out without a great deal of work, effort, and frustration."

"That is the idea, so your sister does not have to do much to maintain her beautiful crest. And anyway, her mate does all the maintenance and enjoys every opportunity he can to dote upon her. You cannot deny the truth! Her crest is a marvel."

Waldren shook his head and sighed. "I'm not denying anything. I'm just warning Camellia that you Veloc are obsessive, and if she wants to be able to do her own hair again, that she should steer clear of you and your wicked talons."

"I feel an update of the Veloc species records is in order. Nowhere in anything I've read indicates they're oversized feathered hair stylists. Murder machines? Yes. Stylists? No."

Walden snickered. “They’re quite skilled murder machines, yes. If you want to leash a Veloc, I have secured plenty of volunteers, and an assortment of tethers, ropes, and similar have been brought out that easily attach to their jewelry. I recommend you do not ask why they are so skilled at leashing themselves. It becomes quite lewd.”

I joined him in snickering. “The species record should be updated with a general warning that Veloc are perverts. They disguise this by claiming they’re romantics.”

“You’re not wrong.” Waldren checked over his shoulder, and I realized Palta hadn’t accompanied him. “If you’d like Palta to be available for the call, we may have to delay. The beast sleeps, and she does not take kindly to her rest being interrupted.”

“Understatement,” Herserael muttered. “I will present a picture of your feline for her family to enjoy, or we can use the portable comm so we can show her family around the ship. Assuming, of course, you do not mind the invasion to your nest.”

Waldren circled me, and after examining the Veloc’s work, he picked up one of the bejeweled hair sticks, which was encrusted with green stones, and raised a brow at the Veloc.

“You are worse than any peacock,” the Veloc complained, plucking the ornament out of Waldren’s grasp before making an adjustment to my hair style and adding the stick. “She has sufficient green tones to be marked as belonging to the Emerald Crests for the duration. Does that satisfy you?”

“For the moment.” Waldren did another pass around me before nodding. “This works. If you’d like to hold the call on a portable unit, I can set it up and operate it, and Camellia can hold the reception unit. I’ll set it up so she won’t be able to see her image. Palta’s in her bed, and I already tidied, expecting a tour of the spaces meant for *homo sapiens*. Ah, that reminds me, Camellia. We do have modular quarters on this ship, and we have the tools required to adjust the layout for your liking. Our accommodations are a little better than on most ships, but space is still tight, so there’s only so much we can do. I’ll

show you what I've done with my space, and we have a standard setup. Do not keep the standard setup; you'll be on board for a long time, and it's a way of turning the space into your home. If we have to quarantine in quarters, you'll appreciate the customizations."

I would get to customize my temporary quarters? I'd heard of such things, but they were not features of the ships I would have been taking to venture into space. "I'd love to see the customizations and learn how to use the systems if I can."

"We can start looking at the options after you have a chance to speak with your family," Waldren promised. "I will go get the comm ready. Do you want to begin at the control center, Herserael?"

"That works. Go make yourself and your ship pretty for our remote guests. I will finish here."

"Ten minutes," Waldren replied, marching out of the room at a rather brisk pace.

"I feel like I could rather rapidly develop whiplash observing him. One moment, he is sullen or angry, and the next, he is rather energetic."

"He quite loves this ship, and he enjoys showing her off to those who live planetside. His favorite moment is when he lures someone else into venturing among the stars. You will get used to it. Expect his tendencies to show up sooner than later."

"Tendencies? What tendencies?"

"The ones where he is compelled to do his best to convince you that you adore space travel. His determination to have you customize your space on the ship is the first symptom of these tendencies. He is an amusing human. I find your whole species is prone to episodes of charming ridiculousness. I do not expect any problems with your adaptation to space travel. Some mental stimuli and opportunities for socialization should be sufficient. You'll get exercise as part of your physical therapy, which is often an issue. We have gravity set close to your planetary norm, so you won't suffer any consequences

from that. Gravity on Veloci Minor is a little lighter, so you'll feel strange when you first land. Your steps will feel bouncier than you expect, you'll jump higher, and so on."

"We have done gravitational exercises," I said, grinning at the Veloc. "It was a treat we had earned because everyone scored sufficiently high on a test. They had a gravitational manipulation system in from another world, so we got to test it and learn the basics of gravity adaptations. It was interesting."

"Those are excellent training tools. We have the ability to adjust gravity throughout the entirety of the ship, although we only have three sectors. The storage bays each have their own gravitational controls, and the rest of the ship is separated from the storage bays. If you would like to train for planetary exploration in different gravity conditions, I'm sure an arrangement can be made. We have hunting games we play in various gravity conditions, although setting up the course takes several hours."

I would need some quiet time to decompress from the various sources of excitement the Veloc insisted on flinging my way. "Do you have data libraries?"

"If you would like to read, we have plenty of books available. We also have a variety of link-based libraries for your enjoyment. Reading books through your link is an excellent way to adapt to the system. You'll also be able to do audio-imprints, but we will not be activating that function on your link until you have been given more time to readapt to having your hearing. It could potentially create trauma or overwhelm you. We will take small steps to keep you comfortable." The Veloc showed me his long, pointy teeth in a wide grin. "It would be a pity for you to be driven mad on your first voyage into space. But don't worry, should you descend into madness from boredom and lack of training for space travel, we are equipped to handle treatments."

"Well, that's something at least," I replied, marveling over the Veloc's general attitude. "Are all Veloc relentlessly optimistic?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

What had I gotten myself into?

Waldren handed me a small screen, and to my delight, it offered a clear view of my parents, who sat at their table together. While we had similar tech on our world, most tended to use voice-only comms to save on costs. They hadn't owned a video-comm unit, and while I wondered where they'd gotten it, I refused to question our good fortune. "Hey!"

My parents laughed at me, and my mother went as far as to point at the screen. "Your face!"

It took me a moment to realize I'd probably exposed myself as excited over the new technology I got to play with. "Look, I'm not responsible for the things my face says. You know this, Mom. I am sorry I didn't talk to you before abandoning the planet for a spaceship, though."

It was my father's turn to laugh. "We're not upset, and you have no reason to be sorry. You're an adult, you worked hard to get a chance to venture into space, and we respect that. You gave the medical team good instructions, and after the crash, you'd told us you wanted your hearing back. You have always had our blessings to do everything necessary to get what you needed."

Needed, not wanted. I appreciated that. Any other time, I might have cried over the situation. Not this time. I would escape the call with my pride somewhat intact. My expression probably spoke on my behalf, but I'd ignore my inability to maintain neutrality with them. "Still, I probably should have talked with you about it first."

"And hold up the nice people who flew across the universe to offer you aid? Nonsense. You should tell whoever oversees your physical therapy that you deserve more rigorous exercise for even thinking about overly inconveniencing them."

Waldren smirked, and Herserael hooted a laugh. "I will make sure she is motivated to run faster and longer at a pace she will not appreciate."

“I’m not sure what crime I’ve committed, but I’d like to bargain for a reduced sentence,” I announced. I regarded the Veloc with interest. “How can I make them see you?”

“They already can. We have it set up so they are able to witness our entire tour,” he replied, and he gestured towards the ceiling. It took me a few moments to realize there was a ball rolling along the ceiling. “They have several screens so they can get a full view of the tour.”

“Magnetic?” I guessed.

“Yes, it’s magnetic, and it’s designed to track me, as I have the controller. Waldren can teach you how to use it, as it’s one of his precious toys.”

“According to the Veloc, I travel the stars in search of toys,” Waldren stated in a wry tone.

“Just tell them toys don’t talk back, cost a great deal less to feed, and don’t require hours of grooming daily,” I suggested. “Also, they can’t talk, as it seems they’re so much trouble that they have to venture to the far reaches of the universe to romance unsuspecting women because I suspect Veloc women are wise to their ways and make them demonstrate they are not just murder machines masquerading as peacocks.” I waited long enough to enjoy Waldren’s amused reaction to my commentary before saying, “Mother, Father, this is Waldren, and he’s the companion of the DNA donor for my new ears and tail. I’m not allowed to see my ears yet, but I am going to end up looking at my tail without permission the instant the painkillers wear off.”

“We have the growth sites numbed due to her tendency to suffer through unbearable levels of itching. We would prefer if she did not scratch off her new ears and tail, as she would regret their loss. Limiting her visual awareness of them will help with preventing some of the psychological sources of itching as well.” Herserael gestured towards my head, and I stood still, aware he likely touched one of the ears I hadn’t seen yet. “I am expecting two or three more weeks of keeping the sites numb before testing if there is remnant itching. These

treatments do not at all impair her hearing, and her nervous system has accepted them.”

The Veloc snapped his fingers, loud enough I fought the urge to swat the feathered murder machine. “Could you please refrain from doing that? That’s really not comfortable.”

With a soft coo, the Veloc patted my shoulder. “I suspect your hearing is quite improved from standard *homo sapiens* levels, although those tests will wait for later. We’ll begin our tour with meeting Palta, the DNA donor. She is likely napping, so we will need to keep quiet, as she is a rather surly feline when awoken from her hard-earned nap without good reason. As her keeper, young Waldren here, is rather tyrannical with her feeding and treat schedule, a small morsel might spare us from her wrath should we disturb her.”

Waldren reached into his pocket and pulled out a small jar filled with brown pieces of some treat. “I am armed with her favorites, so we should survive. And I’ll even let her sucker me out of a few extra for her good behavior. She’ll be so confused over why she’s receiving an unscheduled treat that she will forget she’s angry at us for the disruption to her nap.”

My mother giggled. “I see you’ve found the feline version of yourself, Camellia.”

“I haven’t actually smacked anyone for waking me up since I was like eight, Mom,” I replied, shaking my head over her attempt to embarrass me. “I won’t deny I was inclined to scratch and bite anyone who inappropriately woke me, though.”

“Much like a cat, we had to trim your claws and teach you not to bite,” my mother stated. “How are you liking space so far?”

“They have customizable quarters.”

“Do be mindful of my daughter and her ways,” my mother said, and her attention turned to something she could see but I could not. I assumed she had several screens on the table to get a better view of the spaceship. “From the moment she realized the stars were reachable destinations, she has always looked

towards the sky. She planned her schooling, from the age of six, to be able to discover what was beyond our world.”

“That’s young,” Herserael noted, and his emerald crest rose. “At what age did the education system of your world begin encouraging space travel?”

“It doesn’t. She asked of her own volition after a trip to the space port. They receive a course near the end of standardized education regarding basic space travel for those who do decide to go off world, but it isn’t typically encouraged. We *do* have exploratory programs, like the classes she took until the crash, but it’s intended to cultivate our planet versus engaging in actual exploration.”

I should have known my mother had looked closely into my education. “The coursework is designed to encourage us to go out and find compatible life forms for our world that’ll solve some problem within a localized ecosystem. Space travel is required for such things.”

“The general expectation is that she would return to our world after a few years of gathering specimens for compatibility studies elsewhere. We do have a rather robust zoo.”

Our world had an entire continent dedicated to a menagerie of different species from elsewhere, involving explorers collecting plants and animals from another world and creating an entire ecosystem dedicated to their study. “Our zoology program is quite interesting. I’m still not sure it’s a great idea; if the species escape, it could create significant problems for our ecosystem.” I shrugged, as my opinion had meant little to my teachers, and I’d gotten more than a few flags for my inclination to question the status-quo. “Mom, I’ve determined we should stock Veloc on our planet.”

She raised a brow while my father snorted, coughed, and struggled in vain to mask his snickers. “Why do you say that?”

“This one can cook, the bold can pet them, and they’re excellent entertainment.”

“As I’ve reviewed our planet’s guidelines for species introductions, you cannot create a catch and release program for any sentients, including any Veloc,” she scolded. “Do try to be serious.”

Herserael whistled his amusement. “Most *homo sapiens Schwana* do not tolerate the presence of my people well, young Camellia. Your innate xenodiversity rating is unusually high.”

“Please tell me you didn’t try to pet your host,” my mother muttered.

“I did not try. I successfully petted my host,” I admitted. “It’s not my fault. I’m not responsible for what my hands do when I’m drugged and a feathered sentient puts his face in range of my hands.”

“Truth be told, I was doing some maintenance nearby when she emerged from sedation. It was a known and accepted risk. Of course, I expected her to hit me rather than pet me. It is part of our xenodiversity evaluations. It does change our general plan, however. We had intended to evaluate more of unusual branches of *homo sapiens* and their worlds first, but we might begin with one of our worlds instead.”

“How long do you anticipate this experimental voyage to take?” my father asked. “While her school has been accommodating, they won’t hold her place forever.”

The Veloc tilted his head to the side, and his crest raised a little taller, displaying his baubles and feathers in their full glory. “It will be at least three or four of your yearly cycles, perhaps longer. Her education is our responsibility, and by the time she does return, she will have surpassed educational offerings from this world, I’m sure. We will address all licensing and certification issues, including her piloting license should she decide to accept education from young Waldren here.”

I could only assume my parents locked onto the man, as their gaze shifted to a different display I couldn’t see. My father’s eyes narrowed with interest. “You’re the pilot?”

“Yes, sir,” Waldren replied. “When my sister and I were adopted into the Emerald Crests, I was given a variety of education options. I wanted to fly, so they found instructors for me. When my sister decided to wed her suitor, I was given this ship. I’ve been flying her with Palta ever since.”

“And you can teach my daughter how to fly?”

“I’m qualified and licensed as an instructor, yes. I’m not a top-tier instructor, but I’m solid on the base-level education, and should she pass my base criteria, she’ll be ready to test for her entry-level license. I’m working towards my advanced training certification now.”

“I see. Well, Waldren, I trust you will do your best to keep her safe during her education.”

Something about my father’s tone implied he would teach the man the true meaning of fear if things did not work out as planned. “Dad,” I complained.

“I am just stating that I will give even Veloc a reason to worry should he do something reckless with you.”

I crossed my arms. “All you’re going to do is encourage them. I’ve only had a few hours of generalized exposure to them, and I’ve already learned you’ve just issued them a challenge to do reckless things with me. Why? So they can find out what you’ll do. They do not need any additional encouragement. I’m already encouraging them sufficiently.”

“She’s probably right,” my mother stated, and she elbowed my father. “She doesn’t need any additional encouragement. She’s already venturing off into space as it is. Sure, it’s as a test subject, but at least she’s a willing test subject.”

I foresaw many years of my parents addressing me as a test subject, something I didn’t mind, as I’d cracked similar jokes before the crash. “It also gets me into space years ahead of schedule. I’ve been promised as much education as I want, Mom.”

My mother snorted and shook her head. “Are you even planning on visiting us with that on the table?”

“Whenever I realistically can,” I promised.

Herserael hooted, and his crest smoothed down. “It’s only four gate hops to here—longer than most voyages, but it’s a total round trip time of a month. It’s a two week space voyage between one of the gates, otherwise the gates are close to each other. It can be done in a week with certain ships.”

“Our clan has one of the ships, but it’s more of a cargo freighter that can happen to carry a few passengers,” Waldren admitted. “My ship is slower, but she’s reliable. Visitation will not be an issue.”

“It’s only two weeks each way? But we’re on the fringe of explored space,” my father stated, his eyes narrowing.

“The one gate requires a high-end shiftgem drive to utilize,” Waldren explained. “My ship has the appropriate drive. Otherwise, it’s closer to four to six months of hopping around the other gates and traveling through empty space to reach here.”

“So, she could be back home in a week, if the conditions are right and she can book with a fast ship?” my mother asked.

I admired Waldren’s patience, as my parents were beginning to get on my nerves with their incredulous responses. “That’s correct. Her worst-case scenario is a six-month voyage, as very few ships coming out this way do so on a direct path.”

“It could be worse,” my father decided. “Can you introduce us to this Palta?”

Waldren headed off, and I followed him through the ship. The spacious corridors amused me, but I assumed they needed to be larger to accommodate moving equipment through the ship. He guided me to an area of the ship I hadn’t been in yet, poked his head through an open doorway, and a moment later, Palta hissed.

The rattling of the jar ended the vocalized complaints, and I peeked inside to discover the feline on the bed. An amusing assortment of cat toys and scratching posts took up most of the space with a desk tucked into a corner. Shelving units likely

held his clothes and other property, with the free space dedicated to Palta and her empire.

One lower shelf, located near the desk, contained a litter box. The neighboring cabinet, with a little door she could hop through, contained food and water dishes along with a cat bed.

After devouring her treat, Palta hissed at Waldren for waking her, took a fake swipe at him, and jumped off the man's bed before coming to me.

Accepting the risk of disfigurement or potentially death, I set the tablet aside, scooped the cat up, placed her front paws on my shoulder, and made sure to support her hind paws. "Did that mean owner of yours wake you up?"

Palta rewarded me with a purr and nuzzled my face.

"I see nothing has changed," my mother said with laughter in her voice. "Ever since she was little, if there was an animal she could pet, she would pet it. Don't worry, Waldren. She recovers from the heartbreak of not being able to keep the latest animal to cross her path after five minutes or so. Use her love of animals against her. If she can't pet your cat until she has finished all her tasks, you will find them finished to perfection on an advanced schedule."

Careful not to dislodge Palta, I shrugged. "It's true. Palta is an Earth-bred species, Mom."

Herserael chuckled. "Palta is bonded to Waldren, but we'll see about acquiring a companion for you, as it would be a good partnership. Palta is a very social animal, and she will shower everyone in the crew with her affection, much to the dismay of her owner, who would like to be the one and only in his cat's eyes."

Waldren shrugged. "I've had her since she was a kitten."

I cuddled with his cat, smiled, and said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to steal her. I will pet her at every opportunity, however."

"It is clear we will have to go on a search for her to have a pet of her own," Herserael stated, and he whistled and trilled at

Waldren. After a few moments, the man replied with a series of whistles, a growl, and an odd half-hoot.

Huh. I hadn't known *homo sapiens* could learn how to speak the Veloc's language. "Can you teach me how to do that?"

My parents laughed. "If you teach her, you'll never get rid of her," my mother warned.

I wouldn't protest the truth. That I was going into space at all might be the reason they wouldn't be able to get rid of me, but I wouldn't admit that to anyone.

In the blink of an eye, I'd gone from fearing the destruction of my hopes and dreams to living them. Without the crash, I would have made it into space eventually, but because of it, I dove headlong into the sort of voyage I'd only dreamed about before everything had gotten twisted around on me.

No matter what, I would make the most of the opportunity. "I think they'll manage just fine, Mom. You don't need to try to warn them off."

"It's always polite to warn others of what they are getting themselves into," she countered.

I foresaw a great deal of trouble in my immediate future in the form of my parents educating everyone on my tendencies. Rather than fight it, I focused on showing the cat affection and prepared to endure.

CHAPTER SIX

I MET three other Veloc during the tour of the ship, all members of the Emerald Crests. Within three minutes, my parents enthralled the giant feathered murder machines. If left to their devices, I feared my parents would take over the Veloc clan's entire planet. They charmed my hosts, and it didn't take long for my hosts to retaliate and charm my parents. It took me an hour or two to accept the reality of the situation.

I would be returning to my home fairly often with feathered murder machines in tow, else my parents might wilt away from grief over having their newfound joy taken from them. The tour ended up taking seven exhausting hours, which Herserael finally brought to a close when I failed to contain my yawns.

He promised future communications, stopped the connection, and showed me to one of the unclaimed quarters, of which they had five and I would get to choose the one I wanted after I was rested, fed again, and went through my basic tests.

I luxuriated in sleeping without being attached to some form of machine, but I woke with an itching head and lower back. I could only assume my tail grew where the spine met my ass, as I wanted to scratch the whole thing off. Rather than scratch, I got up, got changed into yesterday's clothes, and went on a search for someone who could show me how I was supposed to get clean.

Like it or not, I would tolerate the itch for as long as possible.

I found one of the younger Veloc on the voyage, Gersenalt, engaged in a rather heated argument with a piece of equipment in the hallway. Parts littered the floor, grease caked the Veloc's feathers, and I wondered at how much work he'd have ahead of him. "Are you okay?"

According to the Veloc's explosive snort, nothing was okay, nor would it be okay again. "It fights me."

That much I could tell without needing a manual to understand what any of the parts did. "Is there anything I can do to help? I can provide hands, but I know nothing about these machines."

"Hands are useful. Yes, you can help." Gersenalt pointed at a rather greasy tube made of metal. "Once I have this seal back into place, I will need you to put that over the seal while I hold everything in place."

I grabbed the tube in question, examining both ends. "The side with or without the screw threads?"

"With. You will screw the tube into place over the seal. I will handle tightening it once it's in place." With his crest plastered to his skull, the Veloc resumed working, and after a few minutes, he grunted, adjusted the contraption he worked on, and pointed his nose at a round section with threads matching what was in my hand. "Screw that into place, please."

"Here?" I asked, putting the end I'd selected as the probable one into place before regarding the Veloc.

He cooed and nodded.

The tube put up a fight, but between my determination and his general strength holding the other piece in place, I got it on, triple-checking to make certain I'd threaded the screws properly. "Like this?"

Gersenalt turned the device on his lap, took hold of the tube, and finished screwing it into place. "You did quite well. Almost tight enough to hold. That will improve as you go through physical therapy."

Like some sorcerer in his element, Gersenalt reassembled the machine. I watched with wide eyes, marveling he understood what bits went where. Once finished, he spent an unholy amount of time checking over his work. Once satisfied, he got up, lugged the machine down the hall, and opened a panel, revealing a mess of tubes, metal bits, and chaos.

It took him ten minutes to return the machine to its proper spot, after which he reattached the tubes and all the other bits. Once done, he pressed a flashing red button in the control panel.

The device whirred to life, and he cocked his head to listen to the sound. He then pressed a nearby button and said, "Please test the auxiliary oxygen generator."

"Roger," Waldren replied, his voice coming from a small box. "There are no initial warnings on the system."

My eyes widened further. "That thingie makes oxygen for the ship?"

Gersenalt hooted his amusement, and his crest lifted. He gestured to the center of the whirring machine. "There are several shiftgem crystals in there, which produce oxygen and water for the ship. This is the backup system, and it threw a warning shortly after departure from Schawna Major. Cousin Waldren worries, and as he's worked recovery on numerous derelicts, he has four backup systems capable of oxygenating the ship. We usually do maintenance on all systems every three months, but we got the call to come assist you right before our maintenance cycle. We've been doing the work as maintenance flags appear, but let's just say my featherless kin has been stressing himself over the state of his beautiful wife."

"You call the ship his wife?"

The Veloc showed me his sharp, pointy teeth. "She is as expensive as any wife."

"More expensive," the surly man muttered. "The comm is open, you feathered freak."

"Quite on purpose, I assure you. Your beautiful wife will be well. Our guest helped me reassemble the system, as she

came out of her quarters to explore several hours ahead of our estimated schedule.”

Well, as I had already defied their estimations, I decided a little whining was in order. “I itch, and rather than scratch, I got out of bed.”

“Ah, yes. Herserael wanted to see how you were progressing. Not as well as we would like, apparently. I will take her to the medical bay so the itching can be addressed along with cleanup. I took the liberty of greasing everything.”

“You greased it?” Waldren asked.

“It was already apart, so why not grease it?” Gersenalt regarded his greasy feathers and heaved a sigh. “My feathers are doomed.”

“Your feathers will be fine. The system is checking out so far. I’ll comm you if any of the tests reveal any issues.”

“There are no other systems that need to be worked on, right?” the Veloc asked, his tone so wary I fought the urge to giggle.

“The system is clean of flags. I am not responsible if a new flag shows up, but this time, I am not tricking you into cleaning up only to have to get greasy again.”

The giggle I’d been fighting back slipped out. “What did he do to you to deserve that?”

“He exists,” Waldren informed me before something clicked.

“My uncle is the Veloc who won his sister,” Gersenalt informed me. “As such, I carry the burden of his sense of humor. It doesn’t help that I tease him about this at every opportunity. Don’t fret. I have earned my fate. My uncle offered to sacrifice me to Waldren in an effort to earn some favor. It has worked to a limited degree. Had I been a behaved hatchling, I would be home with my mate working on convincing her we should have hatchlings. But she joined forces with the rest of the clan, thus resulting in my eviction.”

The fondness in his tone made me smile. “Is she also an Emerald Crest?”

“Oh, no. My mate is a Scarlet Tail who married into the Emerald Crests. The Scarlets—the entire lot of them—are wicked temptresses, as evidenced by her taking over our clan with her iron claws.”

I wanted to meet his mate, who sounded like she could take over worlds if given an opportunity and an excuse. “They aren’t all female, are they?”

“Oh, no. The males just know better than to get in the way of their mates and daughters. They’re an adventurous and brave clan. We’re adventurous, in that we’re more inclined to travel the stars, but we are less aggressive than they are. It works well for us. The Scarlets tend to view the Emerald Crests as a clan to be safeguarded, especially our hatchlings. We’re most likely to be targeted due to our disposition.”

I’d heard of traffickers on my world, as *homo sapiens* were common targets, also due to our general disposition. “Are there more clan types than named after crest and tail colors?”

“Tails, breasts, crests, backs, and tails tend to be our predominant groupings. There are others, but they’re rare.” Gersenalt gestured to his clawed feet. “Feet is one, and they are to be approached with care, no matter the color. The clans named as such tend to fight with all their natural weapons, and they are not inclined to cap their claws. If you hear about a Veloc being involved with the mass slaughter of other species, one of the Feets was likely involved. They tend to hunt traffickers and live out among the stars, making it so the rest of us can stay safe and cozy in our nests. We will all indulge in violence as needed, however.” He made a point of showing me his capped claws. “These are not just for show.”

“Frankly, I’m amazed that you can work on something like that machine with those claws!”

He showed me his hand, wiggling padded fingers beneath the claws. “When claws do not suffice, we use our fingers, although they are not nearly as dexterous as *homo sapiens*. The claw tips are textured, and they are quite strong, which

helps. Learning fine-tuned movements with our claws is something we practice when young, so we are not at as much of a disadvantage as one might think.”

Without the distraction of observing him fix the machine, the itching made itself known, and I eyed his claws. “How good are those at scratching?”

“Quite, but there will be no scratching on my watch. I will restrain you should you try. I can, should I desire, carry you around by your wrists while you are reduced to standing on your toes, and you will not be able to pull free no matter how hard you try.”

I held out my hands. “Demonstration, please.”

Hooting a laugh, the Veloc complied, taking hold of my wrists in one hand, the padded claw tips pressing against my skin. With zero evidence of my weight bothering him, he lifted me off my feet and let me dangle for a moment before easing me down to my toes. “We learn how to restrain excitable *homo sapiens* in safe fashions. My uncle’s mate often becomes excited and requires such tethering to keep her from investigating newcomers. Like you, she is inclined to pet any Veloc to cross her path.” He herded me along, forcing me to prance around on my toes. “We have done experiments with intrigued *homo sapiens*, where they climb all over us with the goal of making us move from our chosen position. They rarely succeed.”

“Waldren tossed Herserael to the floor,” I commented.

“You cannot see this, I know, but your ears just betrayed you, perking forward with interest when you made that comment. Your tail has also fluffed. The body language you express seems to match Palta’s. Most interesting. Does our little cousin interest you, or are you curious on how he can throw a being far larger than himself?”

“I really want to know how he threw Herserael,” I admitted. “It seems useful being able to toss a Veloc to the floor.”

“It is a matter of gravity. He waited for Herserael to be off-center in balance and took advantage of his position. Without that leverage, *homo sapiens* simply cannot toss us no matter how hard they try. Had Herserael been balanced, he might have lost a few feathers to the attempt but little else. We’ve worked hard to make sure the *homo sapiens* within our clan are best able to defend themselves.” The Veloc’s tail twitched. “Such encouragements come at a price, as Waldren has discovered it is possible to ride us. Most will not allow such things willingly, but when we do not wish to harm our troublesome *homo sapiens*, he takes advantage of that weakness to do what he wishes. And sometimes, he wishes to establish his status as a pest through pouncing onto our backs and remaining until he is ready to depart and go back to whatever it is your kind does when behaving.”

I giggled at the thought of Waldren scrambling onto the back of a Veloc and staying there, all without permission. “Your clan must really like him to put up with that.”

“We like his sister more, but we are fond enough of him despite his status as a frequent pest.”

“What other things has he done?”

The Veloc grinned. “I would be pleased to tell you all of his dirty secrets.”

After an hour of itching, I snapped so hard it took three Veloc to contain me. I landed several bites on Gersenalt, kicked Herserael numerous times, and I attempted to scramble my brains bashing my forehead into the thick skull of Alban, the eldest Veloc; a green, yellow, and red male who found my plight fascinating.

While Gersenalt held my wrists together, Herserael pinned me long enough for Alban to give me several injections. One needle, taken directly to the ass, had stoked my fury to the point I’d unleashed threats to pluck all of them for a new pillow.

A rather bemused Waldren observed, safe out of my reach. “I’d read the reports about the problems with her itching, but they neglected to record temporary psychosis. This could be an issue.”

Alban’s hooted laughter drew my attention to the elder Veloc, and I hissed at him. “She is a feisty female, this is true. The feisty ones are always troublesome, but they are worth keeping around. They tend to be clever as well as stubborn. Her tolerance? Quite admirable, really. We now know her tolerance for the itching problem, and we will be certain to medicate on the appropriate schedule. Her nerve endings are healing nicely, and she has full mobility of her tail and ears. This is a useful incident.” After stowing the expended syringes, the Veloc dug his capped claws into my hair and scratched, light enough to relieve the itch. I went limp and still. “There, there. This should tame the beast.”

“Without injuring her?” Waldren demanded.

“The site has fully healed. It is the new nerves causing the problem. Unattended scratching might create injury, but a little to offer relief is permissible. That does not mean you can scratch, young one. We will scratch for you until the healing process finishes. We will only test if you itch every few days, and we will make certain to numb it before you try to murder us or rip your new ears and tail off.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

Alban gave the other side of my head a healthy scratching, and by the time he finished, the itching subsided to something I could ignore with a little work. “You have nothing to be sorry about. We understand that some of our tests may result in our patient threatening to pluck us for pillows. A potent threat, especially now that we know you will bite if provoked.”

“And scratch,” Herserael added, and the Veloc hooted his amusement. “And attempt to use her skull as a weapon.”

“She gets full points for determination,” Waldren stated. “And now that our medical entertainment is over for the moment, it’s time to prepare for the jump. Camellia, am I

correct in understanding you have zero training regarding jumps and protocols?”

“I have no training,” I replied, and once the *Veloc* released me, I brushed my clothes off and straightened, careful to ignore the urge to give my scalp a good scratching. “I understand the basics, but I don’t know if my basics are correct. I learned them from a book.”

“Pretend I’ve never been on a ship in my life and tell me what is supposed to happen with a jump,” Waldren instructed. “Keep it to as simple terms you can. If you want to become a shiftgem engineer later, that’s something you can pursue at your leisure.”

“Every jump-enabled ship has a special drive that interacts with the shiftgem gates. I’m not convinced it’s actually science, but the gems in the gate, which is an archway somehow locked into a fixed location in space, activate the gems in the engine of the ship. The gems then unite the connecting archways and shunt the ship through. If everything goes correctly, the ship materializes through the other archway and floats out to space. If something goes wrong, the ship may not jump—or it might be torn to pieces.”

Waldren nodded. “That’s as good a base explanation as I’ve heard. I have several gem colors on board with a drive allowing me to switch out the cores to best match the gate we’re going through. While my ship isn’t the fastest in the universe, the *Veloc* gifted me with sufficient shiftgems to utilize any gate—even the ones requiring black stones. This is where things get touchy. The gate that allows us to make the journey to your world in two weeks uses black shiftgems. The gate has... issues.”

“Issues?” I blurted, my eyes widening, as his tone implied the gate itself was alive. “What sort of issues?”

“It has a mind of its own. Most people only use the gate if there is an emergency. For example, when *Dauntless* came to your world, the captain was aware that there were a lot of people in critical condition. The gate reacted accordingly—and shunted the ship within a ten minute flight to your world.

We've been traveling longer than ten minutes, as I'm sure you've noticed by now."

"I had." I considered him with a frown. "We're not in an emergency, so you aren't sure if the gate will send us to where we want to go?"

A faint smile appeared before he smothered it. "Precisely. Sometimes, the gate responds to the needs of the crew—and sometimes, the gate is aware of those who need assistance in some other portion of space and decides a ship might become someone else's salvation. Space is a vast and dangerous place—and the Veloc have a rule. If the shiftgem gate calls, we answer. And that rule tends to mean we get sidetracked fairly often if we use one of the touchier gates."

"Like this one."

Waldren nodded. "And with your situation, we simply don't know what will happen. The shiftgem within your brain might even react to the gate. This is about as experimental as it gets. We won't know what will happen until we try the jump. No is an allowed answer. If you aren't comfortable with the risk, we'll take a different gate and extend our voyage."

I shook my head. "It's fine. It's better to find out now rather than later. What do I need to do?"

"Not much. I'll have you in the command area of the ship. I'll put you in the co-captain's chair and let you get your first taste of working with a spaceship. The Veloc prefer to hide in their nests, where they can be safely tethered. Jumps unnerve them, and they'll cap their claws so they don't shred their nests."

"And Palta?"

"She will be in her cubby in my quarters. Her bed closes and has sufficient padding to protect her, and she has her own life-support system. There's also a water dispenser, waste receptacle, and a food dispenser. If something happens to us, she'll be able to survive for three months. There's even a heater so if the systems shut down, she'll be okay."

My eyes widened. "That's incredible."

“It cost me a fortune, but I refused to take her into space until I was certain I could make her as safe as possible. But now that I have her system sorted, I can replicate it in every quarter. When I had the ship refitted, I made certain every habitable space was fitted with the necessary connectors for the system. The battery is the expensive part; it requires a complete collection of shiftgem crystals. But she’s worth it.”

That she was. “Can I see the system afterwards?”

“Sure. I actually have all the components for a second system, so I can show you the whole thing. When we got word about your situation, I gathered the equipment. The Veloc are obsessive, and if they feel like you need an animal, you will be getting an animal. And Veloc tend to believe *homo sapiens* of all stripes need animals to thrive.” Waldren shot Herserael a glare, and the subject of his displeasure laughed.

“I haven’t had a pet before,” I admitted. “I was always too busy looking at the stars than being willing to take care for an animal I’d probably have to leave behind.”

“On most exploratory ships, a pet wouldn’t be an option. I make the concessions and pay the prices to have Palta—and the Veloc sometimes bring their pets along, too.”

Alban snickered. “I have a parrot that was originally bred on Earth, but my beloved refused to let me take her off planet this time. It’s her turn to keep Rosie company.”

“Do you all have pets?”

As one, the Veloc nodded. Herserael said, “We’ll keep an eye out for a friend for you. Unless Palta decides she likes a male of her kind, it probably won’t be an Andean like her. But that’s not a bad thing. If Palta does make friends with a male, he’ll likely become Waldren’s companion as well. It’s better for the cats to be kept together.”

That I could readily understand. “Or we could find a male for Waldren, and then we could go on a quest to find another pair of cats for me. We will be overrun with them within a few years and create an empire of cats.” I’d read just enough about genetic diversity to understand with four cats from different

lines, with the science of genetic manipulation available, we could repopulate the species and give them a new lease on life—assuming we could gain access to the machines needed to do it. “We could make a conservation project for cats like Palta. I mean, have you looked at her? She’s adorable, and her kind deserves to be spread far and wide.”

The Veloc hooted their laughter and Waldren sighed. “Cats like Palta generally sell for over a million standard galactic credits, Camellia. However much I would love to further their species, it’s not precisely affordable—and finding three cats with the appropriate genetic diversity would be a challenge.”

“Kittens,” I replied, as I felt the word fully explained my stance on the situation.

“It would only take one or two profitable derelicts to make her idea a reality,” Alban commented, and he flashed a toothy grin Walden’s way. “You worry about flying the ship, I will retire to my quarters and worry about sourcing felines. Palta is an excellent hunting companion, and our world can sustain the species when they’re companion beasts. We may have a habitat suitable for wild release, but we would have to genetically modify at least three hundred kittens for proper diversity, breed them, and then scatter the animals throughout their territory. Not impossible, but a challenge—and stocking their territory with suitable prey might be a challenge.”

“Might?” Walden blurted. “Where are we going to get three *hundred* Andean kittens?”

“We’ll breed them, of course.”

I burst out laughing at the Veloc’s enthusiasm. “I should apologize for giving your clan bad ideas, but I like kittens.”

“You like all animals and plants, even ones that would try to kill you,” Herserael informed me. “Your parents were quite clear regarding your tendencies. Waldren, I’ll leave her in your capable hands. Call for me should the itching symptoms manifest again. Otherwise, tend your ship and begin teaching Camellia your captain ways. It’s never a bad thing to have more beings capable of flying this thing.”

Waldren snorted. “You’re all trained for emergencies.”

“If I were meant to fly, I’d have wings,” the Veloc countered, giving a shake before departing.

The other Veloc likewise fled, leaving me alone with the disgruntled man. “I swear. They do it just to irritate me.”

“It does seem to me like they have identified one of your red, shiny buttons and depress it at will just to see what you will do,” I agreed. “Unlike them, I’m not afraid of learning to fly a ship, although I will regret it, as I am certain the price of a space-faring vessel easily exceeds the amount for an Andean mountain cat.”

“By a significant margin. Most pilots get their ships used and on payment plans or through a company they fly for. I’m fortunate; my ship is mine, but it’s only mine because Veloc are wealthy. They’d have to be. They wear shiftgem crystals in the feathers because they like it.”

“Those are shiftgems?” I blurted.

“Every last one of them,” Waldren grumbled, wrinkling his nose. “I’m pretty sure my sister’s husband sold some of his baubles to buy my ship—and didn’t miss a single one.”

“But where are they getting the gems?” I thought about the ridiculous number of jewels the Veloc wore in the crests and on their tails. “There’s so many of them.”

“Most of their worlds are shiftgem producing planets, and planet busters steer clear of any planet the Veloc own—or live on. Should they attack a Veloc’s planet, the entire species would rise up and destroy every planet buster in existence without remorse. They would paint the universe red by the time they finished. It’s gotten to the point the Veloc are considering such a mission, however. They tire of lost lives for the sake of profit. But when they aren’t showing off their hunting skills, the Veloc mine for shiftgem crystals—and on some places on their worlds, all they have to do to mine them is walk around the ground and pick up any they find.”

“Are you saying I could, if the Veloc let me, just walk around their planet and pick up enough shiftgems to buy an

entire spaceship?”

“Yes.”

Well, that explained a lot. “So, you’re saying the Veloc are the bazillionaire romantics of the universe.”

“Well, my sister doesn’t mind how much currency she has available to her should she desire something, that’s for sure. I hate being idle, so my sister’s general lifestyle would not work for me.”

I raised a brow. “She has to contain a Veloc, Waldren. They seem like a handful on a good day.”

“You truly have no idea how right you are,” he replied, and he gestured for me to follow. “As there is no time better than the present, let’s get to the bridge and test our luck with the gate. If you believe in any higher power, now’s the time to start praying.”

I didn’t but I chuckled at the thought of Waldren resorting to something like prayer to get through the gate without incident. “It can’t be that bad, can it?”

“I really hope we don’t find out.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SHIFTGEM GATE hung in space and twinkled in the ship's light. A myriad of colors played across the surface, and I marveled at the display. "Is that why the gems are called shiftgems? Because they change colors?"

"They can change their state from crystal to an odd metal in the right conditions. That's how it got the name *evolvulite*. The gates did give the stone its common name, though. They really do look like they're shifting colors. But as far as we can tell, the effect is from the various crystals activating and glowing as we get close. Light refraction." Waldren got up from his seat and showed me how the straps for the co-captain's chair worked, securing me into the harness before returning to his seat and doing the same. He then pressed a button on the arm of his chair and said, "Gate activation in t-minus five minutes."

"What if someone isn't ready in five minutes?" I asked.

"They'll comm me. Alban will make sure Palta is secured in her cubby." He gestured to a monitor on the nearby wall, which showed a diagram of the ship with a series of red, yellow, and green lights. One by one, the reds turned to yellow, and then the yellows turned to green. He pointed at one area within the crew quarters. "He already contained her before I sent out the five-minute warning." He pressed a few buttons on the arm panel and a section of the monitor outlined in white. "That's her sector."

While small, the cubby was marked, and it was colored green. "Green means ready?"

“Correct. The ship has validated the settings and occupants of those sectors, and when the sector turns green, it’s been locked down for the flight through the gate.”

At one minute before his countdown ended, everything on the ship was marked green. “Now what?”

“Magic,” Waldren replied, and he pressed a few buttons. Two control stands rose from the floor within his easy reach, along with a set of foot pedals. “I have numerous control mechanism on the ship, but these are my favorite. I have more fine-tune control in case I need to do evasive maneuvers.” The ship rumbled, and it eased back from the gate. “Hold on tight. This is going to be a wild ride.”

At a few presses of a button, an electronic voice began a ten-second countdown. The ship’s rumble intensified, and at the count of one, he moved the ship forward. According to his body language, he expected something bad to happen, as he tensed as the glowing archway drew closer.

White light enveloped the ship.

Squealing alarms indicated Waldren was right to worry. Before I could do more than squeak, he cursed, hit some buttons on his armchair, and manipulated the controls. In the time it took me to draw three breaths and register we were no longer in space, the ship’s systems quieted.

Rather than the expected inky void, a sandy beach loomed in front of us with a band of trees in the distance. White-capped waves crashed on the shore.

I marveled that Waldren had somehow managed to control the ship despite the utter change of environment. “How did you do that?”

“The ship’s autopilot was enabled, the ship detected the changes in gravity, initiated hover thrusters, and per my programming, came to a halt. That process can destabilize the ship, so I did some adjustments to level us out so the hover can work properly. Because things like this can happen, pilots enter the gates at a speed suitable for sustaining flight in most habitable atmospheres, so it was a matter of checking for risk

of imminent collision, adjusting some settings, and stabilizing the ship's course. That could have gone a lot worse." Waldren focused on one of the monitors, and he tapped on the arm rest of his seat. "In bad news, I have no idea where we are."

"Uninhabited space?" I asked, a chill sweeping through me.

"I only load complex star charts and planetary coordinates for sectors of space I think I will need to go or have been. I don't usually make use of gates like this, and nobody has a chart listing for that specific gate because it can literally go anywhere—it just tends to favor one set of gates, and with a ninety-five percent chance of going to that gate, most are willing to risk it. I'll be able to evaluate our position once the planet's night begins; I *do* have a complete star map of known space for identifying our position so I can load up the relevant charts—if I have them. The star maps are usually enough to get us going in the right direction."

"You can do that with star maps?"

"I can, yes. The flight system has star views from all angles, so it's possible to identify a general location with a clear view of the stars from a planet," he replied, and he unbuckled his harness, came over, and showed me how to unbuckle mine. "But now we have more than a few issues. First, if the planet is inhabited, we need to figure out who lives here, inform them of the gate mishap, and clear ourselves of legal issues. That won't be a problem, as I registered us as using the shiftgem gate."

I wondered if that would be truly good enough if somebody took offense to our presence. "The odds that this is an inhabited world?"

Waldren eyed one of the monitors, and after a moment, he said, "The atmospheric conditions are suitable for human life, with an oxygen density of 20.1%. That's a little lower than what we like but plenty sufficient. Veloc prefer 21.5%, which is a little higher than what humans prefer, which is 21%. 20.1% is a little lower than what is comfortable for a Veloc, but they won't have to wear masks to survive. They're just

going to be a little uncomfortable. Veloc would not choose to live here, which is a good thing—most species wouldn't choose this planet despite its status as habitable.” He pressed a few buttons and grunted at whatever result he found on the monitor. A glare warned me the man disliked what he read. “We're outside of the comm range to any spaceports for my ship, which means we're on the edge of explored space, and I'm not picking up anything on the common communication frequencies.”

“Well, that's not ideal,” I muttered, getting up from my seat to inspect the monitors and the various bits of information they spit out. The atmospheric intel intrigued me, as the ship reported the entire atmospheric conditions. “How does it get the data so quickly?”

“I invested in an exterior sensor system. It retracts during space travel, but once I had the ship hovering, I activated it. The atmospheric tests don't take long to run. The next test is longer, and we stay on board until it completes.”

“Atmospheric biohazards?” I guessed. From viruses to toxins, there could be things in the air that didn't get picked up on the basic readings capable of killing people in a hurry. “We were learning about those systems in school, but we wouldn't actually be trained in deciphering the data until next year. We started with direct hazards first, registering unidentified life forms and generalized identification of what might try to kill us. If the teeth are sharp and pointy, it will probably try to kill us. If a single human can fit in its mouth without chewing, it will probably try to kill us. If it has sharp and pointy bits, period, it will probably try to kill us. That applies to plants and animals.”

Waldren snickered. “That is a good way to stay alive for a little longer, I do have to admit. Your schooling didn't seem to indicate Veloc are possessing of sharp, pointy teeth, however. They also have long, pointy claws.”

“Veloc are definitely top-grade predators I shouldn't pet.” I regarded him with a grin. “But now that I'm aware of how soft they are, I'm making it a mission to see how many different Veloc I can pet without losing my life.”

“Considering you have successfully pet one, you’re ahead of most humans.” Waldren held up three fingers. “When honest, I’ve petted this many unwilling Veloc, one of which is my brother-in-law. I demanded to pet him. To be a complete jackass about it, I informed him to make certain his feathers were soft enough to be worthy of my sister. My sister loved it. Her Veloc? He tolerated me petting him, and the instant my sister looked the other way, he tossed me into the nearest river. I deserved it, but I threaten to pet him again—or take him into space so he’s trapped on my ship and I can pet him at my leisure.”

Something about the banter put me at ease, and I wondered at the man’s change of behavior without the Veloc around. “So, we’re agreed. Veloc exist to be petted, much like cats.”

“It’s a dangerous venture, but the reward might be worth the risk—especially since it’s their fault we are now in this position.”

Were they? In a way, I supposed they held some responsibility. From my understanding of the situation, they were the driving force behind my restored hearing and new tail. I would find some way to repay that debt, although I would focus more on Waldren.

The Veloc all seemed like the kind to go across the universe for the sake of another as their default, where the man had come despite his misgivings and hesitations. In a way, I understood both sides.

Waldren’s position made his presence more of a sacrifice and a duty, where the Veloc found their work to be a reward as much as it was a responsibility.

As I’d gotten Waldren to relax, I decided to hold my course and do my best to maintain the jovial atmosphere despite being lost on some planet possibly skirting explored space. “We could charge each Veloc on board with mandatory petting as compensation for being stuck on a possibly unexplored planet.” I giggled, turning my gaze to the beach before us. “What sort of planet would a shiftgem gate send us to?”

“Whichever one it wants, which is the issue. The gems have some ability to communicate with each other over vast distances. We haven’t figured out *how*, but the gates obviously communicate with each other somehow.”

I nodded. I’d heard the theory before, but nobody truly understood the underlying workings of the gates, how’d they’d been formed, and what made them work. “So, I guess we need to evaluate what we discussed, our various feelings on the matter, and how the shiftgems might interpret that.”

With narrowed eyes, Waldren eyed the monitor. A moment later, a flood of information appeared. “Ah. Yes, good thought. The atmospheric conditions are a little questionable for *us*, but they’re ideal for Palta. They come from a high mountain environment with lower pressures and sometimes lower oxygen content. Cats of her species would be quite comfortable here. But how would the shiftgems have been able to locate a planet with ideal atmospheric conditions for a specific species of cat?” Frowning, he regarded the monitor again, and an image of a cat similar to Palta but with a paler coat appeared, including information on atmospheric and biologic requirements for the survival of the species. “It’s an almost perfect match to the conditions they prefer in the summer with the exception of elevation. And having the conditions in a lush environment gives them a better chance of overall survival.”

“More prey and habitat options,” I muttered, joining him in reading the screen. “But how did you access the data so quickly?”

“I have a link, too. I’ll be the one primarily teaching you how to cope with the link installations. It can be overwhelming. I tapped into the ship’s data banks with the link so I wouldn’t have to dig out a keyboard and start typing.”

“Convenient.” I pointed at the section involving their diet. “But what are the odds that the planet will have the appropriate fare for her species?”

“The odds are really high. Andean mountain cats have a surprisingly adaptable digestive system. If it’s an animal of the

right size, for the most part, they're willing to eat it—and can get away with it. Should the planet have a viable large island the cats can't escape from without human intervention that can be stocked with good prey, this could work to preserve the species.”

I'd been aware of people manipulating new planets, especially ones on the lower threshold for being habitable, as animal sanctuaries. “And if this planet hasn't been discovered before?”

“Well, we will be very rich, I won't be at all worried about buying you a pair of your own cats, and you could invest in your own ship without even thinking about it. Discoveries of new, habitable planets bag a huge bounty. If we have, though, we'll have a problem on our hands.”

I could think of a lot of problems. “Getting back to explored space is one of those problems.”

“Exactly. If we're lucky, we'll find an undiscovered shiftgem gate.”

“And if we're not?”

“Well, I hope you enjoy keeping us company, because it could be years before we find our way back to known space—if we ever do.”

After a few minutes of running system checks, Waldren informed the Veloc on board we had undergone a slight locational mishap. His wording over it reduced me to tears of laughter. By the time the Veloc all showed up, cramming into the bridge along with Palta, I struggled to breathe and chortle at the same time.

“Please do not mind Camellia. She finds me endlessly amusing, and it seems she views my way of speaking beyond hilarious.” Waldren's typical scowl returned, and he claimed Palta from Herserael, cuddling with his cat and sitting down to better attend to her. “The gate has decided we're visiting a new

planet, habitable but less-than-ideal for most oxygen-breathing species. The general oxygen level is a little below ideal. However, the planet, at first estimate, seems ideal for certain breeds of cat, like Palta.”

The Veloc hooted their laughter, and Albon recovered first, stating, “The gate must have read her desire to preserve Palta’s most charming species. Your desire as well, when you are honest about it.”

With a shrug, the man replied, “I’ve been saving up to acquire a permanent companion for Palta. It just happens all the male Andeans have not been to her standards thus far.”

I eyed the viewport and the beach. “Didn’t various coalitions dump a bunch of endangered Earth species on habitable but non-ideal planets after the exodus?”

Waldren grinned at me. “All of those planets are recorded, and I have them registered in the system. They also have global comm satellites, so I would have been able to identify our location had this been one of those worlds. That’s a very good tidbit of knowledge to have, however, and I’m impressed you were aware of the exodus planets.”

“Well, we’re a backwater world, but we did track what happened to the other branches of *homo sapiens*. Part of our training is to go check in on those worlds to see what has happened to them after so many years.”

“It’s amazing to think that progress can happen so quickly but then stall as we reach the limits of our creativity and ingenuity. We have only managed to progress science so far, and there are so many barricades preventing progress.” Walden gestured to the entirety of his ship’s bridge. “We have conquered many forms of space travel, but we have not conquered traveling at the speed of light. We’ve gotten close, but most organics simply cannot handle the forces exerted on the body. Instead, we have shiftgem gates.”

“Which surpasses the speed of light by a hefty margin. Sure, we didn’t conquer traveling at the speed of light, but we can travel millions of light years in the blink of an eye. That’s something special.” I pointed at the beach. “I’ve seen pictures

of beaches before. I've heard the sound of waves on the sand. But I've never been *on* a beach."

"Ah, right. Your home is located in the heart of your major continent, far from any beaches." Walden eyed the beach. "We're probably two days from determining if it's safe to go take a walk on the beach, but if it is, we can do that. I will be taking the ship onto land if there's a suitable landing spot to preserve energy."

"The toxin tests take a long time to run on this ship?" I guessed.

"That plus we'll have to get biologic samples, although if everything checks out, we might suit up and go. I have an arm we can use to gather samples of the flora to do a basic surface test for toxins and dangerous substances. Getting a robust enough sample test plus doing an extensive flyby of the area will take up most of a day. Then we'll need to see if there is viable prey. If so, we'll have the Veloc earn their keep. The lower oxygen levels will make such a hunt a challenge for them. We'll lose half a day ridding them of potential pests, as we'll have to bathe them with various pesticides. *Homo sapiens* have the advantage. We are much easier to groom."

Herserael sighed. "You are still upset with us over the flea incident."

"Palta got bitten, and she is allergic to fleas. I had to purify every inch of my ship against the pests, and you feathered freaks didn't want to have the pesticides applied to your so-called perfect bodies."

Somehow, the man managed to shame all the attending Veloc into flattening their crests and bowing their heads.

"All beings, including the *homo sapiens*, will be properly treated for any pests in the quarantine bay immediately upon return to the ship should the planet prove non-hostile. We will deal with having to oil feathers, using moisturizers, and otherwise undoing the damage from the pesticides. We will also check for any toxicity from the treatments two weeks after and deal with any consequences promptly." Waldren engaged Alban in a staring contest, using a mix of hisses and a

growl to force the Veloc's attention to him. "I *will* tell your mate on you if you do not cooperate."

"Ruthless," Alban hissed in reply. "You coerce us, bathe us in those... those concoctions..."

"Insecticides, most of which are safe for *homo sapiens* and Veloc alike, with minimal consequences we'll address after we're cleaned of pests. Be grateful. It could be worse. I could be enforcing internal purges of foreign materials while on world. I'm going to be generous and allow you to eat anything you catch as long as you allow me to run it through the scanner first. And don't you lie to me, you feathered freaks, you like your meat a little ripe!"

"He's gotten a bit feisty since the shiftgem gate made a mess of his schedule," I stated, looking him over. Waldren bristled at the Veloc in a way that amused his cat, who did her best to snuggle up to him while he established who ruled over his vessel. "One of my teachers called you feathered murder machines, and I need to confess I still think of you as such."

My words captured the attention of all the Veloc, and the entire lot of them perked up as though I'd gifted them with the greatest of compliments.

Waldren snickered. "That's a good one. I might have to adopt that one when they're being good and need to feel special."

"It is a badge of pride to be a murder machine for a predator, isn't it?" I considered the Veloc, chuckling at their body language, which claimed Waldren had laid them all low but believed in some form salvation, likely coming from me. "If this is a new planet, I can buy cats for myself with my share, right?"

Alban recovered first, and he nodded. "Yes. We get equal shares, and there's an extra share assigned to ship maintenance and to feeding and caring for Palta, split between them."

"Well, she is the ship's cat, and that's a very prestigious job. Ship maintenance is also critical. It seems fair to me that the ship maintenance comes out of a share and the cats get the

rest. They're morale improvement officers." I grinned at the memory of the debate that'd broken out in one of my classes regarding the importance of general morale during a long voyage. "I'm of the opinion that morale-boosting crew are worth keeping around even if they lack in any other viable skillset for a venture. If the team's morale fails, the team fails. Not everyone agrees with me."

Waldren snorted. "You're absolutely correct. Most sentient species are social. There is plenty of practical evidence proving that seclusion among most sentients equates to mental and emotional trauma to the point it can be lethal. I've been evaluated as stable with only Palta for company, but the feathered murder machines lose their minds at the thought of me venturing off into space alone, so they send entourages with me."

"It's always useful having your own army of feathered murder machines, Waldren. You're one of the best armed sentients in the universe. You have how many Velocs willing to murder on your behalf?"

Waldren made a show of counting heads. "Currently, there are four. How many are in the clan, Herserael?"

"We are seven thousand strong, and we should reach eight thousand next breeding season, should all go well." The Veloc regarded me with a grin, displaying his many teeth. "We are one of the smaller clans, but we hold large territory and we have taken over a small, habitable world by our own strength. We invite other clans to use our planet for hunting ventures, so we make good credits and hold much prestige. But we are small, as we are prone to seducing wayward *homo sapiens* women, who do not produce entire clutches of children at one time. But our numbers grow, as our crest color has become a more dominant gene as of late."

"You're born into a clan?" I guessed.

Bobbing his head, Herserael said, "Veloc society is complicated. You are eligible to join any clan you match colors with. For example, my father has an emerald crest, an azure tail, golden feet and legs, and a crimson chest. He

ultimately joined the Emerald Crests, but he is welcome at any clan holding matching his colors. It works well for us, as every hatchling ultimately has a choice of several clans, which include crest, tail, chest, arms, legs, talons or claws, and feet. *Homo sapiens* are welcome in any clan they have a tie to. Family members of someone mated to a Veloc, much like Waldren here, are held in high regard. He has suitors often from other clans hoping to build an alliance with us.”

If looks could kill, Waldren would have slaughtered his Veloc family member within moments. “I do not have any suitors, thank you.”

“You have not *accepted* any suitors, but they litter the ground you walk upon, and they show off their feathers and baubles in hopes you will pay them any attention,” the Veloc replied without any evidence of the man’s wrath bothering him. “Perhaps the gate wished to spare you from their adoration for a while longer.”

The way that Waldren blanched implied the Veloc hadn’t been far off the mark. Interesting. “Were you hoping to delay the inevitable, Waldren?”

“There’s only one thing worse than being forced to go on a hunt with the Veloc, and that’s being hunted by them in packs—and not to be the main course for dinner!”

I laughed at the thought of the man being stalked in large groups by a bunch of predatory females out to continue their species. “But *homo sapiens* and Veloc are biologically compatible, right?”

“Veloc are biologically compatible with most species. In the case of males selecting a *homo sapiens* mate, his reproductive system will, over the course of a year or so, adapt for compatibility with his new mate. Most Veloc won’t engage physically with their new partner for at least a year or two. There might be irresolvable problems with any children produced,” Waldren explained. “In the case of female Veloc, it’s usually a six-month process, but she won’t engage for at least a year for the same reason. The last thing a Veloc wants to do is lose a child due to impatience.”

I hadn't heard that part about Veloc biology, and I marveled over the patience of the species and their care for their families. "That's so strange. Not all *homo sapiens* are compatible, but Veloc can breed with just about anything."

Alban's soft hoots drew my attention to him. "*Homo sapiens* reproductive compatibility is a strange thing. As neither of you are aquatically adapted, you should have no problems with reproduction should you opt to grace our clan with offspring. Even the aquatically adapted can reproduce with minimal genetic therapy. It is a pity you will never master the art of reproduction quite like a Veloc. We are truly supreme beings."

I could understand the reason for his pride; unlike most species, Veloc possessed dominant genetics, resulting in almost every child being born a Veloc regardless of parentage. The rare times another species came from a union involving a Veloc, the child was typically female and carried her Veloc genes, often having Veloc children.

I'd read about a live-birthed Veloc born from non-Veloc parents, who'd adapted to preserve his mother's life. His claws and teeth had grown in sufficiently slower to allow for nursing, although by the time he'd turned five, only a few things differentiated him from his Veloc kin: he had his mother's furred tail, and he was roughly half the size of other Veloc.

"I read a study about an Azure Tail who doesn't have Veloc parents, although I don't know how old that study is."

"Oh, that's new enough," Alban replied, and his crest rose. "He's now a precocious teen who has discovered women of all species are interesting. He's more in love with the stars, though, and the current apple of his eye is a spaceship. His family is horrified, but the rest of his clan has sent him off on an adventure with some Azure Feet. They're pirate hunters with a specialty and love of killing planet busters. He's doing quite well, and the Azure Feet will keep him steered clear of romance until he's fully grown. We aren't sure if he's slow to reach his full stature or if he has active feline genetics. There is feline in him, as his parents are a sentient feline species. I

will refrain from telling you more of them, as you will surely want to pet them.”

“There are feline sentients?” I blurted.

“The universe is a strange and marvelous place, and among the billions of stars we have not yet reached or studied, there are habitable planets—and where there is life, there is chaos. From that chaos comes the many species we know and have yet to discover.” Alban gestured towards the beach. “That beach could be home to hundreds of new species we know nothing of. That is chaos in its purest form. But there is order to that chaos, as they all survive and thrive together.”

I considered his perspective, marveling at the dichotomy of it. Order and chaos, surviving and thriving together? To me, that sounded about as convoluted and impossible as efficient government.

Had my situation been left to the planet’s rulers, I never would have made it to the mercy ship in the first place. “That reminds me. How did the mercy ship get clearances for me to come and go as I pleased? It’s a lot of paperwork to leave.”

Waldren made a thoughtful sound. “It is a condition of being eligible for the services of a mercy ship. The planet’s government may not bar anyone receiving treatments from coming or going from their planet. But we handled your paperwork for you for this voyage. You’re covered to return should you wish without penalty from your government. I handled the filing, as your world is rather backwater regarding other species. They had trouble enough with the limited exposure to the Veloc they had when we first processed our arrival and got permits to land on the planet to deliver the comm tech to your parents. I’m making Alban replace those toys with better ones, so don’t worry about that.”

The Veloc in question flared his crest and whistled his amusement. “You are an amusing youngling. Yes, yes, your toys were overdue for replacement, and this is the only way you will let us shower you with our affection, as you won’t allow us to put baubles in your crest.”

As I resembled a peacock and had gotten used to the idea of being ambushed by eager Veloc wishing to adorn my hair with jewels, I considered the man, deciding green would play wonderfully with his hair color and conflict nicely with his eyes. “Would you let me help them once with your hair? I want to see what they do to men.” I gestured towards my head. “I am not really a beauty, but they work magic with me.”

“You’re plenty beautiful,” Waldren replied, and he considered my hair. “Green’s a good color on you, though, which surely amplifies their efforts. But if you want to see how they do it for men, I’ll grow my hair out a little so you can see it. I’ll surprise my sister when we return.”

The Veloc all snorted.

“I think they’re questioning our ability to return, Waldren.” I eyed the beach. “At least we ended up on a nice planet, right? And we have *four* feathered murder machines capable of hunting for us, so we shouldn’t starve.”

“Assuming there aren’t bigger predators than the Veloc out there,” Waldren replied, joining me in observing the beach. “So, we have protocols we use for situations like this. I’m not trying to offend you, considering your education, but I don’t know what you know, nor do I know what you don’t know. I won’t until I ask or we start working together.”

“Assume I know nothing,” I informed him. “I can identify common toxicity traits of plants, which will be useful here, as that’s often a universal feature. Weird plants tend to have similar tricks to our normal plants, it’s just a matter of identifying those traits. Don’t touch until data analysis has been done is a good rule. If you have a biologics analyzer, I might be able to help, though. We started our training with those, and I’ve been using them for years now.”

“Alban, get the field analyzer,” Waldren ordered. “Herserael, see if we have a field kit that’ll fit her. My spare kit won’t. We’re too different in chest size.”

The Veloc scurried out of the room, and I suspected the pair was relieved to have a job to do.

I eyed his chest. “Width or bust?” I inquired.

As I’d opened fire, he gave me the same treatment in looking me over. “I was thinking width, but your bust is substantially larger than mine. My width does not make up for your other advantages.”

I burst into laughter and joined him in staring at my chest. “While I don’t have an overabundance of mammary material, it is definitely present. I’m just going to apologize in advance for the extra clothing expenses. Bras are not cheap.”

“They are when the Veloc you’re living with adore human clothing and love making anything to make their featherless clan members shine. They love adorning breasts as much as they do crests. Your clothing bill will be fine as long as you don’t mind gifts.”

Nobody had warned me that the Veloc were insane and lacked regard for money. “When it comes to bras, I have no problems accepting gifts.” That left me with the problem of my hair, adorned with more baubles than I knew what to do with. “But what about my hair?”

“We have ways of adorning human crests in a manner safe for the equipment,” Gersenalt commented before looking at the final Veloc on board, a bright yellow one with an emerald crest like the others. “Rerenni, you can handle that, as you’re the best for ensuring the comfort of our victims.”

The Veloc hooted a laugh and bounded off, his capped claws making a strange rapid tapping on the floor with each step. “What is that tapping?”

“Rerenni is the youngest of us, mated only a few seasons before joining us on the ship. His beloved wanted him to, ah... expend some energy in the vacuum of space and spare her for a few weeks. In reality, she wants to create a nest, and she does not want him underfoot while she confers with the experienced mothers on how best to set up their nest. He would cover everything in baubles because he likes how stones glitter and shine. Baubles are not ideal for young hatchlings wishing to eat everything.”

I giggled at the thought of the Veloc having to rescue baubles from young feathered murder machines. “That tapping is an expression of excitement?”

“It is.”

“Waldren, can we study the Veloc once we’re done evaluating the planet?”

Waldren snickered. “Sure, Camellia. We’ll turn the ship into a research facility specializing in Veloc. I’m sure they’ll love it.”

“We absolutely will not,” Gersenalt replied.

“My ship, my rules.”

The Veloc hissed. “We will make you pay, just you wait and see.”

“You can contemplate how you think you’ll make me pay while preparing the quarantine bay. With our current luck, we’ll need it.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

TWELVE HOURS AFTER OUR ARRIVAL, night fell, and Waldren began analyzing the stars to determine our location. That the ship was unable to immediately pinpoint our location from the basic star charts thrilled him. The Veloc heaved resigned sighs and settled in to wait for the verdict.

It took four hours, but the ship finally beeped, and Waldren checked on the system. After a few moments, he burst out laughing. “This could be worse, but it could be better, too.”

The Veloc straightened, and their crests rose.

Alban hopped over, gave himself a shake, and asked, “Where are we, little one?”

“It’s an unidentified habitable planet, but it’s on the edge of known space. We’re about six weeks out from the edge of mapped space—and I updated my star charts right before departure. We’re in a quadrant flagged for probable shiftgem gates. The bad news? If we find one, we won’t know where it goes.”

“Well, that’s the definition of risky,” I muttered. “What’s the bad news?”

“The edge of mapped space is two or three of our lifetimes to reach the nearest shiftgem gate. We only have this map because of generational ships that wandered this way.” Waldren shrugged. “Assuming we can find our way home, if we can gather plant and animal samples, do a complete toxicology report of this region, and perform a flyby of the planet to count continents, we’ll get a hefty bonus for

identifying a habitable planet. Herserael, are you current on new species import rules?”

“Toxicology tests are required, pesticides need to be used, and a DNA sample needs to be taken. If dead, stasis is required, but live specimens may be transported for evaluation,” the Veloc reported. “You could make use of that stasis machine that cost the clan a fortune.”

“I could, but I don’t want to kill off a bunch of animals for no reason. If the planet seems safe, I’ll have you four scout and find out which species are plentiful. If it looks safe for your consumption, we’ll gather samples that way. Are you handy with a camera, Camellia?”

“We’re trained on them for data gathering,” I replied.

“Excellent. You’ll register species, and I’ll put you in charge of plant sample collections. Plant parts I don’t mind putting into stasis, especially if you can gather seeds of the various species.”

Seed gathering I could do; my first year, we’d spent days upon days upon days practicing gathering seeds of all types, and once we’d gathered them, we’d been expected to store them and grow them the following year. “I can do that. I know how to store them safely outside of stasis, and I’m trained on gathering the appropriate soil samples for testing.”

Alban cooed. “Such a useful little human. Then the plants shall be your domain, and the animals shall be ours. Waldren shall pretend he is lord over this domain while we ignore most of his posturing.”

“He has a very important job to do,” I reminded the Veloc. “He must pet Palta and convince her she is the most loved being in the universe.”

Waldren sighed. “While you’re not wrong, could you at least pretend I am useful?”

“You can fly the ship. I can’t. As the sole person on board truly qualified to fly the ship, you must assign the dirty work to the expendable.” I snickered at his perplexed expression. “You’re plenty useful, especially to Palta. We can’t risk

breaking her precious little heart should the planet have adverse opinions to our presence.”

The Veloc hooted their laughter and bobbed their heads.

“All right. Camellia, you’re in charge of evaluating the plant life to determine if it’ll generally be safe for us to leave the beach. The Veloc will serve as giant guard birds.”

“I’d rather have a giant guard bird than a guard dog right now,” I admitted, pointing at Alban’s capped claws. “I’m fairly confident those can tear through metal. And while dogs can bite, I’m pretty sure most dog breeds can’t compare to a Veloc in the biting department.”

Waldren chuckled. “You would be correct.”

“Palta is only better than a Veloc because she’s cuter, her fur is soft, and she likes when I pet her.”

Waldren nodded. “Those factors do make Palta the reigning champion of predators on board this vessel.”

“Exactly. So your job is the most important. Palta must be kept happy and comfortable for her stay on this planet. We should name the planet after her, and don’t forget the numeric designations so it’s validated.”

He raised a brow at me. “I see you have undergone some training regarding exploratory sciences and regulations.”

“I don’t know if there’s a planet named Palta, but if there isn’t, there should be. And this one should be it.”

After a moment, Waldren eyed the nearest monitor. “There are no planets named Palta, so we’ll dub this one Palta 001. We’ll name the moons, after we get a count of them, Andean after her originating home. This is now the planet of the cats.”

Alban cleared his throat. “You forget something, little ones.”

“What have we forgotten?” Waldren demanded.

“What if there are sentients on this world?”

Waldren deflated. “We’ll do the sentient checks and hope for the best. New worlds with sentients on them are so

complicated.”

“Why don’t we do a flyby of the planet and check for cities and organized civilization by air?” the Veloc suggested. “Then we will be less likely to be surprised. We can make this location on our charts and return to it.”

“Without knowing the precise size and orientation of the planet, we’d have to drop a beacon, and I don’t know if the beacon will be strong enough. Let’s start our investigation here. The beach is likely the safest place for us to begin an exploratory endeavor. We have no idea what is in those trees. We have no idea what’s beneath the sand, but I’d rather try my luck with the sand and the ocean than dropping us on ground. That’s a quick way to die. We’ll do the flyby after we determine if this region is safe.”

Herserael cleared his throat. “It is not much of a plan, but it is a better one than I have. I think he has the right idea. Let us check the location we know before exploring further. Once we know more about the world in this location, then we can see what else it has to offer.”

Waldren owned a modern analyzer, the kind my teachers spoke about in longing whispers. We’d gotten to look over the manuals of such machines, but we’d been at least a decade behind on the style he held. In good news for me, having read the manuals and done comparatives against the ones we had used, I was able to isolate the best way to collect samples, record findings, and retrieve the data, the three primary tools I needed to do my job. I pouted and regarded Waldren with wide eyes. “You’re better equipped than my school.”

Alban hooted, came over, and gave the back of my head a thorough scratching with his capped claws. While I couldn’t perceive the itching, the sense of relief and enjoyment remained. “She likes your toys, Waldren. This is the expression of a woman who will be surely stricken with heartbreak if you take her new toy from her.”

“I mean, I’m glad that damned thing brings *someone* joy on this ship, because all it does is cause me pain and suffering,” the man replied, and after a moment, he burst into laughter. “Her medications are going to be wearing off within the next half an hour, and her reaction to having her itches scratched is all the warning I need. Get the medications before she bites us.”

Still hooting his amusement, Alban left to do as Waldren asked. Once the *Veloc* departed, he said, “I had worried the school was behind on tech, but you seem comfortable enough with that.”

“We had access to the instruction manuals of the upper-end models, and we compared them to our models. The idea is the same, there is just more buttons, better functionality, and it’s generally easier to use.” I flipped the device over to examine the sensors. “This even has an insert probe. What do we use to clean it?”

“It will clean itself. Part of the probe’s test is to monitor any substances on it while it superheats to sterilize it. Once it has charred anything on the probe, it uses some vibrations and a burst of air to remove the leftover matter. I’ll give you sterilization cloths, but it does seem to work. I don’t know if I really understand how, but it’s self-cleaning, and I haven’t seen any evidence yet of contaminated samples.”

I wanted one of my own. “Hit me with it. How much is this?”

“Three million,” he confessed, grimacing and glancing at the other *Veloc* in the quarantine bay, who were preparing for our first venture onto the beach. “They don’t have many ships, not like some of the other clans do, so the ones they do have get tricked out. I fly for them, but the ship is mine and they pay me for the work, as I am notorious about trying to dodge gifts. They wanted to go to a newly discovered planet, but the mandates for the planet required data analysis and toxicology run. They needed a scanner, so the bastards decided part of my pay was this specific toy. And since they tossed it in as part of my pay, I couldn’t refuse.”

Clever, clever Veloc. “You’d probably suffer a great deal less if you just accepted their gifts.”

“They would win if I did that,” he replied in a solemn tone.

Men. Species didn’t matter; men were men, and I’d yet to meet a male who could readily set aside their pride for their benefit. Pride *always* interfered somehow. “But if losing means you get toys like this, I would lie down on the altar of gift receiving and wait patiently.” I gestured to Palta, who engaged a scratching post with dangling toy in the corner I’d learned was hers should we need to go into quarantine. “You’d lose for Palta.”

“I would,” he admitted. “With genetic manipulation and restoration, she’ll probably outlive me. And the instant we’re back home, I’m going to take my share of the bounty earnings, do a refit of the ship, and make space for her to have a companion. I can’t be with her all the time, and space travel can be lonely, especially for a cat as social as she is. I won’t enjoy the next few months of her hissing at the males I introduce to her, but here’s hoping she actually *likes* one for more than basic breeding purposes.”

“Maybe get her a female friend for companionship?” I suggested.

The look of utter horror Waldren shot me reduced me to tears of laughter.

“One litter of kittens tests his patience,” Herserael informed me, coming over to peer at me before whistling. “But she makes a good point. You could both get pairs of females, and once all the felines are properly bonded to their owners, they will be able to mingle as a small colony. Then you can bring various males around for their entertainment, deal with all of the kittens at one time, and strongly help with their natural diversification. We could acquire a set of four males to keep on our world so your kittens form a stronger genetic base. If we mix and match the males and females, then we can repeat the process with the next generation but more exterior males—and make a strong collection of good male

stock for those with unrelated females abroad. We can use the ship to transport the breeding candidates.”

“So many kittens,” Waldren muttered, shaking his head. “Last litter, I couldn’t count all the little bastards on both hands!”

“Palta is quite skilled at providing her loving owner with large, healthy litters,” the Veloc cooed in reply. “You are just upset you had to find homes for so many wondrous animals.”

“I should have kept one,” he grumbled.

“You sold them for a hundred thousand credits each, far below their market value, and only to good homes that were willing to sign documentation establishing their responsibilities to pet and species. You are merely upset because you will have to do many contracts with this ploy, and you hate paperwork.”

“So much paperwork.” Waldren bowed his head. “It’s a good idea, but I’d have to overhaul the entire ship.”

“Or buy a new one, which discovering this planet would allow you to do. And you can keep this one as your trainer ship when working with young, beautiful pilots like the lovely Camellia here.”

“Even with the haul from discovering a planet, I can’t afford a new ship, especially not with the number of shiftgem crystals I would need to set the drive up. Sure, I could buy the body and main parts and get her built, but the engine would be an issue.”

The Veloc’s crest snapped up, and he hooted, trilled, and clicked something at Waldren, who scowled before replying in the same language. Herserael’s reply, which involved some hissing and clacking, triggered a rapid-fire discussion between the two, and the rate of hisses increased with each exchange.

Expecting feathers to start flying, I headed for the hallway, poked my head through, and hollered, “I think Waldren’s getting into a fight with a feathered murder machine, and I’m not sure who is going to win.”

Alban, armed with the small medical box I recognized as containing my various medications, hurried down the hall, his feathers standing on end. I got out of the way so he could peer into the quarantine bay. A moment later, he burst into hooting laughter. “They are fighting over you. Waldren appears to be offended that Herserael suggested you be trained on an inferior ship should he upgrade this one—quite due, really. Herserael is just egging Waldren on at this point, as he has an enjoyment of pushing shiny red buttons. What started this?”

“Herserael suggested we get all female cats and start a breeding program. I started it because I asked about finding Palta a female companion. Herserael just added fuel to the fire.”

Alban’s feathers smoothed, and he spent a few moments preening and situating himself. “He is heartbroken every time he lets any of the kittens go, so this tracks. He loves his cats dearly, even the kittens he sends off to bond with other sentients. He may not be the easiest to get along with, all bristly and determined to be independent, but he has a tender heart for the furry ones.”

That I could believe. Then, a thought struck me. Had Waldren’s behavior to me changed solely because I possessed tidbits of Palta’s genetics? I could believe that, too.

He lived because of her, and he cherished everything about his furry companion. While I wanted to think that our ability to work together and spend time together had grown because of me, I realized Palta played an equal role.

Palta liked me, so Waldren did his best to like me, too.

“Maybe me getting cats isn’t really a good idea,” I mumbled.

Alban cocked his head to the side. “Why not?”

“If I get cats, and I leave to do whatever it is I’ll end up doing, it’ll hurt him because he likes cats that much. Perhaps it would be best to wait.”

The Veloc’s crest snapped up, and he considered me through a single eye, tilting his head this way and that. The

motion reminded me of an inquisitive bird pondering how best to solve some problem. “Ah. I see. You are an affectionate, tender being, and you would rather hurt yourself than others.”

I couldn't refute his statement, so I shrugged. “I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I can be selfish at times.” I gestured to my head and my tail. “I have these because of my selfish pride.”

“No, you have those because of your steadfast determination. Your dreams require ears which can hear. The tail is just an adorable bonus. No, that was not selfish pride. You have places you wish to go and dreams you refuse to give up your hold on. It is not selfish pride to listen to your heart's song. That is caring for yourself, something that every being must do from time to time to thrive. Do not berate yourself for caring for your future.” Alban crouched, opened the box, and pulled out several syringes and a folding mirror. “Today, you will get to see your ears in their full glory. The itching should subside in the next few days, but it is time you begin your journey towards accepting everything you now are. I will do the injections first as a precaution. It has healed enough you may touch your ears and tail now.”

My eyes widened. After five minutes of enduring needle pricks and some poking and prodding, he opened the mirror and pointed it my way.

I remained me with the exception of a pair of ears similar to Palta's although not quite the same. Mine were darker, matching my hair. I twisted around for a look at my tail, which was a darker version of Palta's, matching my natural coloration. “I thought I'd be the same colors as her.”

Alban resumed observing the pair in the quarantine bay. “We modified the genes slightly to better adapt to your personal biology. It's part of the hybridization process. While Palta contributed the genetics, we took those genetics and made them yours. They're her tail and ears, but they're your colors. We've found basic color matching during hybridization is easier on the patient. Children with hybridization that kept their animal's natural coloration tended to have issues with the coloration. Their adaptations didn't feel part of *them*, so we

modify all hybrids now to account for that. Your eyes see that your fur is the same color as your hair and eyebrows, and it feels more natural, as though it truly belongs to you. You should be able to look in the mirror and understand that Palta contributed the genetics but the fur is *yours*. The difference may appear small, but it's an important part of sentient psychology. There are some individuals who are tolerant of hybridization as an adult. They're evaluated through a more minor modification to test their tolerances. And well, there are those who have given themselves completely new bodies through the art of science, altering their genetics so completely they are no longer their birth species."

"That's really an issue?"

"Mhmm. You have already associated yourself with Palta, your donor. You are hesitating to indulge in something you would like and beginning the initial stages of isolation, as you fear a lack of separation between you and her. This is not the case. All Palta donated was a small sample of blood and her genetics. You are not her, and she is not truly a part of you. You share certain genetic traits now, but her genetic material donation is just a sliver of the entity that is you. Felines like Palta share 90.2% of their DNA with *homo sapiens*. This is why we're able to modify your genetic code with hers. There are already so many underlying similarities in your genetics. And as such, we can tweak your genetics to allow for the growth of a new set of ears and a tail." Alban whistled. "Now they are fighting about how you could possibly be comfortable *without* at least two cats of your very own to pet and dote over, as they have both noticed that you will shower Palta with affection at every possibility. To them, the only solution is more cats."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Here. I will put an end to this matter in a way that will make you comfortable with the situation and see the truth of the matter." Alban inhaled, and he honked, an explosive sound that rattled my brain in my skulls and triggered a headache. "Enough, both of you. Before you become too enthusiastic in your discussion, it is wise to

consider that young Camellia will need to undergo an apprenticeship with other species. Palta is unsuitable for such a venture into space. It was already planned as part of her experimental voyage. We do need to resolve this planetary exploration issue promptly, as we had already made arrangements for her to have such an opportunity. Palta and her kin would not fare well on that leg of her journey, and she has missed much of what the universe has to offer on her backwater world.”

Waldren’s eyes narrowed, and he crossed his arms over his chest but said nothing.

Herserael relaxed, and something about the way his feathers ruffled on his crest gave me the feeling he held something back, although I couldn’t guess what. “This is quite true. The Deltans and Cremorans have offered a venture through our connections with the Crimson Crests. If we go by the original schedule, we will have her for the duration of her recovery, after which she’ll be introduced to the allied species of the Cremorans and apprentice in the field of her choice. She’ll return to her home world for a visit, after which we will be in rotation to host her again should we desire.”

Waldren’s eyes narrowed further. “Palta is perfectly capable of handling Cremorans. And Deltans? Pushovers. Friendly pushovers, but pushovers all the same.”

The Veloc bobbed his head, and I wondered what he meant to express. “They are influential pushovers who can help Camellia establish herself with other *homo sapiens*. Palta will have plenty of company. You need not worry yourself about that. It will take you time to find her an Andean companion. The idea of partnering Palta with another female is a good one, and if you acquire her companion as a kitten, Palta will not have an issue—or you could keep one of Palta’s daughters for yourself.”

“That won’t diversify the lines,” Waldren muttered.

“Then trade one of Palta’s kittens for a companion for her. Another option, one that won’t damage your ability to purchase an upgraded ship much.”

Alban bounded into the quarantine bay, careful not to bump into any of the storage boxes or equipment set up throughout the room. “Her six month venture would be plenty of time to look into the issue of kittens.”

“Perhaps Camellia would enjoy accompany us when we search for a companion for Palta,” Waldren stated. “And it would give her time to decide for herself if she would like a pet of her own. The Deltas would make arrangements. They have a ship with foxes already.”

Puzzled, I regarded the man with my head tilted to the side. “Foxes? You mean the Earth canines?”

Waldren nodded. “Yes. The Deltans are typically a mixed *homo sapiens* subspecies, but a pure *homo sapiens* has entered their lines. She’s from the straggler generational ship, and she was hybridized before birth to pick up traits of the *vulpes vulpes*. Her parents gifted her with a fox, and she received a second fox later. They’re being overrun with foxes, although most of theirs are being spayed or neutered unless entering a breeding program and living out their lives as beloved pets. The *vulpes vulpes* are not endangered, and they inhabit numerous planets, ours included.” Sucking in a breath, his eyes widened, and he turned his attention to Alban. “Palta loves foxes. I could get her a fox, and Camellia could get a female Andean and a fox as well. If we both get female foxes, we can work on the *vulpes vulpes* diversification project as well.”

The Veloc glared at Waldren, and as one, they began to hiss.

“What about that suggestion is making them do *that*?” I blurted.

A rather playful grin made an appearance on the man’s face. “They’re cat people, and foxes are cat software on dog hardware, and they *hate* it. They love fox behavior, but they look at a fox and think about dogs, and they are *cat* people. If it’s an animal, I love it.”

“That’s the appropriate attitude to have. I’ve seen pictures of foxes, but I’ve never seen one in person. We don’t have

them at our school, but I think we have some in one of the zoos.”

“They can be a bit rambunctious, which makes space travel hard for them. The Crimson Crest foxes are modified for higher intelligence, and they can still be a bit problematic.” Waldren laughed, and he went back to his work, sorting through the storage boxes to preemptively set up quarantine sectors for everybody should the venture off the ship not go to plan. “The Deltan foxes are highly trainable, useful for salvage ventures, and excellent companions. However much I love Palta, she’s hard to train, and it took me a year and a half to get to the point I *could* bring her into space safely. It takes a month to do the preliminary training of the Deltan *vulpes vulpes*. I could take another Andean into space now, but only because I can install the special cages of cat containment for sketchy situations. I had to start Palta with the cage for situations, but now she’ll go into her nest when ordered, as she knows it’s either go to her nest or get tossed into the cage. I set up cages in most major sections of the ship in case of emergency. Only takes a few seconds to toss her in, close it up, and start up the cage’s life support system. Her nest is more comfortable, and she knows it—but the cage will keep her alive during an emergency, too.”

I turned to Alban, who joined Waldren in sorting through boxes and assembling the temporary quarters we’d need in case of quarantine. “Perhaps Waldren and Palta could come with me during the apprenticeship period?”

After a moment of hesitation, the Veloc replied, “He would become quite bored, likely. He loves to fly. He is not all that keen on learning about plants and the many ways they might kill him. He might be game to take you to places where the plants might try to kill you, however.”

The glare Waldren shot at the Veloc implied the large predator would come to a brutal end sooner than later. “I could take up an apprenticeship to set up a botany lab in the new ship. If I can afford something larger, a botany lab isn’t out of the question.”

Alban hooted, and he winked at me. “That’s a sneaky way of saying he wouldn’t mind having a garden in his next ship. But he is not at all capable of caring for plants at this point in time. Watch him the first time he gets dirt under his nails. The beast emerges. He will tear his nails off making sure his fingertips are clean.”

“Wear gloves,” I suggested.

Waldren scowled at me. “I don’t like feeling dirty.”

With a loud snort, Alban returned to work, shaking from the effort to keep from making some other sound, likely explosive hoots of laughter. As I was far from innocent, I joined the feathered murder machine, snickered, and resumed my task, which involved moving boxes to the appropriate place, guided by anyone who happened to know what I was supposed to be doing.

“Wrong kind of dirty, you perverts!”

While I managed to keep my grasp on my dignity, Alban lost the war, slid to the ground, and writhed from his general mirth. Fortunately, the Veloc’s claws were capped, so when he kicked several of the boxes, all I needed to do was keep the equipment from tumbling to the floor.

Muttering curses, Waldren fled the scene and waited until he disappeared down the hallway to burst into laughter.

CHAPTER NINE

TWO DAYS after the gate mishap, we prepared to disembark and explore the beach. After running numerous tests, including a lengthy virology examination of air, water, and sand samples, Waldren decided we would make our visit without protective suits.

As the generalized test subject willing to deal with the quarantine bay, I volunteered to see how *homo sapiens* might handle the atmospheric conditions and general walk. As Alban viewed himself as plenty old and about to die at the claws of his wife anyway, he volunteered to go with me, carrying a large satchel around his neck filled with supplies for both of us.

Herserael wanted me to carry as little as possible in case the exercise proved too much for me so soon after my operation.

Waldren sulked on the bridge to monitor the outing, as everyone had vetoed his desire to take part of the initial expedition force.

He who flew the ship did not play on the beach without others verifying if the beach was safe first.

Once everyone was out of the quarantine bay and we finished setting up what would be our temporary quarters for the next day, Alban pressed a bunch of buttons near the ship's bay doors, flooded the bay with the planet's air, and waited.

Within a few minutes, I became aware of the slight change in my breathing. "It is thinner, isn't it?"

Alban bobbed his head. “This is borderline survivable for Veloc,” he replied, giving himself a shake. “We can hunt in these conditions, but we cannot hunt for as long before we need to rest, and it could be a week before I adapt. You will have it easier. The air will just feel a little thin to you.”

“And this is ideal of Palta?”

“Very. To her, our air is a little heavy, but she can function and adapt in it. Her breed loves the high mountains, where the air is thin. The high mountains on this world would lack sufficient oxygen for her, I suspect.”

The bay doors turned out to be a ramp, which lowered to the sand. Waldren had parked the ship beyond where the waves crashed, angled to the side so we could get a good view of the water and the trees. While cooler than the interior of the ship, I savored the breeze and the crisp scent on the air, something new to me. “What is that smell?”

“That is the saltwater of the ocean. Decaying plant and animal life mixed with salt. Some like it. Others do not. I enjoy it, even when it can get overly fragrant.”

“It’s nice.” As breathing hadn’t led to any troubles, I hopped down the ramp until it met the sand, eyeing the beige substance with interest. “I’ve heard of sand. I’ve heard that some sand can kill. How do I know which type of sand this is?”

“Often, you do not until you step in it, but this sand should be safe enough. It is when the sand pools with water in specific conditions that it becomes dangerous. Where it meets the ocean will generally be solid enough, although you will sink in it some. That is why I have rope and you will go first. You are much easier to pull out of quicksand than I am. I am pleased they have taught you some common dangers.”

I stepped onto the sand, and my feet sank as warned, although not enough to alarm me. After a few steps, I realized I’d ventured onto tiring terrain, and I scowled. “This is not easy stuff to walk through.”

“Sand rarely is.” The Veloc hopped out, and he whistled at my expression. “The sand will be particularly troublesome where it is meeting the shore in some ways, so do be careful.” After a moment, Alban pointed at something farther up the beach. “A bird.”

Sure enough, a small, fluffy bird with long legs and white and black splotches covering its body and wings pecked at the sand with a needle-like beak. After a few attempts, it pulled out a small, multi-legged creature. “What is that?”

“It seems to be a species of crustacean. Something similar to a crab, which we have on our world, but not quite like these.”

We observed the bird take the wriggling, multi-legged creature away from the water before it shook its head, whipping its prey side to side. Once done, it dropped it and began ripping off the legs until certain its meal would not be running away.

“And that was impressively brutal,” I announced.

Alban hooted, then he lifted the small radio Waldren had given him, tapping on the button at its top. “There are small, predatory birds on this beach, worthy of any Veloc planet.”

After Alban released the button, Waldren replied, “I saw. I have visual from the ship, and I recorded the incident. I’m already running it through the database to see if I can find any matches. If not, it’ll go into our new species registration. See if you can retrieve one of those legs—assuming the bird doesn’t eat everything.”

“Roger,” Alban replied before stowing the radio in his satchel. “Do be particularly careful of any jellyfish you see on the beach. Those are found on most planets, and they can be quite lethal. And while Waldren dedicated much space to universal treatments, it is impossible to carry a cure for everything, so do not touch anything that is in the water that has a jelly-like consistency. In fact, do not go into the water at all. Should we find a jellyfish, we will catch it along with a sample of water and keep it on board. Jellyfish are on the

universal allowed capture list for study—and a live specimen is worth quite a lot to various organizations.”

I searched the beach until I found a blob-like thing lying on the sand. “Like that?”

At Alban’s gesture, I followed him, drawing close to the thing I’d spotted. “Precisely like that.” Opening his satchel, he pulled out a plastic bag, a strange pole with a hoop, and rigged the bag to rest in the hoop. Using the bag as a shovel, he scooped up the jellyfish, added some water, and observed.

To my horror, the blob began to move, waving tentacles covered in fine hairs, shedding bits of sand into the bottom of the bag.

“Oh, most excellent. Still alive. Let us put this on board the ship and get some other water samples so we can make certain it has a suitable habitat until we hand it over to the conservatory studying them.” Alban bounded up the ship’s ramp, leaving me to gawk at him. After a few minutes, the Veloc returned, displaying his crest and whistling a merry little tune. “They did not teach you about the kidnapping of plants and animals on expedition voyages, did they?”

“I mean, it was probably just going to die if it was left out on the sand like that, but won’t scavengers miss the potential meal?” I shrugged and resumed my search of the beach, discovering shells, odd holes with bubbles coming out of them, and several more jellyfish in a myriad of different colors. Alban gathered all the jellyfish and took them on board. I questioned how we’d keep them alive with no idea of what they ate, but I figured I’d learn soon enough. More of the birds came and hunted the crustaceans, leaving twitching legs in their wake. Making use of a pair of tongs, I gathered samples, putting them into sterilized bags for later review.

One of the braver birds approached me while I was rummaging through the remains, and it peeped at me, fluttering its wings and hopping about.

I considered the discarded legs, noticed that one had morsels of meat on it, and used the tongs to present the food to the bird.

With zero evidence of fear, it accepted my offering, going to work consuming the snack.

I went back to my business, and the bird continued to follow me, staring at me with its beady little eyes, peeping each time I moved on.

Nearby, where he investigated the discarded shells, the Veloc whistled and hooted his amusement. “You’ve made a friend.”

“One of the samples had more meat on it than others, and I think it’s hungry.” I resumed my work to fill the bag with molted crustacean shells, legs the birds hadn’t consumed, and even the dismembered but living body of a crab. “Alban? This one is still alive I think. But it has no legs. The birds took its legs?”

The Veloc ceased laughing, came over, and joined me. “A painful part of life, little one. It might live if you feed it, but it would take a long time to regrow its limbs, and we simply don’t know if we can feed it with what we have.” Reaching down, he scooped the crustacean up, went to the water, and placed it in, submerging it and holding it in place so the water wouldn’t wash it away. “Yes, you are correct. It still lives.”

“Do they count in the type of creatures we can take?”

“They do, but you would have to feed it by hand often and take care of all its needs. It cannot swim, it cannot eat, and it cannot do anything others of its kind can do. On my world, it takes a long time for their limbs to regrow. It may not survive its injuries.”

“Why didn’t the birds eat it?”

“The shell is too strong. The birds were strong enough to remove its legs, but they were not strong enough to break through the shell. Bad luck for the bird and its prey.” After placing the crustacean on the sand, he pulled out a bag and placed the distressed animal instead before adding water. “We cannot show compassion to every beast that has lost nature’s game, but I will inquire with Waldren if this little one can become a ship pet and experiment. Try to catch a little one or

two of this type so we can observe their social inclinations. We do not want to take only one if they live in groups. That would be cruel to it.”

“What is it, do you think?”

“A crab of some sort, but with more legs than the ones I am familiar with.” Alban returned to the ship, leaving me with two clear boxes with lids and instructions to put one crab in each box should I manage to catch any.

The little bird, who’d watched me with interest, ran off, dug at a small hole with bubbles, and captured a tiny crab. Rather than shake it, it brought the crab to me, waiting while its prey waved its claws and legs in the air.

Astonished, I took the box and held it under the crab.

The bird dropped the crab and ran off to hunt.

In the time it took Alban to return, the tiny bird had brought me ten crabs.

“Alban?”

The Veloc cooed, plucked the largest of the wiggling crabs from the container, and systematically removed its legs, cracked the shell, and handed it back to me. “Its beak is broken, and it cannot break the crab’s legs. See?” Alban pointed at one of the nearby birds, and sure enough, the tip of the little one’s beak was shorter and blunted, nor did it close correctly. “You provided it with food when it cannot feed itself.”

“It asked for help?”

“It is smart for such a small little bird. And we are learning much here. There are few predators of its kind. It has no reason to fear us.”

Hoping I wasn’t about to contract some disease from handling a dead crab, I pulled out what I thought was the meat for the bird and offered it. Without hesitation, it ate, swallowing as much as it could at a time. “If we leave it here, it’s going to die, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it will die,” Alban said, and he sighed. “I will see if we can utilize some form of loophole to keep your bird, but do not get your hopes up. I will bring you larger boxes so you can gather crabs for it. We will try to feed it, but again, we make no promises for its survival.”

Life was hard; I’d learned that lesson when a spaceship had tumbled from the sky, stealing my hearing.

An act of kindness from a mercy ship and her crew had saved my life. A second act of kindness, from Waldren and the Veloc, had restored my hearing.

If I could save the bird, I would.

After eating the crab, the bird went off to catch more, bringing small and larger prey alike to me. After observing, I realized the something was also wrong with the bird’s wings. Unlike the others, which took flight at their whim, the little one limited itself to ineffective flapping.

Alban returned with Herserael, who wore gloves over his clawed hands. He scooped the bird up and began an examination of it, cooing and whistling.

I tensed, wondering what the verdict would be.

“Relax,” Alban ordered. “Waldren thinks we can get away with the bird due to its circumstances. He has plenty of videos showcasing healthy specimens, and it is clear this one is deformed and unhealthy and would become fodder for scavengers. He has counted at least fifty individuals on this stretch of beach, so it meets the criteria for common species. Registering the bird, showing our care in catching it prey, and recording its behavior will handle what the regulations and rules do not already cover. If you wish to use the space in your quarters for a crab and a bird, that is entirely your business. We will sort out habitat and take some sand for the crabs. With luck they will produce a supply of food for the bird, but he thinks we can mimic something for it.”

I nodded. “But what about pests and illnesses?”

Herserael cooed, and after a moment, showed me the bird, spreading out a wing. “The little one will have a very

unpleasant few minutes, as will we all when we are hosed down with various insecticides. The crabs will be scanned using different machines, as some will be food for the bird. See the shape of the wing at the joint? Where it does not bend quite right compared to other birds?”

I nodded. “I see it.”

“This is a sign of malnutrition on birds on our world. It is resolvable with the machines we have on board, although for now, we will leave it as is. We do not want the little one to fly around the ship until we determine if it can be trained or if it will thrive onboard a ship. If not, we will make a habitat for it on our world so it can live out its days in comfort. This is good evidence we do no harm to the ecosystem taking the bird. This is a sign there are too many birds for this stretch of beach—the strong thrive, and the poor hunters, injured, or malformed eventually starve.” Herserael tilted his head to the side. “There is no prey instinct in these birds at all. These must be the largest predators on shore. Not even other birds hunt them. Had they, we would have terrified them. There must be larger but gentler prey species within the woods, but nothing like foxes or cats.”

“Releasing cats here would destroy the ecosystem,” I predicted.

“You are correct. There would be nothing to hunt the cats, and the birds would be wiped out. This would not be a good place to release cats. But perhaps it would be a good place for a menagerie.” Herserael adjusted how he held the bird, cupping his gloved claws around it. “No fear at all. What a brave and beautiful little creature.”

“Perhaps the gate didn’t care about us at all but saw the plight of the bird and the crab,” I suggested, gesturing at the thriving beach and its nearby forest. “They certainly need far more help than I.”

“The universe works in mysterious ways. I cannot say you are right,” Herserael replied, and he flashed a toothy grin my way. “I also cannot say you are wrong. But do try not to adopt the entire planet. On a normal expedition, the crab and the bird

would be monitored to see how they came to their ends to be recorded for the sake of science. You're getting away with the jellyfish because those are for scientific study. But as we are not here fully for science, we have room onboard the ship for compassion. The captain of the ship requests that you limit your acts of compassion to one more count for the day if at all possible. He can rig up one extra unexpected resident on board of alien origin. After that, we will be pushing our luck."

After an hour on the beach collecting crabs, samples of seaweed, and small stones, sea-polished crystals, and shells, I discovered there was one predator of the birds: fish. The birds ventured close to the water to catch crabs, and something large, dark with glistening scales, brave, and with big teeth surged up the beach, caught a bird in its mouth, and used the same tactic the birds used on the crabs to secure its supper. Feathers flew along with blood. Without bothering to return to the water first, the fish gulped down its meal.

Then it waited for a wave and wiggled back into deeper water.

I turned to Alban and said, "You could not pay me all the credits in the universe to go in that water."

The Veloc hooted, bobbed its head, and replied, "That was highly educational, yes. The oceans on our home contain similar fish, as brave as they are hungry and willing to test their luck for their next meal. So, do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Let's go with the bad news first."

"The crab is probably going to make it, and it already shows signs of regrowing its limbs."

"How is that bad news?"

"The fresh limbs you gathered from the birds seem to be regrowing crabs."

I blinked. “Excuse me? Did you just say the *limbs* are growing *crabs*?”

“Yes, that is what I said.” The Veloc shook out his feathers. “We were not anticipating having hundreds upon hundreds of dismembered crab legs growing bodies on board the ship.”

“Is that normal crustacean biology? I do not remember this from my biology classes.”

“That is more bad news. It seems to be a first. Waldren can’t find any records of this happening in the records. Crabs growing new legs? Yes. Crab legs growing new crabs? No.”

I shuddered. “What does that mean for our samples?”

“Well, that’s more bad news. You probably won’t be able to keep any of the crabs as pets.”

I stared at him before shaking my head. “I have lines, Alban. I draw a line where if I accidentally yank off my pet’s leg, it grows into another pet.”

“It explains why the birds were ripping off the legs of the crabs. When you can grow at least twelve new crabs in short order from dismembering a single crab, they’re replenishing their food supply. I am a fierce predator, but I do not want my dismembered prey growing into more prey.”

“So, we’re agreed. The crabs are creepy, and they can regenerate new crabs from yanking off their legs. Maybe we should leave the crabs here.”

“The crabs are invaluable to science, so Waldren has decreed we will not be leaving the crabs here. He is the only one who thinks his logic is sound.”

“Do you have an airlock and a method of ejecting these crabs into space?” I muttered.

“I am concerned the crabs will become spacefaring crabs, able to survive through the vacuum of space,” the Veloc confessed.

As the last thing anyone needed was spacefaring, regenerative crabs, I shuddered. “I revoke that idea.”

“Wise.”

CHAPTER TEN

ACCORDING to Waldren's fancy machines, if the planet had any significant pests, we had dodged acquiring them. My little bird turned out to be a girl, and she lived for her next meal. After a decontamination bath, which she handled with more grace than I would have in her position, the Veloc discussed the best way to protect her feathers, settling on the gentlest oil they had to make sure she wouldn't become ill.

As she couldn't fly, we set up a box filled with beach sand and a tub of fresh water for her to drink and kept her in the quarantine bay. She made a nest in the sand and settled in, and after consultation with the Veloc, they dug through the freezer, brought out fish from their planet, and offered it to her in small pieces.

Without the sharp tip on her beak other birds of her kind used to shred their prey, the bird relied on us to tear her meal into swallowable pieces. She ate the fish with enthusiasm, and while we waited, tense that we made a mistake with her diet, she went about her business, checking over her nest and digging through the sand to locate shells to place near her chosen space. Without knowing why she wanted the shells, I offered to make one more venture onto the beach to gather a bunch for her along with any crab legs left to regenerate so we'd have a more robust supply of native food for her.

I returned with enough shells to arm an army of the birds with palaces, more crab legs than I cared to think about, and the body of a small fish that had washed up on shore while I'd been busy picking up the discarded crab legs from a bird's meal.

The fish went into stasis for later dissection, the bird received a few handfuls of the shells scattered across the sand, and the legs joined the other regenerating crabs in a large, covered tub with some sand and sea water to mimic their environment.

I then took my second decontamination bath of the day and whined through the process of having my hair and fur detangled, much to the amusement of the three Veloc determined to restore me to acceptable presentation. Their decision to avoid tricking out my hair in baubles counted as a silver lining in my evening. While I had vague memories of having something to eat, I passed out on the first soft surface to cross my path.

The bird survived the night. To our horror, so had the crabs, and they had regenerated while we'd slept. Rather than piles of legs on a bed of sand, we had hundreds upon hundreds of wriggling live crabs in the tub. The lid had spared us from having to chase down escapees, but they barely all fit, and we hauled them to the beach to release and keep a few specimens in stasis for examination later.

The birds, upon realizing we'd brought dinner, congregated in a flock, waiting for easy pickings.

"What sort of hell planet is this?" I whispered to Alban, who'd been sacrificed to join me on the beach to release the excess crabs.

Waldren wanted a hundred live samples of the smallest ones, no more and no less.

He got his hundred, I'd gotten pinched more than a few times, and I wanted to light the entire beach on fire by the time we'd finished sorting and releasing the ones we weren't keeping.

The birds waited for us to haul the tub with our chosen crabs away before converging on the pile we'd left behind. The smart crabs fled.

The rest faced dismemberment.

With wide eyes, I turned to Alban. “Is it too late to change fields?”

“As a matter of fact, no. It is not too late to change fields. But at least the birds aren’t dangerous to us—as far as we know.”

“As far as we know,” I muttered. Grabbing my end of the tub, I picked it up and marched for the opened quarantine bay to discover three new birds, darker than the crab-dismembering terrors with longer legs and shorter bills. “Oh, look. More fearless avians. These ones have decided to come right onto the ship.” I considered their beak shape. “Those look like seed eaters if I’m to judge from the bill shape.”

“They have rather large beaks for something that should eat seeds. I would not wish to get my claw stuck in one of those beaks.”

While I agreed with him, I shrugged. “Think nuts more than flower seeds. Yes, you will have a bad day if your finger gets in the way. The birds I’m familiar with have those kinds of beaks when they want to break into seeds with harder casings.”

The Veloc cooed, and without any fear of the birds, he led the way up the ramp.

They observed us with interest until the giant feathered murder machine got close. With shrill squealing sounds and trills, they lunged for the Veloc. Rather than bite him as I expected, they cuddled against his legs and tried to hide in his feathers.

“This planet is utterly terrifying,” I informed Alban, lowering the crab tub to the ramp. “I’ll drag it in, you... deal with that.”

“I am being aggressively cuddled with, and I’m not sure I consented to the aggressive cuddling from unknown avians.” Careful not to step on them, the Veloc lowered his side of the tub, so I could haul it in. He reached down and plucked the first of the birds off his leg.

The bird reminded me of a cat, nuzzling against the larger, feathered predator to mark its territory.

“Put them back outside,” I ordered. “They are not injured and do not need to come home with us.”

Heaving a sigh, the Veloc attempted to obey, but every time he put one of the birds down, they crowded against him again. Tossing them in the air to promote flight bore no results, as the birds circled once before landing to resume snuggling with the Veloc.

“I can eat you in a single bite,” the Veloc stated, showing the birds his teeth.

The birds merely continued making a ruckus, fighting for the right to claim ownership over him.

After securing the crabs in the quarantine bay, I made use of the intercom, pushing the button and saying, “I require the assistance of some feathered murder machines to free Alban from the clutches of some overly affectionate birds on stilts. It seems they have claimed him as their territory, and they do not wish to leave.”

A laughing Waldren acknowledged my request and promised to send some assistance before informing me he caught the entire incident on video and had recorded it for everyone’s viewing pleasure. Torn between disgust we were being overwhelmed by small birds and amazed they won against the Veloc, who hesitated to hurt them.

“I feel like this planet might be where therapy animals originated billions of years ago. Those birds love you. They aren’t biting you, are they?”

“They reek of sheer joy to have found me,” Alban muttered, his crest flattened to his skull. “I am concerned there are creatures the size of me with a reputation on this world of cuddling with the local wildlife. And they are feathered, too.”

“Or perhaps furred, but with fur resembling feathers? They are not at all interested in me.” As I could escape with ease, I went to check on my bird, who chirped and peeped the instant she caught sight of me. Resigned to my fate, I went to the little

refrigeration unit in the bay, retrieved some raw fish for her, and went to work giving her bits and pieces. “Are the Deltans going to be okay with this situation? I’ve adopted a crippled bird. She can’t eat without help, and she can’t fly.”

“The Deltans will bend over backwards to help you with her care, never fear. They were once helped by the Cremorans after the demise of Earth, and they do their best to pay that debt back. You have nothing to worry about.”

Rather than merely send word to the other Veloc to help extricate Alban from his predicament, Waldren joined us in the quarantine bay, and he laughed at the birds pleading for the Veloc’s love. “What did you do to earn that?”

“Existed,” Alban replied, and he plucked up one of the birds, made a show of heaving a sigh, and petted it.

The bird flopped and basked in the glory of being the chosen one.

“He’s tried throwing them off the ship, Waldren. They flew right back to him, and it only encouraged them,” I reported, and after I finished giving my bird her fish, I petted her. Like the other birds, she seemed to enjoy the attention. “We know there are predators here, but they’re in the water. Is this what happens when you have an ecosystem where there aren’t any natural predators of birds on the land? The birds seem to be the major predator.”

“And there are likely no birds of prey,” Alban reported. “On worlds where birds of prey live, other birds do not take well to my kind. We terrify them. They understand we will eat them. There must be scavengers, else there would be rotting carcasses everywhere, but this is an unusual ecosystem.”

“I’d say they would have a problem sustaining their population, but they solved that by ripping off the legs of the crabs. They have a daily replenishing food source.” I eyed the tub and its hundred, tiny crustacean occupants. “It’s genuinely terrifying.”

“Peaceful as long as you are not a crab. Perhaps the larger species are grazers without interest in birds? They could pick

off pests and bugs. We have found insects in the sand,” Herserael reported, and he gestured to a jar on one of the tables, which sure enough, had some bugs within. “We will have to quarantine to kill off most of the bugs and evaluate if the bugs we have brought on board are dangerous to other ecosystems. The ship will need to be fumigated.”

Waldren huffed. “That’s fairly normal after an exploratory voyage, although our fumigation will be more extreme than most. It might be a good thing I am going to end up upgrading my ship. This one will be out of business for at least three months making certain there are no issues from our somewhat haphazard approach to disembarking.”

“Are there any signs of us becoming ill?”

“None. You’re the most prone of us for illness, as you are lacking a lot of the vaccines we have, and none of your metrics have changed. If anything, you’re looking healthier than before we arrived here. And outside of your bird, everything on this world seems quite healthy.”

“Excepting that dead fish.”

Waldren shrugged. “The fish is a puzzle. I don’t see anything visually wrong with it, but until we get it to a lab that can dissect it, we won’t know. My guess is old age, though.”

“Maybe we should go fishing for some live samples,” Alban said, and he eyed one of the boxes tucked in a corner of the bay. “We brought supplies.”

“No.” Waldren’s immediate and vehement reply made me laugh. “We have taken sufficient things, living and dead, from this planet. We will do one more venture onto the beach tomorrow before we begin monitoring for three days. Once we pass basic quarantine monitoring, we will do a visual tour of the planet and landmass mapping from orbit. Only then will we search for any potential shiftgem gate locations and see about heading home.”

I wrinkled my nose at the idea of quarantine. “In regular quarters or in the bay?”

“We’ll use our regular quarters. Things won’t be much different for us, really. We’ll just need to monitor our vitals, draw blood, and check for any signs of infection. Once we reach a proper spaceport, we’ll undergo full quarantine with professional supervision. The only thing that is different is that we will not use outside ventilation and produce our own air to make certain we cannot accidentally spread any illnesses or pests. Alban, if you go with her, I’ll authorize a tub for gathering of plant material to put into stasis.”

“We’ll all go to get some fresh air and a good stretch,” the Veloc replied. “We’ll do some basic tests to confirm there are no predatory creatures in this general vicinity when we scout.”

“No licking anything,” Waldren ordered before he turned and returned to his work within the ship.

“Alban, what did you lick?” I asked.

“More things than he cares to think about,” the Veloc confessed. “I’m an apex predator, and I determine how much energy I’m going to use from taste. How can I know how delicious something is without licking it?”

No wonder Waldren appeared to be grumpy all the time. He likely worried himself straight to gray hair with the Veloc and their predatory tendencies. “I’m seconding his order. No licking anything on our next venture off the ship.”

A paradise of botany research waited for me in the forest, and armed with elbow-high gloves, pruning shears, bags, and tubs, I rampaged, cataloging and taking samples of seeds, leaves, and anything of interest to cross my path. Alban lasted an entirety of ten minutes before the urge to taste a tree with sap almost overcame him.

Prepared for the Veloc’s naughtiness, I intervened, smacking the oversized, feathered murder machine across his muzzle to stop him from indulging. “Bad! We do not lick the local wildlife, plant life, or non-organic matter. *Bad.*”

Herserael hooted a laugh and hauled his brethren away from the tempting tree. “It smells delicious.”

“That does not mean any of you get to lick it. Document the smell, gather a sample without licking or touching it, *and behave*. If you can’t help without licking the botany, you can wait on the ship.” Thus far, we’d had an audience of curious birds ranging from ankle sized to coming up to my waist, with long necks reminding me of swans but with long, pointed beaks reminding me of a hummingbird’s. Like the birds on the beach, they found us to be most interesting, and I’d already been cuddled once by one of the larger, braver individuals.

Said bird, with brown feathers streaked with white, waited nearby for me to stand still for more than two seconds. As I needed to keep an eye on the Veloc, I did as the bird liked, remaining in place long enough for it to gather its courage and pounce, rubbing against my legs and rubbing its head against my hip.

Transferring everything to one hand, I petted the bird, which seemed to like the attention.

“Do you think there could be a missed colony of humans on this world?” I asked. “These birds are really too friendly to be wild animals. They act like pets that are used to being petted.”

“I don’t think so,” Herserael replied, and he lowered his head to get to eye level of the bird. I remained the apple of the bird’s eye, and the Veloc cooed. “I think it’s a matter of no predators and no conception of fear. There are no instincts warning these birds predators exist except in the water, and even then, the water doesn’t bother them much. They just stay in the shallows. The fish seems to have been a very hungry and bold denizen of the ocean. So perhaps a bird is killed and eaten from time to time, but it’s infrequent enough they do not have any instincts? There aren’t a lot of mammals that I have seen.”

“I haven’t seen any,” Alban reported. “It’s all birds. Have you seen any reptiles?”

“Not yet. Fish, birds, crustaceans, and limited insects. What an odd ecosystem.”

I frowned and began checking the trees for evidence of rodents, including squirrels, who often left marks on branches and trunks when they weren't digging holes. I found plenty of evidence of woodpecker-type birds drilling holes into trees and insects inhabiting the trunks, but I couldn't find any sign of furred animals living in the forest. “How strange. How can there be birds and fish but no mammals?”

“Perhaps there is a danger on the land that is easily evaded with wings?” Alban suggested.

Gersenalt lowered himself to the ground and sniffed at the dirt.

The birds took that as an invitation to cuddle, swarming the Veloc in their determination to receive attention. Cooing and whistling his enjoyment of the situation, Gersenalt complied with their wishes. “Then why are they so comfortable on the ground? Perhaps there are birds of all types that are filling the spots in the food chain that mammals would normally inhabit? There are obviously predators among the birds eating insects and crustaceans. There are likely scavengers that feed off the dead birds. Perhaps there is no need for them to be killed off outside of their normal lifespans due to the ready availability of food? Perhaps a slow reproduction rate?”

I considered the other options. “Or a rapid one, where they reproduce and die off in quick succession. That's also a possibility. If they're in a balanced ecosystem with a survival rate matching their death rate, then there's no need for predators. We've heard about the theory of a truly balanced ecosystem, but I've never seen one before.”

Alban's crest snapped up, something I learned meant a sudden or extreme interest in something. “And perhaps that's why none of the other birds would feed yours. Their lifestyle probably just accepts such things as a reason to die. She no longer plays a part in the balanced ecosystem. And the fish stealing one would not be an issue if it's just a matter of one

individual. That wouldn't knock anything out of balance. The ocean might be more typical for what we are used to."

I considered the forest around us, amazed at how something so similar to home could become so alien. "Have we entered heaven or hell?"

"I don't know," Herserael answered, and he joined Gersenalt in petting the birds. "But I will say this much. If only our children and all the children of the world could enjoy such a sense of joy of discovery. These birds have zero idea we could kill and eat them. They don't know what we are, but they know nothing of fear. For that reason alone, I do not know if I want others to discover this world."

"We could register it as ours, restrict it due to the planet's unique ecosystems, and forgo the bounty on opening the world for study," Alban murmured. "We would walk away from a fortune, but we could protect this world and all its wonders."

There would be no kittens nor foxes in my future without the planetary bounty, but it took only one look at the birds to understand I would have kittens or foxes but a great deal of regret over my choice. "And Waldren?"

"He will understand, although he will be saddened to deal with three months of no space travel until we register the planet and go through the appropriate research to determine its threat level. He would not wish to see this destroyed. We Veloc are predators, yes, but we are also protectors, and this peace is worth protecting."

Yes, it was.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PLANET CONSISTED of ten major landmasses, all of which shared the same general ecosystem as the first we'd landed on. The shape of the continents implied the planet still grew into its true identity, with the coastlines bearing striking similarities to where it had been one mass and broken apart over time.

The similarity of the species on each of the continents implied the separation hadn't been long ago.

None of our ventures yielded any evidence of mammals, and by the time we entered orbit to begin our three day quarantine, we'd seen at least fifty different species of birds and been cuddled by all of them.

My bird, who I'd named Squeakers for her tendency to squeak when it was time for her meal, didn't seem to mind captivity, although she protested her various appointments with the Veloc, who worked on her wings in the hopes of restoring some comfort. None of them knew if she would ever fly, but unlike with me, they doubted she had ever been able to fly at all.

Regenerative machines couldn't fix natural conformity.

Their machines did help her beak, although they only did enough tests to determine her beak could be regrown. As they did not want to teach Squeakers the meaning of fear, they utilized only painless treatments.

Squeakers simply disliked the cold tools, and we'd conquered those by taking the time to warm them to a temperature she didn't mind.

On the third day, we introduced Squeakers to Palta. I stood ready to defend my bird from harm, but somehow the Veloc communicated to the cat the bird wasn't food but family. Rather than try to kill and eat the defenseless bird, the cat settled in, purred, and nuzzled her new friend.

Squeakers adored the cat, burrowed into her fur, and made contented cooing sounds.

"Perfect xenodiversity," Alban murmured so as not to startle the pair. "Palta took much time and training to teach the difference between prey and friend. Squeakers simply does not understand that Palta could have been a threat."

"Palta's pretty amazing." I turned wide eyes to the cat's owner. "You taught a cat to be friends with *birds*."

"It was necessary! The Veloc keep a lot of songbirds and other avians as pets, and Palta needed to understand which birds she can eat. We actually had to hire a psychic to help us imprint on her the difference, but it's pretty easy to teach her now. She won't attack any bird that looks anything like Squeakers." Waldren smiled at the pair. "And if Squeakers can't go with you on your apprenticeship for any reason, I can watch her for you. She likes Palta enough she won't feel abandoned."

I doubted the bird understood abandonment, but rather than voice my concern, I nodded. "That might be the best for her. I'm not sure we *should* teach her to fly unless we release her back to her own world. She'd be killed right away."

"You are likely right," Herserael replied. "Flightless but not in pain would be the best result for her. We already are seeing some results. She is more energetic and eating more, which are good signs. Perhaps there was something to your theory that the shiftgem gate did not want to do anything for us but instead wanted to find an appropriate protectorate for her world. Your compassion is unmatched, and we Veloc will not allow this planet to be destroyed through greed."

While it was only one of many theories, it was the one I liked the most. "How much is a planetary bounty?"

“A billion standard credits is the typical amount, paid out by the various planets in the group that oversees exploration,” Alban replied. “We may end up with some compensation for creating a protectorate. It happens sometimes when there are unique ecosystems like this. A billion is truly a small price to pay for a whole new world. But it’s also a small price to pay to protect that world.”

After the split, the credits would have been enough to set me for life—and buy several spaceships, entire colonies of kittens just like Palta, and never have to worry about paying for anything. Rather than get upset over what I wouldn’t be able to enjoy, I considered Squeakers. “The universe truly is a strange place, isn’t it?”

“It is strange, yes,” Alban replied. “It is also wondrous. As soon as we are in comm range, we will send the map, claim protectorate status over the planet, and bring a more robust expeditionary force here. Then we’ll begin making plans to set up a spaceport. That would pay for the care the planet requires, lure researchers over, and potentially give us a method to fund further expeditions.”

Waldren sighed. “So much paperwork.”

“You will surely survive,” the Veloc replied with zero evidence of sympathy.

The day of our departure, I woke to a soft and gentle song. Unable to determine where the music, similar to a bird’s melodious cries, came from, I ventured to the bridge to discover everyone staring at the viewport at the world we would soon leave to return to the Veloc’s home.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“The planet sings,” Alban replied in a hushed tone. “Her song penetrates even the vacuum of space.”

“How?” I blurted, my eyes widening at the thought of the impossible being possible.

No one had an answer for me.

“Where’s Squeakers?” I asked. Everyone pointed at one of the chairs, where the bird cuddled with Palta. I smiled at the odd pair. They both slept, unaware of the planet’s song, which infused the ship and brought with it a strange sense of peace. “Do you think the planet is sentient?”

The first day of classes, in the torrential downpour of information on what we needed to learn before we could venture off world, the possibility of a sentient planet had been brought up, although everyone had quickly dismissed the idea.

“It’s disturbingly possible,” Waldren stated. “If we translate the melody into mood tones, this song is along the lines of a soothing but triumphant finale. A song of closure and joy. Did you know we have databases that can evaluate music like that?”

I hadn’t, so I shook my head.

“The singing started about two hours ago. I woke first, and I checked on the animals. Squeaker’s beak is almost fully regenerated now, by the way. Take a look.”

Sure enough, the bird’s bill resembled what I remembered of her brethren on the beach below. “That’s a lot of growth.”

“Most of it started when the planet began to sing. Her wings are unchanged, but I don’t think the planet is capable of fixing that. She was born that way. Her beak was broken—her wings were not.”

“Are you saying the planet is trying to tell this little bird goodbye?”

Waldren glanced at the Veloc. The predators shrugged. The man heaved a sigh. “I don’t know what I think. But I ran a scan on the sand we brought in for its composition. It’s evolvulite. The sand, the dirt... it contains or is fully made up of evolvulite. The sand has the purest concentration. Our surface scan is implying that the planet’s crust and upper surfaces is at least sixty percent evolvulite. It’s very much like Earth in that regard, and Earth has one of the highest known concentrations of evolvulite in the universe.”

I held my breath, staring at the screen with wide eyes. “What do we do?”

“We keep our plan the same as before,” Alban stated. “We will install a spaceport, and we will do very careful—and expensive—tours of the planet for those interested. We will allow minimal research. We will work with the other clans to ensure this planet’s survival. We will adjust our purpose to make sure this jewel remains a jewel until the day it faces Earth’s fate. And unlike Earth, we will be prepared to rescue as many of the birds and animals as we can, creating sanctuaries for them so she is never forgotten. But she is a young world, and it will likely be many a long year before she shares Earth’s fate—assuming she does.”

“Perhaps we should name the planet Melody,” I suggested, gesturing to take in the planet and the song she sang. “She *sings*.”

“A good plan. I’ll say one thing, I’m going to be doing a great deal of thinking on our way home,” Waldren replied.

I would, too—assuming we found our way home.

We traveled for well over thirty hours before the planet’s song faded away to silence. If we flew every hour without stopping, we wouldn’t reach the nearest shiftgem gate in our lifetime. It would take several lifetimes to reach one.

Our only hope for making our way home involved luck and an undiscovered gate. As the only ships to venture this way had been generational ships lacking the equipment to identify possible habitable planets from the distance they’d been from our discovery, we would have to do sector scans and hope for the best.

Even with a planet full of evolvulite, we couldn’t create a shiftgem gate.

Nobody knew what made them appear, why, and what made them vanish as though they’d been ghosts or some

strange mirage in the first place. Fortunately for most, shiftgem gates tended to stick around, although there were known incidents of them disappearing without warning.

The voyage had turned from an experiment for my adaptability to an exploration of our resilience and determination to go back to the places we knew.

Perhaps one day, life would stop surprising me.

One unasked question loomed, and rather than stew in uncertainty, I asked, “What are our odds of finding our way back to known space?”

“Higher than you might think, lower than I like,” Waldren replied, and he gestured to the main monitor, which brought up a large-scale star map. A red dot appeared. “That is our current position.” After a moment, a pale yellow field covered most of the map. “That is known space, defined by having a shiftgem gate within three months of space travel.” A purple dot appeared on the far edge of the yellow zone. “That is your world.”

“We ended up on the exact opposite side of known space?” I asked, my eyes widening.

“That’s correct. We’re actually closer to Earth than your home right now.” A green dot appeared along the edge of known space. “*Homo sapiens* amuse most in the universe. Before the planet’s destruction, *homo sapiens* viewed themselves as the center of the universe. In reality, they’re along the edge of it. The other races did what they could to save our people, but Earth has never been easy to access. I think it’s like this world—there were no shiftgem gates because if there were gates nearby, the planet would be plundered. The first shiftgem gates to appear near Earth did so shortly before the planet’s demise. The other races barely had enough time to prepare *homo sapiens* for departure—and many died.”

I considered the planet we’d just left behind. “It’s really like Earth, then?”

“Earth had many predators, *homo sapiens* among them. I never heard any reports of Earth singing, either.” Waldren replaced the star map on the display with black space, and a red dot appeared. “This is our current location, and I’m zoomed in, so you can see what we have around us within a year of flight.”

I regarded the void, empty save for one tiny planet, with dismay. “We’re looking for a needle in a haystack, then.”

“We are.”

“How long do we have in terms of supplies?”

Waldren winced. “Six months. The best we can do is explore for two and a half months out and then return to Melody to attempt to resupply, assuming we can figure out what we can eat that won’t completely disrupt their environment. And I don’t know about you, but the last thing I want to do is teach Squeakers and her kin that we’re able to eat them. Perhaps the fish, assuming we can study their behavior and determine they have natural predators in the waters. The one that ate the bird implies they have a more usual ecosystem in the ocean.”

For a long time, I stared at the blank map, the red dot, and Squeaker’s home world, and wondered what the future might hold.

As I lacked any conditioning to help me cope with the reality of our situation, Waldren suggested the Veloc activate my link and start training me on coping with the ability to read data in my head with the help of the implant. As Herserael thought it to be a wise idea, he removed the caps covering the link behind each of my human ears and showed me. The device had a plug meant to hold hair to mask the presence of the link. He showed me how the plug worked, snapping the cap embedded with hair matching mine into place. When installed, most wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.

The hair had been cultivated from my head, making use of the ship's regenerative technology to create a wig. As I liked my hair, I requested it to be covered.

He then showed me the chips, handing me the entry-level set.

Much like the planet we'd left behind, the chips sang. My eyes widened. "They sing?"

The Veloc hooted his amusement, and then he cooed. "Most excellent. No, chips don't sing for everyone, but those with an aptitude for it may hear such things. Each chip is made with tiny evolvulite crystals. The singing you're hearing is resonance. Some have it, some don't. Waldren's chips sing, and it took him many months to adapt to it."

The man in question snorted. "I needed a psychic to dampen that part of my brain. I'm overly receptive—but it's also why I can manipulate the computer systems so well. I have latent psychic abilities, but they're not accessible. They just make my ability to link stronger. It's individualistic if the singing bothers you."

"Will it be louder once it is installed?" I asked.

"Nobody knows. It simply varies too much. We won't know how you'll react until you try. Are you ready?"

I nodded, and I tilted my head to the side so he could access the chip ports installed behind my ears. "Does it hurt?"

"No, it doesn't hurt. You'll hear a click when the chip is inserted, and then it'll activate when the cap is put into place. Starter chips won't work without the caps in place, but advanced chips will operate as soon as they are inserted. The cap safeties are meant to give relief to new linkers. In a way, you'll have an easier time of it. Waldren will reduce the number of interfaces you can access with your link until you're used to filtering them out. Are your systems ready for it?"

"The ship is operating on minimal systems. Go ahead with the insert," Waldren replied.

As promised, I felt nothing during the chip installation, but I heard a faint click at installation. The chips continued to sing. I tensed when aware of the Veloc replacing the cap to protect the delicate chip and equipment embedded in my skull.

For a moment, the singing intensified before quieting to a whisper. In the upper part of my vision, I became aware of the presence of a prompt like I'd use for a computer. No matter where I looked, the prompt remained, a ghostly overlay.

With a little work, I managed to populate the prompt with an options command. A menu appeared, informing me of my various choices, including an informational database. I discovered I could access the database with a thought, and the wonders within reminded me of a massive library filled with the all the knowledge in the universe.

Waldren chuckled. "It took you less than five minutes to locate the primary database. Well done, Camellia. As you become more adept with the link, you won't even realize the interfaces are there. More often than not, you'll filter them out of your general awareness unless you need it—and you can summon and dismiss it as you need. The starter chips don't allow you to dismiss the primary prompt, though. It's a training tool. Are you experiencing any unwanted noise or discomfort?"

"The singing is a barely noticeable whisper," I reported. After a moment of thought, I added, "There's nothing uncomfortable about it. It's not much different from the computer system we used at school."

"That's intentional. When we were setting up your trainer chips, we checked into the computer systems you are familiar with. We used the closest system to what you used to give you the best chance of a quick adaptation. You'll be able to switch between various operating systems on other chips. My chips have a set of five systems I can use, as that gives me the versatility I need to control my ship completely through my link if needed. Not a lot of pilots do a complete interfacing with their ship like I do. It's a lot of extra work to learn. But, if I'm physically incapable of flying the ship but have retained my mental capacities, I can still fly her."

“That’s incredible.” I delved deeper into the informational databases, discovering I could also pull up images of plants, animals, birds, and fish with a thought. I understood why everyone had been concerned.

If such images mystically began to appear without warning, I would not have handled the intrusion well. My awareness I controlled—and could dismiss—most of the new inputs kept me from freaking out over the new things only I could see.

“If you begin experiencing any discomfort, let us know,” Waldren ordered. “In the meantime, your job is to familiarize yourself with the system. I’m going to bring up a new system once every two hours. If you hit your threshold for volume, let me know, and we’ll start the exercise over. Ideally, within the next thirty-six hours, you’ll be able to interface with the entire ship, although your chips are restricted on what you can access until you’ve learned how all the systems work. In our current situation, it’s best for you to be busy enough you aren’t worried about where we’re going or if we get there. We’ll all be conjuring similar tasks to keep ourselves busy and mentally sound. You’ll be at the highest risk of a breakdown, however. We’ve been conditioned for this possibility.”

“I haven’t,” I conceded. I considered Squeakers and her feline companion. “But even if we run out of time or must adapt to living on Melody, Squeakers got a second chance.”

“Yes, she did. But the universe works in mysterious ways. I think we’ll be fine.” Waldren’s smile caught me by surprise. “That evolvulite gate took us there for a reason. I suspect we’ll find out way out of here, likely with frightening ease.”

“Why would ease be frightening?” I inquired, furrowing my brows. “I don’t get it.”

“In cases like this, ease means we were not the ones in control of where we went or how we go there. I suspect we’ll find a shiftgem gate—and I suspect we’ll find it because one of us is going to get an unpleasant surprise.” With a rather wicked chuckle, he gestured to the main monitor. A report

about someone having become possessed by a shiftgem gate so it could be used came up.

The man in question, a *homo sapiens* with gray-green scales and gills, had reported that long after the discovery of the gate, it continued to sing to him, a haunting song reminding him of the time a stone had bent his will.

“How does stone sing?”

“I really don’t know,” Waldren replied. “You know what glass is, yes?”

I nodded. “Of course. We make drinking vessels out of it, and some rich people even use it for windows.”

“You can make glass from shiftgem crystals, and should you apply some friction to the rim of a round glass, you can make it sing. The Veloc have created musical instruments that make use of this property. We’ve found several materials we can create glass from, but shiftgem crystals make the best singing glass. What we don’t understand is how the original *homo sapiens* had lived on their planet for so long without unlocking the power of shiftgem crystals. They used it as building materials among other things, but they never unlocked its full potential.” After a moment, he shrugged. “But then again, had they, the universe would have been theirs to discover. And humanity is many things, but I’ve always felt that we, perhaps, should not be the rulers of anything other than our personal matters. We always find a way to make a mess of things.”

That we did. “So I learn, and we wait. Is that it?”

“That’s it,” he confirmed. “We will hope for the best and plan for the worst. That’s all we can do.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

WALDREN'S PREDICTION came true within an hour of him bringing all his ship's systems back online, but not in the way he anticipated.

The shiftgem gate did not possess anyone.

Rather than deal with waiting for us to figure out how to grid the sector, explore like good little lost spacefarers, and take potentially years to locate it, the shiftgem gate solved the problem through the unexpected relocation of our ship. One minute, we were making plans and struggling to come to terms with our status as lost in space.

The next, all ship systems except for life-support cut off. Before we had time to panic, the ship lurched, we got knocked onto our asses, and Squeakers took the first flight of her life, albeit aided by the unexpected removal of gravity.

Had gravity been on when the ship had been yanked across space, we would have endured worse than a few bumps and bruises. The lack of gravity turned the entire ship into a hazard, as everything that hadn't been secured floated. With zero training on how to handle a lack of gravity, I discovered momentum worked in a vastly different fashion. Fortunately for me, I crashed into a wall rather than any important equipment.

Waldren came to my rescue, hauled me to one of the seats, and buckled me in so I wouldn't hurt myself or someone else. He captured Squeakers, handed her over, and took Palta off to his quarters, where she would remain in her nest until he got gravity online and began rebooting the ship's systems.

Upon his return, he activated the exterior cameras.

A shiftgem gate glowed around us, and the ship hovered in its heart. Some force maintained the ship's position while Waldren and the Veloc scrambled to restore the ship's systems and contain the floating hazards. Much like Melody, the gate sang.

Squeakers only needed a little attention to calm, and the bird cuddled close upon recovering from her fright. I suspected I needed more comfort than she did, as my heart raced at a few thousand beats a minute. The link chips sang, loud enough I struggled to hear anyone speak. Fortunately for my sanity, the noise ebbed and settled to a strangely pleasant background noise. Little by little, my heart rate calmed as well, although I would need a shower to clean away the excess amount of sweat. "Is the ship okay?"

"She's fine," Waldren replied without looking my way. "The system shut down when the drive cores activated, leaving the life-support system on. As I hadn't activated the engine, the ship's systems went into emergency mode. That involves shutting down all non-mandatory systems. On this ship, life-support is the sole mandatory system. It'll take me an hour or so to get everything back up and checked for damage. But the system had enough time to shut down before the drive cores activated."

"Has this ever happened before?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Alban?"

The Veloc, who waged war with one of the consoles, snorted. His crest feathers snapped up, and a moment later, he cooed. "We've been pulled a three-week voyage from Melody. I'm registering the shiftgem gate's position in our systems."

With a chuckle, Waldren went over to Alban and peered at the display.

I marveled how the man used all surfaces as launching pads, somehow gliding to where he wanted with the right amount of force to keep from crashing into something. "How do you learn to do that?"

“You mean move without gravity?” Alban asked.

I nodded.

“Our first three voyages are done without gravity to teach us,” the Veloc replied. “We then learn to cope with gravity in space. Each voyage has a two week adaptation period to get used to gravity after floating in space for a few months. We weren’t going to put you through that environment until you healed. It can cause strange consequences on a body. Gravity serves important purposes.”

Waldren bobbed his head, and he typed something onto Alban’s console before floating back to his station. “Do star scans and pipe them to an exploratory map file,” he ordered. “Exclude Melody’s location on the maps with a notation that we have a claim on a habitable world within four weeks of this waypoint. As soon as we have Melody registered as ours, we’ll release an updated map. Run another scanner for any other planets from this location. Our scanner should be able to detect Melody from here.”

“Roger,” the Veloc replied before getting to work.

“Camellia, I’m going to bring the informational database up next. I want you to find the shiftgem section of the archives and see if you can get any matches on the color patterns and gate shapes. That might help us learn which gate this might access.”

“Can a shiftgem gate connect to multiple gates?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “When you want a specific destination from a gate that has multiple destinations, we have to send a series of pulses to change the gate’s color. Once the gate is the correct color pattern, we activate our drives and make use of the gate. Those gates are pretty rare, however. I know of only six of them in the universe. We’ll probably end up discovering another gate after this, which will be another big paycheck in our accounts. Shiftgem gates are worth even more than habitable worlds.”

My eyes widened. “Finding gates are worth even more than entire planets?”

“They are. In exchange for sharing the location and destination of the gate, we’re paid a hefty sum. Gates that go to exterior space are priceless, but all captains pay yearly fees to help cover the allowances for using the gates. This ship costs ten thousand credits a year for gate usage. There are millions upon millions of ships paying fees. Eighty percent of those fees tend to go to bounties for discovering new shiftgem gates.” He chuckled, paused his work long enough to rub his hands together, and added, “I really might have enough to upgrade the entire ship with this. Sure, we’ll need to do a lot of work protecting Melody, but that’ll be worth it. I’m going to get a dual-drive system, too.”

“Dual-drive system?” I stared at him, struggling to comprehend how he’d gone from his more restrained self to boisterous.

“The ship will have two sets of engines, so the chances of a catastrophic failure preventing space travel are significantly reduced. It’s expensive, but it’s worth it—and if I have the funds, I’ll do a tri-engine system. The third engine would be rigged to replace one of the others if they broke. In space, the loss of an engine can be a death sentence. I tend to do a lot of maintenance work on the engine to make sure there aren’t any issues.” Waldren returned to his station and typed on the console, narrowing his eyes while considering the ship’s output. “All right. The systems seem to be checking out. According to the sensors, we’re being held in some form of gravity well. It’s reporting pressures on all sides of the ship, which is holding it in place. Not a lot of pressure, but enough to make certain we aren’t going anywhere. Engaging the engines will be enough to break the hold. This is good for us because it’s enough to keep us from drifting.”

“Shiftgem gates can do that?”

“Apparently.” Waldren tapped a few buttons on the keyboard. One by one, the lights returned to the bridge, and the ship vibrated as the engine kicked back on. “All right. The systems are coming back faster than expected. It looks like the ship automatically started rebooting the instant we crossed through.”

Alban snorted, and he said, “We’re getting planetary readings already. I’ve located Melody, and there are four other planets within range. I’m getting the scan data. We’re close enough we can issue a claim to them without visual. They aren’t registered.”

“Are they within this system’s Goldilocks Zone?”

“Checking,” the Veloc replied before tapping buttons on the console and monitoring the screen. “Mathematical analysis confirms all planets are potentially habitable.”

“*Four* habitable planets?” Waldren paced around the bridge, and the activation of the displays implied he’d gotten the systems up enough to utilize his link. “Can we afford to establish protectorates for all four?”

“We can. If we apply a share to the fees, locating the shiftgem gate and sending the star charts would be sufficient to lay claim over all four planets. If we flag them all for research and non-commercialization, we’d be able to establish the protectorates with ease.” Displaying his teeth, the Veloc raised his crest. “It will take a few months to handle all the paperwork, during which Camellia can pursue her training and other ventures. Her share of the shiftgem gate discovery will set her for life and allow her to pursue her dreams as she sees fit. I am sure the Deltans will still host her even with her fiscal success from this venture.”

“Assuming we make it out of here—and figuring out where the gate goes.”

“I suspect the partnering gate will form not far from our world. We have limited gates, and conditions are optimal for the manifestation of one. This gate clearly is capable of manipulating our ship, so I suspect it is able to get a lock on our home world.”

According to Waldren’s grunt, the Veloc had given him terrible news. “We’ll have to increase our security around our home.”

“The other clans will help with that, as they will be given access to the gate as part of our protectorate. I’ll contact the

Crimson Feet.”

Waldren froze. “The Crimson Feet?”

“They love peace as much as they adore violence, and they will lay down their lives to make sure Squeakers and her kin never experience fear. If we involve the Crimson Feet, we will have nothing to worry about. If you upgrade from this beauty and offer her to the Crimson Feet, we won’t even have to pay them for the work. They will use it as part of their yearly rite of passage.”

That got Waldren thinking. “Camellia, the Deltans are capable of handling quarantine situations, so assuming we manage to gate back to regular space, we can take you there first. That’ll let you be in a more restive environment. Our quarantine quarters are less than ideal.”

“We don’t need them often,” Alban explained. “So it would spare you a great deal of misery.”

Aware Squeakers adored Palta and would be lonely without her furry companion, I understood the necessity of my next words, however much I disliked it. “Can you keep Squeakers with Palta?”

“Of course,” he replied, and he offered a small smile. “I don’t know how long Squeakers will live because we don’t know much about her species, but she’s more than welcome to stay with Palta.”

“They get along so well, and Palta would be sad,” I replied.

“Palta would survive with minimal complaining should you take your bird with you, but it might be safer for her to stay with Palta for a while. I don’t know what the Deltans have in mind for your training. Knowing them, they might just toss you into an exploratory group and teach you on the fly. Little prepares someone more than a trial by fire. They’ll keep you as safe as possible, but not completely safe.” Waldren wrinkled his nose at that. “They might not, considering this incident. Only time will tell.”

“Time will tell.”

It always did.

It took Waldren three hours to check over his ship for damage, which was enough time for the *Veloc* to make use of the scanning systems to get a full chart of the area. One of the planets proved to be a mere hour away, but considering the behavior of the shiftgem gate, beyond getting some long-range telescope photography of the world, which showed every sign of being habitable, he decided we were best off not testing our luck.

The gate had gone through the effort of porting us to it, so he wanted to see what was on the other side.

As he didn't have a proper pen for Squeakers, I held her on my lap for the jump. The bird enjoyed the attention, made herself comfortable, and waited with admirable patience.

Waldren remained tense throughout the entire process of preparing the ship for the jump, and when it was time to depart, he eased the ship out of the gate's hold. The gravitational forces released the moment he engaged the engines, which implied the shiftgem gate itself was somehow sentient.

The *Veloc* had discussed the gate's probable sentience in hushed whispers and a certain amount of awe.

No one could definitively prove it, but *something* possessed sentience. Nobody on board believed our trip to Melody had been a coincidence. We still made guesses as to the why. I preferred to think that the shiftgem gate had spotted an opportunity to protect the nearby planets, putting their safeguarding in the *Veloc*'s capable claws. If I were someone inclined to try to profit off such a peaceful world, I would think twice before testing the feathered murder machines.

I valued my life. I supposed the greedy might not.

"Well, here goes nothing," Waldren muttered, and he accelerated the ship in the direction of the shiftgem gate.

Like our first jump, white light enveloped the ship. Unlike our first jump, no alarms screamed, and once the glow faded, we emerged into empty space. The ship drifted to a halt. Waldren pressed a few buttons on his chair's armrest before saying, "We're clear. I'd like the feathered menaces on board this vessel to start working the star charts while I do a check of all systems. I will be moving the ship a safe distance from the gate in case it is a known gate with multiple destinations."

Within ten minutes, after doing a basic scan and check of the systems, Waldren moved the ship a safe distance away from the shiftgem gate. Alban took over the console controlling the primary scanning software. "The gate is not registered in the system," he announced.

"I'd say we're set for life, but in reality, we'll walk away with a sliver of the percentage of discovering a pair of shiftgem gates making sure nobody screws around with those worlds." Waldren heaved a sigh. "Herserael, see if the gate can be locked."

Shiftgem gates could be locked? Puzzled, I observed the Veloc as he went to one of the consoles on the other side of the bridge and began tapping on the screen. Within a few minutes, he replied, "The gate can be locked."

"Okay. How can a gate be locked?" I asked, gesturing at the pulsing, colored gate hanging in space nearby. "I don't understand."

"Shiftgem gates can interface with ships. We aren't sure *how*, but link-enabled ships can sometimes communicate with shiftgem gates. It's usually yes or no states, but some gates can be locked. Gates that can be locked accept an input code from a ship, register that code, and will not activate again until that code is entered," he explained. "It's like a password for shiftgem gates. Most gates won't or can't lock. But that just plays to the belief these gates are sentient. If we lock the gate, the worlds we want to protect are a great deal safer—and we can limit who can get to that sector of space without a generational ship." Waldren stepped away from the console and rubbed his hands together. "This will make our lives easier yet more difficult."

Alban turned towards me and said, “We will still be paid quite well for having discovered the gate, but as we’re claiming protectorship over all the worlds this gate leads to under conservatory and research rules, we’ll have a lot of paperwork to handle. We should agree to monitor the space for rescue, Waldren. That will cover most of our bases.”

“I was already planning on that. If the Veloc clans work together, we can figure out an arrangement. Do you have a lock on our location?”

After a moment, the Veloc grunted. “We’re within Veloci space, although we’re skirting Cremoran and Deltan territory. We’re a week from a Deltan gate, which will take us to their homeworld. That should put us at three weeks from getting home.”

“We’ll be a little late, but if we’re that close to a Deltan gate, then we’re in comm range.”

“We are.”

“Once we’re away from the gate, get a comm going with the Deltans, inform them we’ll be bringing Camellia over, and that we need to quarantine due to a new world discovery.” Turning to me, Waldren said, “You’ll be grateful for dodging the Veloc’s quarantine zone and the paperwork generally required. You’ll have to sign some, but the Deltans can help with that. You’ll find them to be nice albeit strange *homo sapiens*.”

I raised a brow at that. “In the universe’s general standard, aren’t all *homo sapiens* strange?”

The Veloc hooted their amusement while Waldren grinned at me. “We are. I’d apologize for your experimental voyage being cut short, but I think we’ve all had our fair share of excitement for the next while.”

Truer words had never been spoken.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SIX MONTHS LATER.

Had I known I would hate everything about being landlocked, I would have hidden on board Waldren's ship and lived the rest of my life as a starfaring stowaway. I would have reduced myself to hiding in Waldren's quarters, latching onto him, and refusing to let go.

It'd taken me a day to realize I missed the man, his cat, and the bird I'd rescued. I also missed the Veloc and their approach to life and space travel.

The Deltans and Cremorans took their hospitality to extremes, danced around my condition as partially deaf without comprehending my hybrid ears functioned properly, and otherwise treated me as though I were made of delicate glass. The sole individual to understand my plight, a fellow hybrid blended with a fox, rarely made her way to the planet, as she thirsted for the stars and owned her own ship, stealing away her husband at her whim.

One day, her husband would rule over the Deltan planet, so they escaped at every opportunity.

What they disliked they changed, although they coped with the things they couldn't change with grace. I admired them for that.

I'd gotten within thirty feet of successfully stowing away on her ship before one of my Deltan babysitters had caught me

and redirected me to the latest project they wanted me to complete.

According to them, it was xenodiversity training and preparation for space.

According to me, it was an exercise in extreme boredom.

What I learned almost made up for the tedium, which rehashed much of what I already knew. They viewed my home as a backwater with dated education, but it took little time and effort to adjust my knowledge. The link helped with that.

I'd handled upgrading my link chips at my speed, never mentioning what I did to my teachers. While there were some linkers among the Deltans, they were few and far between. That meant the accessible systems were also few and far between, and I discovered those systems tended to have horrible security.

Someone so new to using a link shouldn't have been able to manipulate important things, including my personal schedule. The first time I'd done it, adding an archaeology course to my schedule, my teachers had been confused but accepted the oddity. The second time I'd done it, I'd invited myself to learn how ship engines worked, attending an entire month's worth of classes. By the time I finished, dedicating six hours of my day to my learning, I could dismantle and rebuild an engine without the help of a manual.

My final trick would be escaping the planet and going somewhere—anywhere. The first ship accepting passengers would find me on board, and if none came to the world, I'd go with my second plan, which involved stowing away.

The Deltan's planet drove me a little crazier every day.

It turned out I liked a little lethal blended with a little abrupt, and I missed the blunt honesty of the Veloc and their *homo sapiens* adoptee. Making use of my link, I wrinkled my nose and checked over the schedule for the day, hoping I might get to slip away and hit up the spaceport.

Luck was with me, as the Deltans did toss rest days my way every now and then.

On foot, it would take me several hours to make the hike, most of which was through Veloc territory. I'd learned early on the Veloc wouldn't hunt *homo sapiens* but enjoyed startling prey they couldn't eat. As a result, I'd learned to take a variety of different weaponry with me, most of which could subdue a Veloc. For the most part, I gave them a jolt they wouldn't forget anytime soon if they came into my space without permission. Thanks to the self-defense courses the Deltans liked subjecting me to, I'd even gotten to the point I could, like Waldren, toss a pesky Veloc if they lunged at me.

While large, I'd learned the feathered murder machines weighed less than I had expected.

A jaunt through hunted woods sounded a hell of a lot better than the quiet picnicking on pristine lawns the Deltans enjoyed. If I stayed underfoot, I'd find myself the victim of such a picnic for lunch and maybe dinner as well.

I'd rather go kick a Veloc in the head to see what would happen.

I supposed the predator in me in the form of Palta's donated genes had changed me in more ways than sprouting ears and a tail.

I escaped the university residence I'd called home for the past six months wearing running shoes and sweats, which would leave the Deltans with the impression I worked on my physical fitness. I would, although not in the way they anticipated. In my pockets, I held my most important identification cards, my financials card, and my health card, which would inform any who scanned the chip of my vaccinations and general health status.

The Deltans lived for paperwork, and I wanted to toss the entire lot of them off a cliff.

The instant I escaped the university grounds, I jogged in the general direction of the Veloc hunting grounds, where I'd be able to cut across to the spaceport. The meticulously manicured lawns made way for deer tracks and broad hunting paths the Veloc favored, as they loathed when their baubles got

caught in the underbrush. I made use of the Veloc's trails, which had seen recent usage.

A run-in with a Veloc would improve my day, especially if I couldn't find a ship to stowaway on to escape my personal version of hell.

Within five minutes, I spotted a Veloc ahead, one with a crimson crest, matching feet, and a cyan body and tail. I maintained my stride while the oversized feathered murder machine halted and regarded me with a bright golden eye. The temptation to toss the inquisitive Veloc on his ass almost got the better of me, as he did a good job of blocking the trail so I couldn't get by him.

If he didn't want to move, I'd vault over him, which I did, planting my hands on his feathered shoulders and propelling myself up and over. "Pardon me," I chirped, and because I could be an ass, I flicked my tail at him.

While startled, the Veloc hooted a laugh. "Not a Deltan, I see. Deltans cringe, except for that one boy who has learned we won't eat him."

I turned, and as walking backwards on a trail showed of fitness, finesse, and spatial awareness, I did that, careful to monitor my progress and slowing to a somewhat sane pace. "You mean Delta?"

"I see you have met the boy." The Veloc stalked me, although I'd learned his body language implied I intrigued him rather than enticed his appetite. "You must be the little *homo sapiens* from Schwana Major."

"Camellia," I replied. "And your name and clan?"

"I am Waltri, and I belong to the Crimson Feet."

Ah. I'd run into one of the elite feathered murder machines. "I am not available to be consumed by a Veloc today." I flashed him a grin and came to a halt. "I don't suppose you have a spaceship in which I could stowaway upon to get off this maddening rock, do you? I've a *homo sapiens* and his pet cat to track down."

Maybe I hoped for something that wasn't there, but I longed for a chance to find out if I could make a future with Waldren and Palta.

I missed them.

Waltri lifted his head and let loose a loud and long hoot, and his entire body shuddered from the force of his mirth. "You view this world as a maddening rock?"

"Was that a laugh?" I asked, blinking at the Veloc's behavior.

"More of the hysterical nature, as you caught me completely by surprise. But yes, that is one of our laughs. You wish to stowaway on a ship to escape this world?"

"I am so bored I will go insane if I have to deal with learning more hogwash I already know." I considered flopping on the ground and kicking my feet like a child in the throes of a temper tantrum. "There are only so many classes I can sneak into using my link, and for some reason, they won't let me enroll in flying courses."

"They expect you would fly away, never to be seen again, should they put you near the controls of any ship. You, little one, have a reputation that is reaching throughout the stars."

Oh, great. I had a reputation? "As what? A demoness out to drive the Deltans out of patience?"

I could see that. While I'd done as told for the most part, I'd demonstrated more than a little skepticism over my education. Reading ahead, advancing my learning on my schedule rather than theirs, and otherwise doing what I wanted when my day hadn't been scheduled down to the last second, had something to do with that.

Waltri cooed, and he gestured in the direction of the spaceport. "We of the Crimson Feet do have a ship here, and you may board, although I'm afraid we will not allow you to stowaway. The Emerald Crests have laid a claim upon you, and we would not endanger one of their clan through inappropriate transport. And as you were part of the voyage

discovering the new worlds, we have you to thank for new hunting grounds.”

I growled, a habit I’d developed within a month of arriving on the Deltan’s world. “Hunting better not mean you’ve been eating my birds!”

The Veloc cooed and shook his head. “No, no. We have not done anything nefarious to Squeakers and her kin. We have taken more than a few of the birds off their home world, but only the injured ones or ones with broken beaks like hers. We have learned that is how they control their population. When there isn’t enough food to sustain them, volunteers break their beaks to indicate they will sacrifice themselves to spare the rest of the population. They classify as low-grade sentient, in the same category as Palta and similar animals. She is capable of learning words and commands and has emotions, which qualifies her for low-grade sentience. She does well, as do her other kin. They adapt now. Instead of breaking their beaks, the ones who wish to be removed from the population invite themselves on board, and they bring a crab with them.”

“Let me guess. They rip the crabs legs off to bring their own food supply for the voyage.”

“Correct. The crabs are non-sentient, and while they have a nervous system, it is heavily restricted. They do not have pain receptors, and they have instincts to feed on rotting plant material or fish. They’re quite easy to care for. They lack reproductive organs and rely on the birds to rip off their legs to create new crabs. They can regenerate new crabs every twenty-seven hours, and the birds have learned when the crabs are ready to be consumed.”

Nature never failed to amaze me. “I brought my important documentation, and I can pay my fare to get off this rock.” I pointed at the sky. “I’ve learned one thing of importance since leaving Schwana Major, and it’s that I belong up there, not down here.”

I’d also learned there was a who behind my desire to leave and not just a burning need to travel among the stars.

“Some *homo sapiens* are like that. Young Viva is the same. She begins going mad after staying on a single world for more than a few months. Delta has learned he must plan for his wife’s need to roam, and they’ve been adjusting how they will handle rulership, as he will stay with his beloved. We have heard word you two have met and get along well.”

“I almost stowed away on her ship,” I confessed. “I got caught before I could.”

“Your link gave you away, I’m afraid. I know you’ve learned many tricks, but all spaceports are rigged with the ability to track active linkers. I can teach you how to silence your link to get through security at the spaceport. Of course, we will report we have snatched you from our hunting grounds, but we enjoy poking the Deltans because it amuses us. All you need to do is do your shutdown of your link like you’re going to change your chips, remove the chips, and put them in a shielding case.”

As I’d done from my first day, I kept all my chips in my pocket in their shielding cases. I fetched the case, shut the system down as suggested, and retrieved the chips and put them away. “That’s it?”

“Linkers who cannot link are not a threat to the spaceport, so that it is.”

I frowned. “My baubles are in my room.” The room, which had even less space than the quarters on Waldren’s spaceship, contained little I cared about save for the collection of shiftgem crystals the Veloc had insisted on putting into my hair.

“Then we shall go to your room and claim them. The Deltans know you enjoy the company of other races, and it would not be strange for you to show me your quarters. And they know little of putting baubles into your hair, and it is not a task you have been taught to do on your own. I am quite skilled with decorating human crests, so I will fix the travesty I behold.”

As I had no better plan, I guided him back to the university, hoping I might be able to finally head back to the

one place I wanted to go above all others.

Waltri pitched a fit until I dressed into something closer to space-suitable attire, and he spent almost two hours handling my hair. In his words, my crest had been horribly abused, the ends were split beyond redemption, and the Deltans had wrought some horrible insult upon all Veloc kind. His antics reduced me to giggling, which made the process of washing, trimming, styling, and decorating my head with baubles enjoyable.

According to my clothes, I belonged to the lowest brackets of society. My hair and its fortune of shiftgem crystals, told another tale altogether. As it was impossible to hide a Veloc in the university, curious Deltans came calling in a steady stream. We both told a collection of lies, which involved some physical therapy using the Veloc's hunting grounds and some random tradition involving the *homo sapiens* adopted into Veloc clans.

The Deltans bought into our lies, and once Waltri declared I was suitable for a lively jaunt through the woods, we left.

I took everything I cared about, which boiled down to my cards, my baubles, and a plant and animal sketch journal I'd begun working on when I'd realized tedium loomed on every horizon.

On our walk through the university to escape, Waltri flipped through the pages, reading over my notes and admiring my sketches. "This is excellent work. You like the research and the studying of planetary exploration, but you dislike staying long?"

"I guess. You'd think I would want to avoid space travel after that mishap. Within a day or two of being dropped off, I found myself staring at the stars and wondering why I'd come to this world."

"Aptitude testing is important, and you needed the training these six months has given you. You are adept with your link

now, bypassing some security systems to obtain what you wish. The education center reported your mysterious enrollment into certain courses. As you'd gone through all the trouble of bypassing their security to adjust the course schedule for your interests, they decided to ignore the system glitches. You also played dumb quite well, so they could not tell if you were the one toying with the system or if Viva had been behind the adjustments to your schedule. As you both denied involvement, and there was no reason to be truly upset with the changes to your schedule, they let it go. I am to commend you for your excellent trail covering."

Well, damn. "I'd hoped I wouldn't get caught."

"Your tolerance was being tested, and part of those tests is to observe what you do when put in a dull environment. Space can be, frankly spoken, dreadfully boring. Young Waldren maintains his ship, plans upgrades, and studies. You seem much like him, and I will be wise to warn him he must bring extra toys should he find himself with you on board. Two of you bored at the same time might bring the end of the universe as we know it."

"I need the universe intact, else I won't have a place to live," I informed him.

"The practicality of that statement pains me."

We reached the Veloc's hunting grounds, and he gave my book back. "You will need to undergo a basic medical exam before you stowaway on board our vessel, but a good run to the spaceport should be sufficient for most of the test. Run fast, run well, and we should be back among the stars by the end of this world's day."

As I'd spent more time than sensible running back and forth from the spaceport in hopes of making my escape, I made it in record time. A rather irritated Waltri kept up—barely.

"I concede. I have brought the Crimson Feet nothing but shame, outpaced by a *homo sapiens*."

I snickered at his commentary, slowed, and walked off the exercise. “I’ve been making these runs several times a week, taking advantage of every opportunity to see if I could sneak off world. As the windows are narrow, I learned to run fast and far.”

“We Veloc are sprinters, agile and swift over short distances, although we can go much faster and farther than humans.” Waltri huffed. “Under normal circumstances.”

The spaceport, which consisted of numerous landing pads arranged in starbursts, had six larger ships, a few more than normal. “Why does this spaceport have enough for fifty or so ships, anyway?”

“Conventions and congregations of species, mostly. This spaceport is dedicated to the university and surrounding city, so it tends to welcome supplies more than people. If the primary spaceport is overly busy, this one is sometimes used.” After a moment, Waltri gestured to a gleaming silver ship not far from one of the other Veloc trails. “That is our vessel.”

I whistled. At a little over twice the size of Waldren’s ship, she could likely go anywhere in the universe without issue. During my engine studies, I’d read about ships like her, state-of-the-art exploration vehicles that could hold up to fifty people with their own quarters including enough supplies for ten years. There were six different models available, and the one with the lowest passenger capacity also boasted an entire garden ecosystem able to support trees up to twenty feet tall.

Like Waldren wanted, that model had a tri-engine system, which could be upgraded to support a fourth backup engine. Narrowing my eyes, I considered the sleek vessel. “Waldren would skin Veloc for that ship.”

With a hoot, Waltri bobbed his head. “Or use most of his payout to buy her. The fourth engine he custom ordered is giving him some trouble. It included a rainbow black shiftgem core, and she sings enough to drive him to the brink of his sanity.”

“Waldren’s here?”

“He is here. I am but a guest on board, as I am scheduled to be one of the defenders of Harmony, Melody’s sister planet. The Deltans begged us to please take the easily irritated and crabby *homo sapiens Schwana* from their world before something is destroyed. But you can act like a stowaway for the sake of your pride.”

“Palta’s here? And Squeakers?”

“They are both present,” Waltri confirmed, and he gestured to the lowered ramp to enter the ship. “You may board at your leisure.”

I hurried to the ship, jogged up the ramp, and examined the storage and entry bay, which was twice the size of his previous ship. Once Waltri caught up with me, I said, “Where is the engine room?”

“This way.” The Veloc led me through a maze of hallways, wide enough to accommodate equipment and Veloc, to a spacious room in the heart of the ship. A grease-covered Waldren battled with a dismantled engine. The rainbow black shiftgem crystals, each one almost the size of my forearm, waited on a velvet bed. A soft singing filled the air, similar to the send-off Melody had blessed us with.

After my classes, the problem waited near the shiftgem crystals in the form of a bracket lacking the additional padding the darker shiftgem crystals needed to absorb vibrations. As the man hadn’t noticed our presence, I went to the supply bin for the brackets, which he had off to the side, rummaged through it in search of the appropriate paddings, sat down, and began the persnickety work of installing them appropriately. Once done, I triple-checked my work, picked up the first of the shiftgem crystals, and eased it into place.

The singing quieted.

A rather amused Waltri reached over, placed his hand on top of Waldren’s head, and moved him until he spotted me. “Did you leave the brackets without their padding on purpose, or had you not gotten there yet?”

“I’d suspected the padding, but I wanted to check over the entire thing, as if they screwed up the padding, they might have screwed something else up,” Waldren muttered, and he reached over, claimed the heavy shiftgem crystal, and grunted his satisfaction. “That sounds right. How did you like your stay with the Deltans, Camellia?”

“I hated it,” I replied, refusing to lie to make anyone else feel better about the situation. “Had I not run into Waltri, I would have ended up sneaking on board your ship, not realizing it’s your ship, and stowing away to escape.”

Waldren stilled, considered me through narrowed eyes, and replied, “You may if you’d like.”

I shot Waltri a triumphant look.

“I believe she would very much like,” the Veloc replied.

A high-pitched squeaking caught my attention, and Squeakers bounded into the engine room, flapping her little wings and tumbling over various bits of engine equipment. Before she could hurt herself, I intervened, scooping her up and giving her little kisses. “She remembers me!”

“Who could forget you?” an exasperated Waldren replied, and his face turned red.

Waltri let out another loud hoot-laugh. “Man and animals alike severely missed your presence. Please do us Veloc all a favor and take this lot into your capable hands. In exchange, he will show you the stars and only set foot on worlds when you wish. I will go off and let you two get reacquainted. Do try to get that poor engine put together sometime today. She does you no good in pieces on your engine room floor.”

Without giving Waldren a chance to reply, the Veloc left.

“You hated it here?” Waldren asked, and he raised a brow.

Setting Squeakers on my lap, I went to work installing the pads on the other brackets so we could get to the serious work of reassembling the engine. “More than words can describe. They did refresher courses of what I already knew, and I swear they went back to the very beginning just to drive me insane. I had to hack the school’s systems just to get into classes I

wanted to take so I wouldn't start throwing books at the professors. They're utterly landlocked here. And quarantine? Don't get me started about the quarantine. It lasted twenty whole minutes, and they shot me up with every vaccine I hadn't had, sent me to my room, and told me to sleep it off, giving me a shit schedule the following morning. They didn't quarantine me. They threw me into their populace to see what would happen. *I disappointed them*, Waldren. How dare I not get ill from my venture to an unknown world? They had wanted to test their pandemic protocols."

He laughed and began the tedious work of checking over every component of his engine before piecing everything back together. "Would it make you feel better to know we'll be headed back to Melody before taking a venture to Harmony? Harmony is Melody's sister world, and there are fascinating species to be discovered there as well. Harmony is also a shiftgem world." Waldren gave the black rainbow shiftgem crystals a fond pat. "I found these shortly after landing on Harmony. I tripped over them. They're a perfectly matched set, right down to the millimeter, and they're perfect engine cores. I modified the ship so this is the drive we use for jumping while the other three drives are for general purposes. I keep a set of other colors, all of which came from Harmony or Melody."

"The planet is throwing shiftgems your way?" I blurted.

He smiled. "When I can't stop tripping over them, I do as the planet wants, Camellia. And tripping over one might be a coincidence, but I've tripped over twelve different shiftgem crystals, which happen to come in sets of four suitable in size and length for engine cores. I'm not sure *why*, but there you have it. This will be my third voyage back to that system. We just made a stop here to cause some trouble and do the Deltans a favor."

"I was a good guest," I informed him.

"You were immaculately behaved, but according to the comm we received, you were ready to go off world two months ago."

“Try six,” I grumbled.

He grinned. “Squeakers, go to your nest, please. Once we get this engine back together, we’ll be preparing for takeoff.”

To my amazement, the little bird obeyed, flapping her wings and bouncing off. “She’s really sentient?”

“As long as you talk a little slower and keep your vocabulary to common words, she can understand you—and we teach her more vocabulary in the stretches between gate jumps. We’re in talks with regulators about adopting the excess birds out as companion pets, much like Palta is for me. As they have low-grade sentience, it’s an adoption fee rather than a sale, and the birds will be checked on by the various regulation services.”

“And they’ll be protected?”

Waldren nodded, and his smile evolved into a cocky grin. “Only households that demonstrate their willingness to care for the birds and their crabs will be able to adopt them, and they’ll be checked yearly, much like regulators check on Palta to make certain I’m caring for her properly. I plan on taking your advice about getting Palta a companion, although I’m afraid the little kitten will be yours rather than mine. I’ve already made the arrangements, and we’ll pick her up on our way to Melody. I hope you’re ready for a long voyage, because if I have my way, it’ll be a long time before either one of us sets foot on a world for more than a few weeks at a time.”

Nothing sounded better, and I went to work helping him reassemble his engine. “But will you teach me to fly?”

“I think I can manage that, but if you want to match me, I’m afraid you’ll have to stay on board my vessel for at least a period of five years. The minimal training time for your base license, you know.”

I snorted at his blatant lies, as the basic license could be acquired in six months. “Five years, is it?”

“And if you fail to pass any quizzes, I’ll be forced to add another year to your training schedule.”

I would need to fail at least a quiz a year to extend my stay on board his ship. “That seems fair.”

“I certainly thought so.” He heaved a sigh and regarded the dismantled engine with dismay. “It’s going to take at least six hours to get this put back together.”

“I’m sure the other three engines will hold until we get into space,” I replied. “Let’s get her put back together and the crystals installed, then we’ll get back to space where we belong.”

I tensed and wondered if I’d overstepped in my general hinting at what I wanted and needed in my life.

Waldren chuckled, and he pointed at his toolbox. “The wrenches are there. Arm yourself, and let’s get this show on the road, before these landlocked *homo sapiens* try to stop us.”

“Do you think they could? There are Veloc on board, and I’m willing to use them.”

His laughter welcomed me home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RJ Blain suffers from a Moleskine journal obsession, a pen fixation, and a terrible tendency to pun without warning. In her spare time, she daydreams about being a spy. Her contingency plan involves tying her best of enemies to spinning wheels and quoting James Bond villains until satisfied.

ALSO BY R.J. BLAIN

[Life-Debt](#)

HER CYBORG LUMBERJACK

THE DRIFT: HAVEN COLONY
BY SUSAN HAYES

DESCRIPTION

Birds were her only passion... until she met him.

Rin has dedicated her life to the study of birds. When the military uncovers a lost project that results in a new avian species, they hire Rin to investigate what they've created... and how to best use their newest assets.

Rin wants more for her subjects than a life of risk and servitude, but keeping secrets from the military is a dangerous game... especially when playing alone.

This cyborg thought he was better off on his own... then he found her.

Infantry scout. Prisoner. Unwilling test subject. Axe has been many things in his life, but most of it he spent alone. Freedom hasn't changed that. He protects the colony from a distance—patrolling the wild places others avoid.

He thought he had everything he needed until a chance encounter changes everything. Now he's got a psychic hawk in his head and a bright and cheerful scientist sneaking into his heart.

She needs his protection. The psy-hawks need his help. And Axe is about to discover that a life of solitude isn't what he needs after all.

CHAPTER ONE

RIN STOOD by the door inside her habi-pod and waited. When the signal came, she wouldn't have long to make her escape unseen. That knowledge had her nerves on edge and her body keyed up with tension.

A sudden sense of urgency filled her mind, accompanied by a mental projection of the camp. No one was in sight.

"Thanks, Hera," she sent the thought to her companion, and then she was on the move.

She dashed through the door and darted around the corner of her pod without being seen. Once she was out of sight, she resettled her backpack and forced herself to slow down to a brisk walk before emerging into view again. Running would only attract attention, and attention was the last thing she needed. The goal was to get out of camp without being noticed. If Lieutenant Douglas caught her sneaking out against his standing orders...

She didn't dwell on what would happen if the asshole officer found out what she was up to. Did the military even realize what a jerk they'd put in charge of their precious project?

Don't let him get to you. He's a bully, and bullies aren't worth your time. Her mother had given her that advice long ago when she'd been young and naïve enough to think that dealing with bullies was only something kids had to face.

The camp wasn't large, but for some reason the handful of temporary structures had been placed far apart. The lieutenant said the open areas were part of camp's defenses. She hadn't

bothered to point out that they were less than five kilometers away from the colony of Haven. The only thing they'd had to defend themselves from so far was an invasion of rodents the locals called squeakers.

The only reason they were outside the city limits at all was because the Interstellar Armed Forces were afraid their soldiers would fall under the sway of alien pheromones. Rin snorted. Like a female of any species would want to be mated to the males assigned to *this* project.

Not that the aliens got any say about it. The Vardarian mating bond was triggered by chemistry, not choice. You got who you got, and that was the end of it.

She knew the risks when she signed on to this project. If she wound up mated to a pair of Vardarian males, she'd likely lose her job and the lieutenant would step up as project leader. Douglas had already made it clear that the moment he was in charge, he'd terminate the entire experiment and leave. In his opinion this entire mission was a waste of time and resources. At least, that's what he declared once they were safely on their way and out of earshot of anyone who outranked him. *The jerk.*

Rin walked with a steady, purposeful stride toward the building they'd designated as the mews. Inside were five of the six subjects they were here to study. The sixth was perched on the roof of the building, acting as Rin's lookout.

To reach the mews, she had to pass uncomfortably close to the large building the soldiers had claimed as their barracks and mess. She'd timed things so that Douglas and his off-duty men should be having lunch inside. She rarely ate with them, so no one would expect her to show up.

She made it past the open door of the barracks without being seen, but she heard what they were saying. The topic was women. Again.

"I hear the Vardarian females are all randy as hell. It's not *fraxxing* fair that we're not even allowed in the colony." Sutherland had complained about the rules every day since they'd arrived.

“No way I’d hit that. They’ve got scales! Fucking one of them would be like doing it with a snake,” Tao said.

“There are human women in town, too,” Sutherland argued. “And bars. And restaurants! Instead we’re stuck out here with nothing to do but drill, train, and use the rats for target practice.”

Rin had tried to stop that barbaric practice, but Douglas had waved off her concerns and told her the men needed something to do. Plus, the pests were making a mess of the camp, their equipment, and their food supply. He’d only made two concessions. The first was to ban target practice while the psy-hawks were out of their cages. They were far too valuable to risk injuring. The other was to clear away the dead rats littering the camp. She had no idea where they’d put the bodies, but at least they weren’t underfoot anymore.

She made it to the side of the building, but the conversation from inside was still audible thanks to the open vents high on the walls.

“The women in town are all alien-lovers and freaks,” Douglas said, his tone venomous. “Why else would they volunteer to come to this planet? No human men are around, just aliens and freakish cyborgs.”

“You’re forgetting about that kid, Cameron. He’s human,” Tao said.

Douglas made a derisive noise. “And he’s living with two aliens. Like I said, they’re all alien-loving freaks.”

Rin was tempted to storm inside and give them all a piece of her mind. They were closed-minded, vicious jerks whose personalities were mainly composed of things that ended in the letters i-s-t. Racist. Speciist. Sexist. The only reason she held her tongue was for the sake of the project.

Any conflicts with the soldiers had to go through the chain of command, and the top of the chain here was the biggest asshole of them all. If she said anything to Lieutenant Douglas, he’d make trouble for her, and only her. He’d

handpicked his own men for this assignment, which meant they were like-minded and loyal to him.

The only satisfaction she'd had so far was seeing their faces when they'd been informed where they were headed. Douglas had pushed for the tests to be done on one of the corporate-run pleasure planets that were often created near large military bases. Instead, they'd been sent here. Liberty was a relatively undeveloped world with only a single colony. She could observe her subjects in a natural setting while still having the opportunity to introduce them to other sentient species to see if they would choose to create a psychic bond with one of them.

She moved past the building and into open ground. This was the tricky bit.

“*Clear?*” she sent the query to her psy-hawk, Hera.

Once again, the hawk sent her an image of the camp. No one was around. Rin broke into a jog and made for the trees that ringed the camp. The skin on the back of her neck itched, and she felt unsettled and vulnerable. Ten meters to the tree line. Seven. Five. She broke into a sprint for the last few steps, flinging herself into the relative safety and concealment of the woods.

She made it!

Rin pushed deeper into the forest, not stopping until she was sure she was safe from detection. The guards sometimes used infrared goggles to scan the woods, looking for heat sources. So far, they'd only seen a few small animals and one large predator that vanished before they could identify it. The predator sighting was why she'd been ordered not to leave camp without an armed escort.

The problem was, the presence of the soldiers unsettled her subjects and made it impossible for her to record their natural behavior. The psy-hawks actively avoided the soldiers and wanted nothing to do with them.

She felt exactly the same way.

Certain she was in the clear, she signaled Hera to start phase two. A few seconds later, the large, bronze-colored bird sent a visual from her perspective as she flew down from her perch and soared through the window Rin had deliberately left open in the mews earlier that day.

The hawk sent her a series of images as she moved from cage to cage, helping the occupants to free themselves. No one but her knew the animals had taught themselves that little trick. The hawks kept their intelligence carefully hidden from everyone but her.

The IAF had no idea why these birds had been created in the first place, and Rin had done what she could to convince them that their existence was a vanity project by an amoral scientist who developed the creatures for no other reason than because he could.

She suspected the truth was far grimmer and fit perfectly into the military's plans for the hawks—plans she never wanted to come to fruition.

In less than two minutes, all the subjects were free and airborne. Hera sent her a flash of pure joy tinged with mischief at their successful escape. Her bond to the psy-hawk had been a surprise to everyone, including Rin. Before Rin's arrival, the team studying the hawks all experienced moments of telepathic contact with the animals. The contact had all been negative, though, with the hawks using their abilities to warn the humans to stay away.

Rin's connection to Hera was much deeper and flowed both ways. She and the hawk could communicate back and forth via a combination of emotions, images, and words.

When Hera allowed it, Rin could even use their link to tap into the hawk's eyes and ears. Hera's senses were far more acute than her own, and while Hera couldn't understand most human speech, Rin could. Anything Hera saw or heard could be shared with Rin. That's when she realized why the psy-hawks had been created. They were natural spies.

She hadn't shared that information with the military, who claimed ownership of the animals. If they knew their value,

Hera and the others would never be freed.

It was another reason she'd worked so hard to convince the oversight committee to allow her to come to Liberty. If the birds chose to bond with other beings while rejecting all military companions, maybe the IAF would lose interest in the project. She just needed to make sure no one figured out their real value until it was too late. Haven colony had been formed to offer a sanctuary to Vardarians looking for a new start and a number of cyborgs that needed a home and a place to heal. She hoped it could be a haven for her hawks, too.

She met the birds in the clearing she'd spotted from the air a few days earlier. The hawks needed daily exercise, and she'd managed to convince Douglas to let her use one of the hover-bikes so she could keep up with them as they flew. He'd insisted on sending two men with her on every flight to "protect her from threats." She knew it was bullshit. He saddled her with guards for the same reason he did everything else, to remind everyone around him that he was in charge.

The clearing was perfect for their needs. Lush grass and flowers came almost to her waist, and she was certain squeakers and other small prey animals would be hidden in the deep grass. Hera had made it clear that the birds wanted time to hunt and enjoy themselves without any soldiers around. Rin had agreed, mostly so she could study the birds without interference and partly to get away from Douglas and his men.

By the time she caught up to the hawks, one of them was already eating something small and furry. The others circled overhead, waiting for their turn to strike.

Rin set up a recording device and hung it on a branch so it had a clear view of the area. Then she leaned against the tree, which grew at the edge of the meadow, and got to work. She used the device to dictate her thoughts as she observed her subjects hunt, play, and interact with each other in the real world instead of the cages where they spent too much of their lives.

This was a huge step for her research. Next, she had to figure out a way to bring them into contact with the citizens of

Haven. Since she couldn't leave camp without an escort and the men weren't allowed to enter the colony, she had no idea how the *fraxx* to make that happen.

CHAPTER TWO

AS MUCH AS he loved spending time in the outdoors, Axe was more than ready to get home. He wanted a meal cooked by a food dispenser instead of over an open fire, a chance to get good and clean again, and then a good night's sleep in a bed.

“Some battle-hardened cyborg I am. A year living free, and I've gone softer than a peskin's pelt,” he muttered to himself. He'd been a scout during the Resource Wars. Living rough for weeks on end, always on the move through enemy territory. Back then, he'd never known the simple pleasures of good food, a warm bed, and a gloriously hot bath. Now he knew what comfort was, he missed it if he was away from home too long.

At least he wasn't as soft as most of his cyborg brethren. They lived in town now, ensconced in homes that seemed like palaces after the brutal conditions they'd endured as test subjects at Reamus Research Station. The corporations' former elite combat troops were now well-fed, educated, and content in ways that worried him. If they ever had to defend their new home, would the younger ones know what to do? Most of them had been created after the war and spent their entire lives as captives until they'd been brought to this place. The only combat they'd seen was against each other, leaving them with scars on their bodies and their psyches.

The Vardarians would fight, of course. Their culture placed a high value on martial skills and training. He attended one of their practice arenas regularly to hone his skills and learn new ones, though he was always careful to pick opponents he knew

and trusted. He might not have many friends, but he didn't want to put those he did have in jeopardy by injuring someone.

It was best for everyone if he kept to himself most of the time. His creators had designed him to be a solo operator. He couldn't change who he was or what he'd been made for. It was better for everyone if he was left alone.

That's why he'd signed on with the rangers. They patrolled the wilds around the colony, updated maps, identified wildlife, and safeguarded Haven against threats of all kinds. They'd been the first to document the existence of the *kopaki*—a tunneling predator that could travel through hard dirt and even concrete to get to their prey. The creatures didn't often hunt in the woods around the colony, though. This was ghost cat territory. That was one of the things he liked about the natural world. Each species had its place. If left alone, they stayed in balance with each other.

That thought was chased out of his head by a flash of a golden-brown *something* darting through the air overhead. He only got a glimpse of it before it was gone, hidden by the canopy of leaves overhead. A single glimpse was enough for him to know that whatever he'd seen didn't belong here.

Axe shifted directions. Instead of heading toward his cabin near the river, he reoriented himself to follow the flight of the unknown animal. This planet was rich with life of all shapes and sizes, but large birds weren't part of the local ecosystem. At least, not that anyone had found so far. Either this creature had literally and figuratively managed to fly under their radar for more than a year, or something odd was going on.

The next time he caught sight of the bird, it wasn't alone. There were two of them now, both a gleaming bronze color with a cream underbelly. They were large animals, with very little size disparity between them. Could it be a parent with a younger bird? Mates? He had no idea. Not yet. He kept following their flight path, aware it would take him straight to an open meadow not far ahead.

The break in the trees was already visible when he heard something else that didn't belong out here—a human voice

speaking what sounded like Galactic Common. The tone was low, conversational, and definitely female. He paused to listen, waiting for whoever she was talking with to reply. Once they spoke, he'd have some idea how many were there. Only no one else said a word. Just the one female was talking. The tone and cadence reminded him of some of the digital courses he'd reviewed over the winter. It almost sounded like someone giving a lecture, but who the *fraxx* was she talking to? For that matter, who the hell was she? Only a handful of human women were on the entire planet, and all of them knew better than to wander into the territory he'd claimed for himself.

He didn't like unexpected company, and everyone in the colony knew that.

Axe closed in, moving through the trees with the stealth and patience of a ghost cat on the hunt. He flipped through several visual filters, trying to locate the speaker and anyone else in the area. Eventually, he found her. She was leaning against a tree trunk that obscured most of her body.

He got close enough to make out what she was saying. That's when he realized that what he'd taken for a lecture was more of a running commentary about the animals she observed. She referred to them by numbers, not names.

He growled under his breath, snapped out the extendable staff all rangers carried, and stomped toward her, no longer caring if he made noise. He wanted answers, starting with who the hell she was, why she was here, and who had granted her permission to release a nonnative species of animal in *his* woods?

It took a surprisingly long time for her to react to his imminent arrival. In fact, it took so long he thought she might be ignoring him. Then he remembered how limited human senses were and his annoyance shifted back to concern. Was she out here alone? Didn't she know about the dangerous predators who prowled these woods? Predators like kopaki, ghost cats, and pissed-off cyborgs? She wasn't capable of protecting herself from any of them. Hell, she couldn't even hear him coming. She shouldn't be out here alone. Not unless she had a death wish.

By the time she reacted to his arrival, it was far too late for her to do anything about it.

All she did was move farther into the meadow to put some distance between them and raise her hands in the universal but pointless gesture that translated roughly to “please don’t hurt me.” Like that ever worked.

She was attractive, in part because she wasn’t as small and delicate as most human females. Instead, she was taller than average with a pleasingly rounded figure. Despite her stature, the top of her head didn’t quite reach his shoulder.

He cleared the trees and took several steps into the clearing before he stopped to glare at her. “Who are you and why are you here?” he demanded.

To his surprise, the woman glared right back at him, her eyes flashing. “I could ask you the same question. And what’s with the stick?”

“It’s not a stick. It’s a *kes’tarv*, a traditional Vardarian weapon.” Then he realized her query had derailed his intended line of questioning. “I’m supposed to be here. I’m Axe and you’re on my land.” He twirled the staff and pointed one end in her direction. “So I’ll ask again. Who are you?”

“I’m Dr. Rin Rey, and I’m here at the invitation of the leadership council of Haven.”

He took a moment to remove his backpack and set it down beside him, positioning it so the large axe lashed to the outside was clearly visible. Not a subtle threat, but he wasn’t a subtle male.

As he stalled, he considered what she’d said about being invited here.

If that was true, the council was about to get their collective asses kicked, and it still didn’t explain why a human was wandering around unaccompanied. “I doubt that,” he said.

At that moment, one of the birds he’d followed here shrieked and plummeted out of the sky, coming straight for him.

“Hera, no!” Rin’s voice rose in alarm.

Axe dropped to the ground as the bird flew into the space where his head had been a moment before. He sprang back to his feet a second later to see the woman standing with one arm outstretched and the bird perched on her gauntleted forearm.

“We were talking, Hera. He wasn’t a threat,” Rin scolded the creature.

Axe was almost insulted. No, he *was* insulted. He was most definitely a threat, thank you very much.

After a pause, Rin shook her head. “You can’t go around attacking beings because you think they might be dangerous. Besides, if you really thought that, you should have warned me he was here. I think you were showing off.”

Another pause. Then Rin frowned at the bird. “I am not helpless! I’m quite capable of protecting myself. And I still think you were showboating.”

Either this woman was insane, or she could converse with the animal perched on her arm. If she was mentally unwell, he’d arrange for her to be taken back to Haven. If she wasn’t? He wanted to know more about how she managed to communicate with animals. Then they’d circle back to why she was here.

“Are you actually speaking with the bird?” he asked.

She looked up at him as if she’d forgotten he was there. “Huh? Oh. Yes. This is Hera. And I’m sorry she did that to you.”

His anger faded at that statement, which surprised him. It usually took longer for him to rein in his temper. It was a fault in his design and the reason why he’d spent most of his life on his own. He suspected his creators had intentionally made him that way, but he’d never know for sure. The techs at Reamus Research Station had deemed him too dangerous and locked him away from the others for most of his imprisonment.

He pushed away thoughts of his past and focused on the present. “And you can actually communicate with her? She speaks to you?”

“Sort of.” Rin shrugged. “It’s more a mix of images and feelings than actual words most of the time, but we’re getting better at it. She seems to understand me when I speak to her. I’ve theorized that she doesn’t understand what I’m saying, but she can sense the intention *behind* the words. Spoken language is an imprecise and messy way of communicating. I’m working to make my own thoughts more precise when I speak with her.”

Rin’s face lit up as she talked, and Axe found himself paying more attention to *her* than to what she was saying. Her brown eyes gleamed with intelligence and enthusiasm while her dark, wavy hair bounced and swayed in its ponytail as she moved her head and free hand to emphasize her words. He found her intriguing and attractive in a way he hadn’t experienced before. Was he experiencing a cognitive malfunction? *Fraxx*, he hoped not.

As Rin spoke, the bird hopped from her arm to her shoulder, its talons gripping the thick leather padding secured by several straps that crossed her chest. It took less than a second to call up the name of the contraption she wore—a pauldron.

“And you brought these animals here to study them? Why?” he asked.

Rin gave him an assessing look, one hand reaching up to stroke Hera’s head. “Because Hera and her batch-siblings are military property, and they don’t like it. This place is as far away from the IAF’s influence as I could manage. I’m grateful your council agreed to allow it.”

Her statement included a lot of words Axe didn’t like, but the words military, property, and batch-siblings held the majority of his attention. Before he could ask her to expand on her statement, a cascade of images and emotions bombarded his mind as something huge and heavy dropped onto his shoulder.

He was under attack!

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN RIN IMAGINED BEING able to observe the hawks in a natural environment, this day was exactly what she'd had in mind. What she hadn't envisioned was how their first interaction with the inhabitants of the colony would go. Hell, she wasn't even sure this guy *was* a member of the colony. He was huge, menacing, and rough in every definition of the word. His clothes were patched and worn, his beard was scruffy, and the only clean thing he owned seemed to be the gleaming length of metal he'd called a *kes 'tarv*.

He was also the sexiest man she'd ever seen. He had deep green eyes, chiseled features, and a low, rumbling voice she liked far more than she should.

Not that she had time to deal with any of that before things got tense. He growled and barked questions at her... and for a moment she'd thought things were headed to hell in a hyper-driven handcart.

Hera had swooped in to help, risking herself in the process. Axe was a dangerous unknown who could have hurt or even killed the hawk. If that happened, it would be Rin's fault. She wasn't supposed to be out here, even though she'd snuck out expressly to try to achieve the mission's goals despite Douglas's ridiculous rules.

Thankfully, Hera hadn't done more than dive-bomb the new arrival. Now the bird sat safely on her shoulder while she and Axe talked like two civilized beings. Axe seemed calmer now, and he was interested in both Hera and the project. Maybe he'd be willing to interact with the birds or at least introduce her to someone who was.

The thought had barely formed when Subject One streaked out of the sky and attacked Axe.

No! This could not be happening. Rin sent a panicked message to Hera, who chattered at her in mocking tones instead of doing anything about the unfolding disaster.

Then she realized she'd misinterpreted Subject One's actions. The bird wasn't attacking Axe. It was... holy hells and gravity wells. It couldn't be.

Axe spun in place and reached up to grab the hawk, but instead of striking the bird or trying to dislodge it, the big man turned to glare at the psy-hawk latched onto his shoulder.

"Get your talons out of my shoulder and your thoughts out of my *fraxxing* head, bird," Axe snarled.

"You can hear him?" she asked, almost giddy with excitement and relief. This could have gone horribly wrong, but instead she'd gotten her wish. Subject One had bonded with Axe!

Axe grimaced and tapped his temple with one hand. "He's in my head and he won't shut up. It's all a jumble of feelings and images. How do I get him to let go of my shoulder before he does any more damage?"

"Ask him and try visualizing him landing on the ground at your feet when you say it."

Axe grunted. "Sure. Why not? Talk to the bird with daggers on his *fraxxing* feet." He cleared his throat, scowled, and said, "You need to get off my shoulder, Amun. Your talons are tearing me up."

The psy-hawk immediately released Axe's shoulder and fluttered to the ground.

Rin had to bite back an unprofessional squeal of delight. Subject One *had* bonded with Axe. *Fraxx*, was her drone still recording? She hoped so. The little device was programmed to capture images and audio, but she'd left it sitting on a tree in her hurry to put some space between her and the walking mountain of muscled menace when he'd stormed into view.

Axe kept all his attention on Subject One while Rin stared at the growing bloodstains on his shirt. “Um. You’re bleeding. I have a small first aid kit with me. Maybe I should look at that?”

He waved her off. “In a minute. I’ve turned off my pain receptors, and my medi-bots will stop the bleeding on their own. I want to know what the *fraxx* happened and what comes next?”

He could block pain and had nanotech? *Veth*. Axe had to be one of the cyborgs confined to this planet because they were too dangerous and unstable to be allowed to roam the galaxy. Why would Subject One—no, she corrected herself—why would Amun choose to bond with a cybernetic soldier after rejecting so many other members of the military?

She dragged her focus back to the questions Axe had asked. He needed answers, and she was the only one who could provide them.

“The short answer is this: The psy-hawk you call Amun has bonded with you. This is only the second time a bonding has occurred, so the longer answer is complicated and includes a lot of unknowns.”

“Only once?” Axe finally looked at her, and she was instantly struck by the uncertainty in his eyes. “I assume the other incident involved you and Hera.”

“That’s right. Hera and I were the first. They’ve showed no interest in bonding with anyone they’ve been introduced to. They don’t like the IAF personnel in general, so I assumed they wouldn’t bond with anyone in the military.” She shrugged, careful not to jostle Hera.

“I’m not military.” Axe’s declaration was almost a snarl.

“You were a soldier, though.” She raised a hand placatingly. “I know it wasn’t your choice. Maybe that’s why Amun chose you despite your past.” She was musing aloud now, working through possibilities. “Or maybe it’s because the two of you have so much in common.”

“What the *fraxx* could I have common with a *bird*?” Axe demanded and then immediately glanced down at Amun. “No insult intended.”

Amun cocked his head and fluffed his wings in a way that somehow conveyed annoyance.

She laughed softly. “I think he’s insulted anyway.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

To her surprise, Axe lowered himself to the ground and sat down beside the psy-hawk. Then he reached out with one huge hand to stroke the bird’s back. “I’m going to need some time to wrap my head around this, Amun. I’ve been on my own for a long time. The only voice I’m used to hearing is mine.”

Amun chirped softly and closed the distance between them until he was leaning against Axe’s thigh.

“It appears I am forgiven.” Axe glanced up at her again. This time, both the uncertainty and the anger were gone. In their place was a look she could only describe as bewildered contentment. Like he was happy but wasn’t sure what to make of the feeling.

Without even thinking about it, she sat down beside him and shot him a reassuring smile. “It’s a hell of a shock. Isn’t it? One minute you’re alone in your head and the next you’ve got someone else in there projecting thoughts and feelings that aren’t your own.”

He snorted with laughter. “I don’t do feelings. They’re messy and lead to bad decisions.”

“Spoken like a typical guy.” *Fraxx*. Had she said that aloud? What a time for her filters to fail. She needed to be at her professional best. After all, this was exactly what she’d hoped for when she’d come to Haven, and she wanted to document everything that happened from now until she had to leave.

Axe shot her a wry look, somewhere between amused and insulted. “I’m not typical and I’m not a guy. I’m a cyborg.”

“I figured that out.” She raised a hand and ticked off each point she made on her fingers. “You have medi-bots. You said you turned off your pain receptors. Oh, yes, and you’re *fraxxing* huge. I swear I’ve seen Torskis smaller than you.”

His smile widened, transforming the hard planes of his face into a portrait of breathtaking male beauty. “You’re exaggerating. The only members of that species smaller than me are juveniles.”

Several important parts of her brain shorted out when he smiled, and she had to struggle to form her next words. “You’re right, but my statement is still technically true.”

“Now you sound like a corporate executive.” His light, teasing tone indicated he was joking, but the words still hit her like a slap to the face.

“Now *I’m* insulted. I’m not affiliated with any of the corporations. I do freelance work for them from time to time, but that’s it. I won’t compromise my integrity for a paycheck.”

His eyes widened and Amun made a show of pecking his leg in disapproval while Hera hopped to the ground and positioned herself so she could glare at the cyborg.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.” He scowled and raked a hand through his long hair. “I mentioned I’m often alone already. Too much time solo and my social skills get rusty.”

“It’s fine. I just wanted to make it clear I’m not on any corporation’s payroll. Not that most of them would have much use for an ornithologist.”

“I don’t imagine many of them care much about birds,” he agreed. “But I would have said the same thing about the IAF, yet here you are.”

Rin paused for a moment to collect her thoughts and confirm that nothing she was about to reveal was classified. Douglas would have her head if she gave away military secrets. When she spoke, she made sure her voice was low enough the recording drone wouldn’t catch what she said. “I

assume you know where the corporations acquired the original genetic material used to create the cyborgs?”

He nodded and dropped his volume to match hers. “They stole it from the Vault of the Fallen. I gather that’s some kind of genetic vault the Interstellar Armed Forces has hidden away on a secret base somewhere.”

Rin confirmed his statement with a silent nod that would give her some wiggle room if she was asked what she’d revealed about Victor Base and the secrets hidden inside its walls.

“Recently the IAF reviewed a number of projects and materials from that location and discovered that one of the former scientists had been running a project off the books.” She gestured to Hera and Amun and then to the others still circling overhead. “The notes are encrypted, and so far the IAF hasn’t been able to read them. All they had to go on were the eight fertilized eggs stored in a cryo-tube.”

Axe curled his lip in disgust. “Let me guess. They decided the best way to figure out the experiment was to hatch the eggs and see what came out?”

“Uh. Yeah. Not the way I’d have done it, but they didn’t bring me on board until later. The subjects were all full-fledged adults by then, and Hera bonded with me immediately. Until then, they had no idea that was one of their abilities.”

“They’re *fraxxing* lucky Amun and his kin weren’t dragons or something equally dangerous.”

Amun chirped at him before lifting one foot to flex his talons and then looking pointedly at Axe’s bloody shirt.

“Point taken.” Axe grinned at the hawk. “You’re plenty dangerous, bird.”

Veth. She was in trouble. He wasn’t even looking at her and his smile still melted the edges of her brain and made her pulse trip like a hammer. Rin reminded herself that she needed to stay focused and professional. Axe might be the hottest man she’d ever met, but he was now part of her project, and that meant he was off limits.

She was the hawks' best chance at a good life—one free from the IAF and its desire to weaponize the animals. She couldn't do anything to jeopardize the study, and that included flirting with the hot and grumpy cyborg.

CHAPTER FOUR

THIS DAY KEPT SURPRISING HIM. All he wanted to do was get home, enjoy a hot shower, eat a good meal, and then get back to work on a number of projects he needed to finish. His customers knew he worked on his own schedule, but he couldn't start anything new until he completed a few of the larger projects to make room.

Now he had Amun in his head and a distractingly lovely human woman seated beside him, offering to check on his wounded shoulder and explaining that he now shared some kind of psychic link to a *fraxxing* bird. Both situations demanded his attention, and he had no idea which one to deal with first.

Amun sent him a brief pulse of amusement accompanied by an image of Rin.

Great. Now the bird was giving him advice. Worse, he was inclined to take it. If Amun wanted his attention, he would let him know. That meant his focus should be on Rin, the temptingly pretty scientist who didn't consider him a threat. Not that he was still stung about that or anything.

“Speaking of Amun being dangerous, I'd still like to take a look at you,” Rin said. Then her eyes widened and her cheeks heated. “I, uh, I mean, I should look at your injured shoulder. I feel responsible for what happened.”

Damn, she was even prettier when she got flustered. It made her look sweet and vulnerable—two things he never imagined would appeal to him in a female. Until now.

He meant to tell her he'd be fine. What came out instead was, "It wasn't your fault. Amun surprised us both. If you need to see for yourself, though. I won't argue."

"*Are you doing this?*" He sent the thought to Amun without saying it aloud. Communicating this way was a lot like speaking to his fellow cyborgs on their internal comm channels. If Amun didn't need to hear his words to understand him, it would be easier, and no one would wonder why he'd started talking to himself.

Amun sent back a thought Axe interpreted as a negative. If the bird wasn't messing with him, he'd either lost his mind or Rin was affecting him in ways he didn't want to contemplate.

"I'd feel better if I knew you were healing up," Rin said as she got to her feet.

He pulled his shirt over his head before his brain had time to process what was happening. It was a good thing he'd stopped to bathe and swim in the river this morning or even Rin's unenhanced senses would have suffered.

Rin crouched down behind him and swore. "Holy *fraxx*. He really made a mess of your shoulder. I'll bring you a pauldron and a gauntlet so this doesn't happen again."

"I'd appreciate that." He doubted she'd have a glove that would fit him, but he had friends who could copy the design and produce something in his size.

The gentle touch of her hands on his back surprised him. He hadn't expected the contact at all, never mind the soft and careful way she stroked his skin.

"You have so many scars," she murmured. "No wonder you're not concerned about your new injury."

"I was a scout during the Resource Wars. I spent most of that of time alone in enemy territory, and I got shot at a lot." He shrugged. "My medi-bots kept me alive and combat capable. The scars are just reminders of the wounds that didn't kill me."

She ran her fingertips over his scars, careful not to touch the still-healing wounds on his shoulder. The touch triggered a

wave of goose bumps up his spine as his cock surged to life.

“Judging by all of these, you must be immortal.”

“I’m a cyborg,” he reminded her. “We’re designed to be hard to kill.” That was the point of their entire existence. They were created to be the perfect soldiers—human enough to circumvent the laws against waging wars with machines but enhanced and altered enough to be bigger, stronger, faster, and more obedient. They were meant to be programmed to kill without remorse and never question orders. Only the corporations screwed up. Given time, the cyborgs overcame their programming and became fully self-aware. Then, they rose up and demanded their freedom. Most were freed. Some, like him, were captured and experimented on to see what went wrong.

“I should get my kit and clean up these wounds. I know the medi-bots can handle it, but there’s a lot of blood. When it dries, it’s going to itch.”

Axe was shocked into silence again. She worried he’d be uncomfortable? No one ever worried about his comfort. This woman kept surprising him, and he didn’t like that she somehow managed to make him feel vulnerable and off-balance.

Amun and Hera shrieked a warning and took to the air a second later. His hawk filled his head with a sense of danger accompanied by an image of an angry human male dressed in military garb.

Axe shot to his feet and pulled Rin behind him as he scanned the woods for whoever Amun had warned him about.

“Dammit. They found me,” Rin muttered and tried to move in front of him. “Douglas! I know you’re out there. Show yourself.”

Axe dragged her back behind him. “Who is Douglas?” he demanded.

“Lieutenant Douglas is in charge of this project. Well, the military aspects of it, anyway.”

Axe wanted to roar in frustration. The council had allowed the IAF to come to Haven? Why hadn't anyone told him? "I thought you said Haven was as far away from the military as you could manage? How can that be if they're *here*?"

"It's just Douglas and a small squad put together for this mission. None of them are allowed near the subjects. They're prohibited from entering Haven, too. The IAF doesn't want their highly trained assets randomly bonding to alien females, and the leadership council preferred the soldiers stay out of town and away from their citizens."

A rustle in the trees ended their conversation. Axe turned toward the noise and scanned the forest for heat signatures. He spotted seven of them, all human.

"Dr Rey. Step away from the hostile immediately," a voice commanded.

"For the love of gravity, Douglas. He's not a hostile. He lives here! And as of ten minutes ago, he's part of the project."

"The hell he is! Get away from the hostile now. Or did you miss the fact he's a cyborg?"

Axe drew his *kes'tarv* and held it at his side without extending it. If they attacked him, he had a surprise waiting. The staff he carried was modified and had a blaster built into one end.

Rin ignored the lieutenant's orders and Axe's wishes by deliberately placing herself between him and the area where the soldiers hid.

"Hera can see them and can feed me images of where they are and what they're doing. None of them have their weapons raised except for Douglas, and he won't shoot at me," she whispered.

Axe hissed his next words through gritted teeth. "I don't need your protection. I should be protecting *you*."

She glanced over her shoulder at him and gave him a brief but sassy smile. "It can be your turn next time."

He braced for the surge of anger that always rose when someone pushed him this far, but it never came. He was annoyed and concerned for Rin's safety, but that was all.

Amun sent a gentle pulse of calm, and this time, he sensed it. The bird was helping him control his anger, and it worked! Axe sent a message of gratitude back, but he couldn't dwell on what had happened or what it meant. He had immediate issues to deal with. Starting with Rin. The curvy little scientist had more courage than common sense, and it occurred to him that someday, somehow, Rin would be the death of him. It would probably involve a firefight or a fatal case of frustration.

Douglas called out again, "Dammit, Dr. Rey. It's bad enough you snuck out without permission or a protective detail. Now you're making it impossible for us to do our job, which is to protect you and the project."

The underbrush rustled again, and this time the lieutenant stepped into view. He looked like every other officer Axe had seen—clean cut, an arrogant expression, and wearing brightly polished boots that had never seen a battlefield. He hated him on sight.

Rin folded her arms and stood her ground. "I don't need your permission to do *my* job, Lieutenant. Your rules have made it almost impossible for me to complete the goals of this project. I can prove it, too. Today was the first time I went out alone, and I've already recorded a bonding between Subject One and this man."

"What?" Douglas sounded equally exasperated and incredulous. "That's not possible. The birds have refused to bond with anyone linked to the military! He's a *cyborg*. One of the most dangerous weapons in the galaxy. There's no way I'm going to allow one of *them* to be part of this project."

Axe decided it was time to join the conversation. "It's not your call to make. Amun chose to bond with me. Dr. Rey has confirmed that already. Like it or not, Amun and I are part of this now. And for the record, I'm not a weapon. I'm a living being whose rights are recognized by all known governments and species."

He heard muttering and grumbles from the other soldiers, but none of them spoke in more than hushed whispers. Rin wouldn't get any help from them, even though they sounded more resigned than concerned. Douglas was the problem here.

"I don't like it and I won't believe it until I've seen solid proof. Dr. Rey, you and your subjects need to return to camp. Now. Once there, you and I will discuss this matter further." Douglas glared at Axe. "You are free to go, cyborg."

"I'm also free to stay. As Rin stated, I'm a citizen of Haven." Axe pointed to the ground at his feet. "In fact, you are currently standing on *my* land. Check with the leadership council if you need confirmation, but this is private property. Rin has my permission to be here. You don't. I suggest you leave. Rin can leave or stay as she chooses." He held out his arm and called to Amun.

"Try not to rip up my arm, bird."

The hawk replied with a quick mental tap that felt like an acknowledgment. A few seconds later, Amun dove out of the sky and made straight for him. The hawk back-winged at the last minute, extended his talons, and wrapped them carefully around Axe's forearm without so much as a scratch.

"Nicely done, Amun," he said loudly enough for Douglas to hear him.

The lieutenant's face contorted into something that conveyed either acute frustration or an unexpected bowel movement.

The hawk looked smug and flapped his wings once before settling again.

"Show-off," Rin whispered to the hawk.

"That is IAF property. I demand you return the subject at once," Douglas snapped out the order as if he expected to be obeyed.

That wasn't happening.

"No. Subject One *was* IAF property. Amun belongs with me now." Axe chose his words with care. He'd been a

possession himself and would never claim ownership over an intelligent being like Amun, even if the bird was going to be a pain in his ass.

Douglas stiffened and opened his mouth to argue, but Rin cut him off. “Check the mission briefing, Lieutenant. Once bonded, the psy-hawks must stay with their chosen partner. Hera explained it, and we did enough testing to confirm it’s true. Amun stays with Axe.”

“Dr. Rey. The IAF did not bring these creatures here so you could give them away to random strangers.”

“Actually, that’s exactly what I hoped would happen. We have confirmation that the bonding between Hera and me wasn’t a one-off event. That was one of the primary goals. Leadership understood that meant some of the subjects may not return.”

“Like I said. Amun stays with me. Rin is, of course, welcome to visit to observe and take notes any time she likes.” Axe decided it was time to throw a *kopaki* into the proverbial henhouse and added, “And she is welcome to bring the remaining subjects with her when she visits.”

It wasn’t until after he spoke that he realized what he’d done. He’d just offered an open invitation to Rin and her flock of featherheads to visit anytime they wanted.

Most of the *fraxxing* colony didn’t even know where he lived, and he liked it that way. What the hell was happening?

One look at the curvy woman staring down an IAF officer and he had his answer. *Rin* happened to him. He’d approached her because he thought she might be a threat. Turns out he’d been right. She was dangerous to his sanity, and if he wasn’t careful, she could be a threat to the solitary but comfortable life he was building out here.

Fraxx.

CHAPTER FIVE

RIN WANTED to shout for joy and possibly do a victory dance, but she stayed still and calm despite what had just happened. Axe's offer was the perfect solution to her problems. Douglas and his men couldn't follow her onto the cyborg's land, so she'd be free to observe both the psy-hawks and Axe's interactions with Amun without interference.

The fact she'd also get to spend more time alone with him was totally irrelevant. He was off limits despite the fact her fingers still tingled from touching him, and she kept revisiting the memory of what he looked like with his shirt off. She'd never seen a man with that much muscle...or that many scars. Cyborg or not, he must be tough as hull plating to survive so many injuries.

Douglas looked like he was going to choke on his own tongue, but he backed down with a sullen nod. "I will contact the council to discuss this... turn of events. Dr. Rey, you will come with us." He snapped his fingers and pointed to the ground in front of him. "Immediately."

She raised her chin and tried to ignore the insult. She already knew Douglas's opinion of her, but this was a new low. She wasn't his pet to be summoned with a snap of his fingers, dammit. Still, she elected to take the higher orbit.

Axe didn't. He snarled under his breath, moved around her, and took several steps toward Douglas. The asshole lieutenant raised his weapon and stood firm.

Veth. If one of them didn't back down, someone was going to get hurt. Probably both of them, since Douglas would likely

shoot first, piss Axe off, and then get the beating of his life. As much as she disliked Douglas, if he was injured, it would put the whole project at risk of being canceled. She couldn't let that happen.

Acting on instinct, she moved to Axe's side and took hold of his hand. He started at her touch and dropped his gaze to glare at her, but she just squeezed his fingers and smiled. "It's okay, Axe," she said in a tone too low for Douglas to hear. "He's an asshole who uses his rank to make himself feel important. The more you react, the better he feels about whatever he's overcompensating for. Ignoring him is the fastest way to piss him off."

"Or I could just tear his head off and give it to Amun to play with." His words were dark, but his eyes glinted with amusement and a ghost of a smile played around his mouth.

"Let's call that Plan B."

Amun chirped at her and she gave him a pat on the head as he perched on Axe's arm. "He'll need fresh water and a place to sleep out of the weather. They were born in captivity and haven't had time to adapt to a more natural life. He can hunt for himself if he's hungry, and I'll bring you more supplies tomorrow."

Axe's smile vanished. "You're leaving? With *him*?" Disdain dripped from the end of his question.

"If I don't go with him, he'll twist everything that happened today. He'll make sure his report is tailored to fit his preferred narrative. I should be there when he speaks to the local leadership, too. He's likely to try to blame everything on you."

Axe glanced over at Douglas, who looked increasingly impatient, and then back at her. "He's welcome to try and blame me. The council will probably be stunned he's still alive and has all his teeth when they hear he was on my land without permission. I'm more worried about you."

That simple statement turned her brain to mush for a moment. This massive and dangerous man, one designed from

the DNA up to be a killer, wanted to protect her. At that second, she saw him in a new light. No wonder Amun had bonded with Axe. They were both products of someone's experiments, created for a purpose they rejected, with the same desire to exist in peace.

She squeezed his fingers even harder and then released him. "I'll be okay. I promise. He's a bully, but he's ambitious enough not to cross a line that could tarnish his reputation."

"If he comes anywhere near that line, you will tell me." It wasn't a question but a statement. "You can ask anyone on the council for my contact information. Tell them you have my permission, but if they give it to anyone else, I will not be pleased."

She laughed. "I'll do that if you stop bossing me around. I can take care of myself. I need you to promise you'll take care of Amun."

He bowed his head and met her gaze. "You have my word. He'll have everything he needs to be free and happy."

They stared at each other for a few more seconds with both of them breaking eye contact at the same moment.

"I'll see you tomorrow. We can sort out the details when you contact me," he said.

"See you both tomorrow. Take care of each other." She smiled at both the man and the psy-hawk and then turned toward Douglas. His scowling countenance confirmed what she already knew. It would be a long walk home.

"... and then I find you far from camp, cozied up with a half-naked cyborg! Do I have to remind you how dangerous those things are? Especially to a woman on her own? The corporations messed with their hormones to make them even more aggressive. You were taking more than your life into your hands just being close to it."

Douglas hadn't stopped ranting since they'd left the meadow. Rin had tuned him out for the most part, but his latest accusation couldn't be left uncontested.

“Lieutenant Douglas, you know full well I was checking on Axe's injured shoulder. You, of all people, should be aware that the psy-hawks can do significant damage with their talons.” He'd been attacked by the subjects several times since he'd joined the project. He'd finally learned not to poke and prod at them like they were objects instead of living creatures.

“Cyborgs heal at an accelerated rate. He didn't need your assistance. If I hadn't arrived when I did...” He trailed off, his implications clear. He wanted her to thank him for saving her from some dire fate he'd dreamed up. The man's ego was out of control.

“I don't believe I was in any danger. If he'd been a threat, Amun would not have bonded with him. As for today's events, I've already given you an explanation for everything that occurred. Be assured I will submit an update once I'm back at camp. I'm certain the higher ups will be pleased to hear that the project is progressing.”

“I wouldn't call today's outcome progress. You gave away one of the rarest animals in the galaxy to a cybernetic psychopath. You do realize that once our time here is over, you'll likely never be allowed to return?” Douglas shot her a look of pure vitriol laced with exasperation. “This has to be what the local leadership hoped for when they agreed to let us come here. You've played right into their plans.”

Douglas was throwing blame around in hopes it stuck to someone else, which was ridiculous.

“I don't understand your point. There was always a risk that some, or even all, of the subjects might bond and stay on the planet. That's why a male and female psy-hawk were left in the IAF's care,” she pointed out gently.

He knew that already. Hell, he'd been the one to tell her about the last-minute change in plans. She assumed she wasn't told until after they'd left orbit because the brass knew she'd be angry and wanted to avoid a confrontation. It worked, too.

There was no point in arguing once they were in transit. She'd let the matter go because any kind of protest was pointless and would only irritate the ones paying her salary.

“Right. Of course.” He waved away her point like it was an annoying bug. “But still, every one of the subjects is a valuable asset.”

Rin arranged her features into the calmest expression she could manage before replying. Once the lieutenant was agitated, it was pointless to try and argue or protest, so she simply moved on to her next point.

“I'm sure the local leadership wouldn't refuse my request to return at some future point, especially if it benefited Axe and Amun. But even if I'm not allowed back, it wouldn't impact you in any way. This mission is only set to last another two weeks, Lieutenant. After that, I won't be your responsibility anymore.”

“That's the point, Dr. Rey. Until then, you and these subjects are my responsibility. What happened today cannot happen again. Do you understand?”

She gave a brief nod, despite the fact she didn't see the point he was trying to make. Still, if she appeared agreeable, maybe he'd end this conversation and let her get back to work.

No such luck.

He fixed her with a stern gaze. “I need you to confirm that you understand my directives and will obey them for the safety of you and the project.”

“I understand that you are responsible for the safety of everyone involved in this project, Lieutenant Douglas.” She nearly added that it wasn't her intention to put herself or the subjects in danger, but it would only ramp up his anger again. Plus, it wasn't entirely true. She *had* snuck out of camp without her escort. The thing was, Douglas refused to see that the hawks were all the protection she needed.

“Which is why I am monitoring your location.” His expression turned dark and predatory for a brief but disturbing

moment. “Or did you think we found you so quickly out of pure luck?”

The son of a bitch was tracking her. She managed to rein in her anger but not her expression, which was all he needed to know he’d scored a direct hit. “You can’t do that. It’s a violation of my rights.”

“I can do that. Didn’t you read the mission briefing?” He threw her earlier words back at her. “For the duration of this project, your personal rights are secondary to the goals of the mission. That includes the safety of you and the subjects.”

And since he was in charge of security, he could, and obviously would, use that clause to control her. His interpretation was twisted to suit his needs, of course. But he was the highest-ranking officer on the planet. Hell, he was the only officer in the whole damned system. *Fraxx*.

She allowed her shoulders to slump in apparent defeat and bowed her head. “I see.”

Douglas wasn’t done gloating. “I don’t care if you see it,” he hissed at her. “I want to know if you understand what I said and what it means.”

She kept her head down because she wasn’t confident she could hide her anger if she looked at him right now. “I understand perfectly, Lieutenant Douglas.”

“Good. Now, I need you to *understand* one more thing, Dr. Rey. You will never release all the subjects from their cages at once again without my permission.”

“Understood.” This time, she kept her head down to hide her smile. Douglas still didn’t realize that the birds were intelligent enough to free each other. So long as one of them was out of their cage, all of them could be released.

Next, she would teach them how to open the cages from the inside. Douglas might have control of her for now... but she’d never let him have full control over the animals in her care.

CHAPTER SIX

AXE SHADOWED the soldiers escorting Rin until they left his property. Amun assisted him by flying overhead and feeding him images of the group as they moved through the trees. Nothing either he or Amun saw impressed him. The soldiers looked like they were on a nature hike instead of a military excursion. Their formation was sloppy and their attitude one of distracted boredom.

Douglas either didn't notice or didn't care what his men did. His attention was focused on Rin, and from what Axe heard and saw, the arrogant ass was ranting and blaming Rin for everything. He was the *fraxxing* officer in charge. If a civilian scientist could slip out of camp unseen with a half-dozen birds in tow, the problem wasn't Rin.

Obviously, this barrel of monkeys couldn't be trusted with Rin's safety.

"If you want something done right, do it yourself," he muttered to himself and then remembered he had a partner now. One who could fly.

"*Make sure they get back to camp safely,*" he sent to Amun.

The bird responded with a blast of images and fragmented thoughts Axe couldn't translate. "*Repeat that but slower.*"

Apparently, the bird understood snark because this time the communication was painfully slow. He received two images of the retreating group from slightly different perspectives and a sense of plurality.

“Gotcha. You don’t need to follow them yourself because you’re linked to the rest of the subjects.” He remembered what Rin had said about focusing on intent when communicating with the birds and tried to make his thoughts clear.

Amun sent him a pulse of acknowledgment and approval.

“Smart ass bird,” he grumbled to himself, more amused than annoyed. He watched until Rin and the others faded from sight before turning toward his cabin. Food and a hot shower would have to wait until Amun was settled.

Where the hell would he put the hawk? In the house? Unlikely. In the chicken coop? Hell *fraxxing* no. That was a recipe for disaster.

“Amun?” he sent to his new companion. *“How do you feel about the smell of sawdust and wood?”*

His first sight of home always gave him a warm feeling he’d never known until Haven. His friends and fellow rangers, Wreckage and Ruin, had kept an eye on the place while he’d been gone. That mostly meant they’d watered his small garden and taken care of his chickens. They knew better than to go inside his house.

Amun flew down to land on the roof of the chicken coop. His arrival sent the small flock squawking in alarm as they bolted for shelter.

“Food?” the bird sent.

“Not your food. My food. You protect?”

The hawk sent a flash of amusement and something Axe translated as, *“I protect stupid food birds.”*

“Thanks,” he said aloud. He unlocked the door and checked to ensure the chickens had food and water before securing the coop again. The local predators would be happy to devour his entire flock if given half a chance. Because of that, his birds lived in the chicken version of a high-security

prison with heavy locks, unbreachable fences, and a metal plate buried beneath the entire structure.

“I live there.” He pointed to his cabin, a two-story building that had taken him months to build because he’d done it all himself. Well, almost all. He’d borrowed one of the Vardarian construction machines to create the basic structure. The rest had been a labor of love.

“I think you’ll be comfortable in my workshop. It’s large, warm, dry, and I can leave the doors open so you can come and go as you please. Later, we’ll figured out something for the winter months.”

Amun chirped and took to the air. He crossed the clearing in a few seconds and landed just outside the shop. He immediately sent an image of the inside of the space to Axe, accompanied by a sense of inquisition.

Axe explained as he caught up. “This is where I work. I chop down trees and bring the wood here to turn it into other things. Furniture mostly. Some art pieces and sculptures. I trade or sell them and use the income to buy what I need.” He didn’t know how much of that Amun would understand, but he explained it all, anyway.

“I used to be a soldier. But when I was sent here I wanted to do anything but fight. I helped clear the land for the colony. That’s when I learned how to fell trees and, well, how to be a sort of lumberjack. Sometimes I do patrols in the woods, too. You can come with me if you like.”

The hawk bobbed his head in what Axe swore was a nod and hopped inside. Axe stopped to flip on the lights and then followed Amun into his favorite place in the galaxy.

The scent of sawdust and wood hung in the air, and everywhere he looked were things he’d created. Someone on his design team had included a few basic skills in his programming. Not only could he cook, but his skill set also included a decent understanding of wood carving. He’d whittled all sorts of small objects during his scouting years. He’d never been allowed to keep any of them, though.

Cyborgs weren't permitted to have possessions since they were considered to *be* possessions.

That wasn't true anymore. Now he was free to create and keep anything he wanted. Every tree he used was carefully selected and felled with the axe he always carried with him. He'd chopped down several trees on his last patrol. He'd have to go out and retrieve them soon. Overhangs on both sides of the workshop provided plenty of space to set out raw logs and other pieces to dry before they were used. Axe breathed in deeply, letting the scent settle deep in his lungs. A sense of calm washed over him, smoothing away the jagged edges of his personality. At least for the moment.

By that time, Amun had already flown up into the rafters and chosen a perch.

"Will this work for you?" he asked the bird.

Amun sent him a strong pulse of approval and pleasure.

Well, that was easy. It only took a few minutes to find a suitable container and fill it with fresh water. Once that was done, he glanced up at Amun. "I'm going inside. You're welcome to come in, too. But if you make a mess of my home, I won't be happy."

Amun issued a strident chirp accompanied by a sense of displeasure.

Axe held up a hand. "Don't get your feathers in a twist. I wasn't trying to insult you. I would say the same thing to anyone I invited into my home." Not that he'd had any visitors. His fellow rangers all had at least a vague idea of where he lived, but very few actually visited, and none had ever been inside. Most of them enjoyed their solitude as much as he did.

That thought led him to consider Wreckage and Ruin's situation. They'd recently fallen in love with a human woman. As a result, they were now more involved with the colony on a day-to-day basis, and that wasn't the only difference. Jade had altered the trajectory of their entire lives. At the time, he'd thought they were crazy. Today? He wasn't so sure. Amun had

literally dropped into his life from the clear blue sky, and despite the invasiveness of their psychic bond, he was already adjusting to life with an unexpected companion. He'd even issued Rin an open invitation to visit him for *fraxx's* sake. That had to be Amun's doing.

Thoughts of Rin stayed with him while he stripped naked and dropped his clothes into the laundry chute for the household bots to deal with. He might live away from the colony, but that didn't mean he hadn't found ways to include some of the perks of modern living into his home. Why do laundry or clean the house when bots were capable of doing the same task faster and more efficiently?

Something crashed to the floor on the lower level. The second floor was a loft that overlooked the common room below, so he could tell Amun was in the kitchen. "I told you not to wreck my house, bird!"

Amun flew up to his level and landed on the railing with remarkable grace considering he had one of the local rodents in one talon. The hawk gave him a haughty look and held out his dead prize.

"That was in the kitchen?" The damned squeakers kept finding new ways into his house.

Amun bobbed his head in what he now thought of as a nod.

"Thanks. You're welcome to kill anything else that wanders into the house without permission."

The bird chirped sharply and raised his claw as if he was about to chow down. "Hold up. Catching them is fine. Eating them in the house is a nonstarter. I'm sure my cleaning bots don't have a remove blood and viscera setting. Eat outside, and then you're welcome to come back in. Meanwhile, I am going to have a shower. Do not disturb me on pain of... something."

The bird flew off with the rodent, and Axe got a brief flash of amusement followed by an image of Rin approaching a standard military habi-pod. She'd made it back to camp. *Good.*

Next time he'd walk back with her. Having seen the incompetent idiots assigned to protect her, he'd have to take over that job. If he didn't, the pretty little scientist was likely to get eaten by one of the local predators... or claimed by a couple of Vardarian males.

That wasn't going to happen. Not on his watch. He needed her help to understand his newly bonded companion. Until he had all the answers he needed, she wasn't going anywhere.

He turned on the hot water and stepped under the stream as soon as it was warm. First, he'd been a scout and then a prisoner. These days he was both a ranger and a craftsman. As of now, he had a new title to add to his nonexistent résumé. *Protector.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

SINCE HER ACCIDENTAL encounter with Axe the other day, Rin felt like everything had finally fallen into place. Her subjects enjoyed their extended time away from the camp and Douglas's men, and her observations of the bonding between Axe and Amun expanded her understanding of the process. Their conversations helped her see things from another angle and generated almost as many questions as it did answers, but it was *progress*.

Douglas continued to be difficult, but even his sour moods and sharp comments didn't hit her the way they had before. She told herself it was because the project was finally producing results, but that was only partially true. She enjoyed Axe's company so much it was affecting her mood even when they were apart. It wasn't just physical attraction, either. He had a dry wit, a sharp mind, and a softer side that was apparent every time she watched him interact with Amun.

Each morning she woke up eager to see him again, and every night she saw him again in her dreams. Their daytime sessions were all logged and recorded, but her dreams... Just the thought of what she'd imagined doing with Axe made her ache for things that could never happen.

"He's off limits," she reminded herself as she made her way across the camp. "Not to mention he's light years out of your league."

Axe stepped into view a few seconds later, and all her good intentions went flying out the airlock again. Her breath hitched in her lungs and her heart did a fluttery-jump thing in her chest just at the sight of him.

Hera sent her a brief pulse of happiness accompanied by an image of the cyborg through the hawk's vastly superior eyes. *Veth*, he was breathtaking. He looked as if he could be an avatar of an ancient god of nature or a warrior from another time. Today, his hair was tied back in a low ponytail. He'd trimmed his beard and tidied himself since their first meeting, though his fashion choices hadn't changed. Dark shirts, dark pants, heavy boots, and the expandable staff he called a *kes'tarv* at his hip.

It didn't matter what he wore. He looked incredible. *See? Hundreds of light years out of your league*, she reminded herself.

Two soldiers joined her as she left the camp and made her way to where Axe stood waiting.

Douglas's men accompanied her on each of these trips to the meadow where she'd first met the big cyborg. They were her official security detail, but that hadn't stopped Axe from meeting her at the edge of the forest just a few hundred meters from camp.

When she asked about it, he stated the soldiers were more likely to get her killed than protect her, so he'd see to her safety himself.

Of course, he'd said this while the men were within earshot. Douglas had not been pleased, but he could do nothing about it. Axe was a civilian, and they were guests here.

"Good morning," she called out to Axe.

"Morning." He flashed her a brief but warm smile before letting his expression go blank again. He never spoke or showed much emotion until they were alone. Not that he transformed into mister smiles-and-sunshine when they were alone, but he did loosen up somewhat.

"How's Amun today?" she asked.

Axe rolled his eyes and moved in close to her before speaking in low tones the others wouldn't hear. "The bird is full of attitude. This morning he left a freshly killed *tumpa* on

my doorstep. When I asked why, he implied I wasn't much of a hunter, and he thought I needed some help."

Rin couldn't help it. She burst out laughing. "Harsh words."

"It's *fraxxing* insulting. He hasn't even seen me hunt yet."

"That's probably why he thinks you need help. His kind hunt at least once a day."

"So you're saying I need to explain to him what a cooling unit is and why I don't need to get fresh meat every day? Great. I'll toss his feathery ass inside it tonight and he can discover what beings with opposable thumbs instead of wings can accomplish."

The relationship between Axe and Amun was very different from the one she had with Hera. She suspected it had to do with the hawks' psychic abilities. From what little data she had, either the birds adapted their personality to match their companions, or they choose companions who were already compatible. She'd need more information before she could confirm anything.

She pursed her lips and pretended to consider his threat. "If you do that, he'll probably eat everything in the cooler."

"Good point. He can find his own dinner." Axe glanced up at the sky. She couldn't see the birds from this distance, but the cyborg could. She'd had no idea how many enhancements the corporations had made to their former creations until she'd met Axe. He hadn't said much, but what little she learned helped her understand why he didn't think of himself as human anymore.

The group of them walked through the woods to the boundary Axe had pointed out to them the first morning.

"I'll take it from here, boys," he told the two men acting as her security detail.

"See you at the usual time," she added. The two would return to camp for a few hours before returning to collect her for the midday meal.

It was one of Lt. Douglas's petty new rules. She wasn't supposed to leave the area around the meadow. She had to return to camp to eat and transfer all the new recordings and notes. Most annoying, he hadn't backed down from his edict that she couldn't bring all the hawks with her on any excursion for "security reasons." Hera could accompany her, but two of the remaining subjects had to stay behind.

This morning she had Subjects Two and Five with her. After lunch, she'd bring out Four and Six. It was the best solution she could come up with.

Once they were alone, Axe warmed up quickly. He pointed out various animals that lived in the woods and instructed her on potential dangers.

Yesterday, he'd shown her a bark spider. After that, she'd been tempted to run back to camp and hide in her habi-pod. The flattened, plate-sized nightmare fodder had a horrifying number of legs and fangs filled with venom. As a bonus, the damned things were perfectly camouflaged to match the bark of the trees they lived on while waiting to ambush prey... or anything they thought might be edible. Apparently, that included humans.

After that discovery, she kept her hands at her sides and made a concerted effort not to walk too close to anything that could house one of the creatures.

Thoughts of the local wildlife inevitably led her back to her favorite topic—the psy-hawks.

"It's interesting this area has no winged predators. It's an ideal location for the hawks because there's no competition," she mused.

Hera sent her a quick reminder that *she* was a winged predator and she was here, so that wasn't true anymore.

"I know, Hera. But we're not staying. Remember?" She continued her habit of talking out loud to her companion. Axe understood and seemed to enjoy hearing her side of the conversation.

The hawk sent her a flash of disappointment and sorrow followed by an image of Amun flying nearby.

“Everything okay?” Axe asked. “You stopped smiling.”

“I did?” Part of her was surprised he noticed. The rest of her was still caught up in the emotions Hera had sent. She felt the same way as her companion. Leaving Amun here alone didn’t sit well with her. She didn’t like the thought of never seeing Axe again, either. But that was a different issue.

“*Not different. Same. Same.*” Hera’s thoughts came through with surprising clarity and the feelings that accompanied the message were... romantic? At least that’s how she interpreted them. For the love of gravity, was her bird falling for Amun the same way she was falling for Axe?

Rin slammed the brakes hard on that entire line of thinking.

“What stole your smile?” Axe asked in a surprisingly soft tone that launched a flurry of butterflies in her stomach.

“Hera.” She tapped her temple. “She told me she’ll be sad when we leave. I think she’ll miss this place and Amun.”

They were still a few minutes away from the meadow, but Axe stopped walking and turned to look at her. “What about you? Will you miss this place?”

They stood so close together she had to crane her neck to look at him properly. The smart thing to do was obvious—make some vague comment about Haven being a beautiful place she’d remember forever.

She didn’t do the smart thing. Her brain wasn’t involved in her next words at all. They came from out of nowhere and shoved her off a proverbial cliff. “I will. This planet is still wild and mostly untouched. There’s so much I could learn here. But that’s not what I’ll miss the most.”

It seemed as if the entire forest held its collective breath as they stared at each other.

Her heart slammed against her rib cage, she couldn’t catch her breath, and her inner voice bombarded her with

fragmented thoughts and fears.

Please don't ask if you don't want to hear the answer.

Please don't ask if you don't want to hear the answer.

Please don't—of course he doesn't want to hear the real answer. Light years out of your league. Remember?

Idiot. I'm an idiot.

The voices stopped the moment he reached for her. He brushed his fingers across her cheekbone before slipping them into her hair.

She trembled, part of her wondering if this was what prey felt like the moment before the predator struck.

“What will you miss the most? The forest? The freedom?” He leaned in slightly, his mouth quirking into a smile that made her insides quiver. “Don't tell me it's the bark spiders.”

She laughed softly. “Ugh. No. Definitely not them. It's not a what I'll miss. It's who.”

“Do I get to know the name of this person?” he teased. She could tell by the heat in his eyes he already knew the answer. Holy hell. He knew, and he wasn't pulling away. She should move right now. Step back and lay out all the reasons this couldn't happen. Only she didn't.

Screw it. She'd already gone this far. Why not go all the way? She laid her hand lightly on his chest and whispered a single word. “You.”

“*Re'veth,*” he swore softly, his eyes still locked on hers. “I was afraid you'd say that.” Then his fingers tightened in her hair and tugged her head back. His other arm caught her around the waist and pulled her up hard against him.

Then he growled her name just before his mouth crashed down on hers, and the world around them vanished in a blast of white-hot heat.

She moaned, closed her eyes, and kissed him back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

UNTIL THIS MOMENT, Axe believed nothing could break him. He'd survived wars, endured abuse at the hands of his corporate owners, and withstood years of solitude and experiments on Reamus Research Station.

He was wrong.

The moment Rin confessed that she would miss him, he broke. He hauled her into his arms and gave in to the desires that had built up over the last few days. He savored the taste of her lips and the lush softness of her curves where they fit against him. Her hair felt like spun silk against his roughened hands, and her mouth was sweeter than honey.

Her moan of desire fanned the flames of his need for her. She'd been a constant presence in his mind since they'd met. She was a collection of intriguing contradictions—a scientific mind combined with a caring heart and a cheerful outlook on life. He'd never known anyone like her. It was easy to relax around her, to joke and laugh in ways he'd observed but never experienced for himself.

Now he'd had a taste, he wanted more. When it came to Rin, he wanted *everything*.

Needs he'd forced himself to deny for years roared to life like rocket fuel poured over the embers of a dying fire.

Her small hand moved to the collar of his shirt, catching hold of it and twisting it around her fingers as she rose up on her toes to kiss him back. He guided her to the nearest tree and pressed her up against it. His mouth never left hers as he shifted his grip on her waist and hair, drawing his hands down

over her breasts and the leather straps that held the pauldron in place on her shoulder. One by one, he unbuckled the straps, freeing her breasts from beneath the leather. He palmed them through her shirt, feeling the warm weight in his hands. Her nipples tightened to hard peaks beneath his touch.

Rin arched her back and uttered a low, breathy moan that threatened to shatter what was left of his wits. Then she reached between them to cup the bulge of his cock in her hand, and he was lost.

“Rin,” he groaned her name as she gripped him through the fabric of his pants. Not even he was sure what he meant by it. Was it a warning or a demand she continue?

“Yes,” was all she said.

It was enough.

Or it would have been... if Amun hadn't chosen that moment to bombard him with images accompanied by a sense of urgent uncertainty Axe translated as “*What is this and what should I do about it?*”

“This better be important, bird!” he spoke the words aloud, so Rin knew about the interruption.

“One image at a time, Hera. I can't focus when you send them that fast,” Rin said at almost the same moment.

Apparently, both their companions were determined to ruin the moment. “This is why I was happy on my own,” he muttered, his mood darkening quickly. “No one around to interrupt me.”

Rin laughed and pulled him in for one last kiss. “If you were by yourself right now, there'd be nothing to interrupt.”

And just like that, his anger vanished.

They both lapsed into silence as they tried to make out what their companions were trying to convey. It took him a few seconds, but only because he'd never seen a drone from this angle before. The phrase, a bird's-eye-view, suddenly took on new meaning.

“Son of starbeast. That’s an IAF reconnaissance drone,” he said out loud while layering on more information for Amun.

“Is that what they are? Douglas is really pushing his luck. Isn’t he? Oh, and Hera says there are two of them.”

A wicked thought occurred to Axe, and he broke into a grin. “Think our feathered friends would like to play with the lieutenant’s new toys?”

Rin’s eyes widened, and she clapped her hands with unrepentant glee. “Why don’t we ask them?”

Amun, Hera, and the rest of the subjects were more than happy to go after anything the IAF owned, and Rin had to talk fast to convince Hera to wait until the two of them were in the open so they could watch.

Rin grabbed her viewing glasses out of her pack and scanned the sky. “Where are they?”

“Target one is at your four o’clock. Target two is at eight o’clock. It looks like Amun and Hera are going after the second one.”

“Thank you. I see them now. You’ve got amazing vision.”

“Cyborg, remember?” He tapped his chest with his fist. “I’m stuffed full of the best technology available eight years ago.”

“Eight years?” Rin spun around to stare at him in shock, the pending battle above forgotten.

“What?” He hadn’t a clue why she was looking at him like that.

“You’re eight years old. Holy hells and gravity wells, that makes me the queen of the cradle robbers!”

He snorted. Of all the things to worry about, that was her concern? “Physically, I’m in my early thirties. I came out of my maturation tank as a fully functional soldier, with all the skills and knowledge I needed. My technical age is irrelevant.”

She didn’t look convinced, so he added, “Besides, the Vardarians live for centuries and some of them have found

cyborg mates. None of that matters here.”

He enjoyed watching her expression as she processed what he'd said and realized he was right.

Before she could say anything more, several hawks screamed in challenge and went on the attack. One by one, the hawks dove at the drones, each strike threatening to knock the machines out of the air.

Chunks of debris and shattered housing fell to the ground after each successful hit, and the entire skirmish ended quickly. The last drone fell in a drunken spiral that ended when it crashed into a tree.

Amun sent a pulse of smug satisfaction that made Axe chuckle. “You wrecked them, bird. Good job,” he said out loud.

Rin smiled too, but her eyes moved from the downed drones to the hawks and back several times. “They took them apart so fast.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully and looked skyward again before continuing. “You said you were born with the skills and knowledge you needed to fulfill your function. Do you think the same thing could have been done to them? I've worked with predatory birds from various planets and ecologies for years, and I've never seen anything like that. In your opinion as a combat veteran, were they using combat tactics against these things?”

Axe pulled up the recording he'd automatically made and replayed it with her question in mind. Once he stripped away his enjoyment of the spectacle and focused on the fight, the answer to her question was as clear as the sky above.

“Yes, they were.” There wasn't a doubt in his mind. Amun and the others had assessed the target, made a plan, and followed through. They'd been created to be weapons... just like him.

“Dammit. That's what I thought, too, but I haven't had hard proof until now, so I've been able to keep that information out of all my reports because it was just a theory. Now...”

She didn't need to finish. He understood. Douglas had deployed those drones to spy on them. Now there was a good chance the lieutenant had seen more than he bargained for—footage that suggested the birds were exactly what the IAF wanted.

They called down Amun and Hera while the other two birds stayed aloft, looking for more “toys” to play with.

All thoughts of what they'd started in the forest fell to the wayside for the moment. They'd have to revisit that kiss again but not until they'd dealt with this new problem.

If the hawks were what he suspected, the IAF would never let them go, and the rest of the galaxy would consider them too dangerous to live. If Amun and the others had any chance at gaining their freedom, he and Rin would need proof, a plan, and the support of Haven's leadership council. And they needed to come up with it *fast*.

CHAPTER NINE

RIN'S thoughts raced around her head like grains of rice tossed into a tornado. Everything she'd suspected about the hawks was true. Axe had kissed her. She needed to keep Hera and the others safe somehow. Holy *fraxx*, that had been some kiss. Had anyone seen the drone footage yet? Had she really been ready to climb the sexy cyborg like a tree and to hell with the consequences? Did she trust Axe enough to tell him everything?

She latched on to that last thought. She trusted Axe completely. Not just because of her attraction to him, or his bond to Amun, but because she knew he was a good, honorable man. He'd help her protect the psy-hawks. And maybe, when this was over, she'd get to kiss him again.

Stars, she hoped so.

It took most of the morning to share everything she suspected but had been keeping a secret. Some of it he already knew, thanks to his connection to Amun, but he didn't know how much information Rin had hidden from the IAF.

She explained everything: the hawks' abilities, their level of intelligence, and their deep aversion to anyone with what she thought of as a military mindset. Combined with what they'd witnessed today, she was certain they'd been intended as military assets, biological versions of drones like the ones they'd destroyed today.

"You're saying that Amun bonded to me because I used to be a scout? We have compatible skill sets?" Axe didn't look happy about that idea.

“I don’t think so. Hera bonded to me, after all. I’ve got next to nothing in common with you when it comes to skills and experience. Not to mention the hawks have had negative reactions to every soldier they’ve met.”

“True.” He reached out to stroke Amun’s back. “Do you think it’s possible their programming was as jacked up as ours? The cyborgs, I mean. This was a private project, right? So the asshole who did this probably didn’t have the time or resources for a full-scale experiment. If the first ones to hatch were a failure by their standards, they might have just left the others in cryo-storage until they had time to rework the whole project. Whoever did this never made another attempt.”

It was an intriguing theory and meshed with her own suspicions. “I think that’s the most likely explanation. The problem is that now the IAF knows about them. If they figure out what they’re capable of, there will be a lot of pressure to try to alter their behavioral programming to accept whatever companion the military wants them to have.”

Axe slashed at the air with one hand. “That isn’t going to happen. These are intelligent beings who deserve to live free and unmolested. I won’t allow anyone to do to them what was done to me and my brethren.”

“Agreed. But how do we protect them? We need a plan. I’ve got a few ideas I’ve been considering, but there are still gaps. They’ll need a permanent home where the IAF can’t reach them. Whoever takes that on will have to be willing to protect them. Not all the hawks are here, either. A male and female are still at the base where they were discovered.”

“They’re protecting a potential asset by holding some in reserve.”

“Exactly. And getting those two back won’t be easy.”

Axe wagged one hand from side to side, his lips parting in a sly grin. “That depends. They won’t give up a possible weapon without a fight, but if they think this project is a failure...”

“That might work,” she agreed.

“It *will* work. We just need to hammer out the details.” He looked at her intently, his next words spoken in deep, measured tones. “Victorious warriors win first and then go to war while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.”

She cocked her head to one side. “That’s a long-winded way of saying he who plans wins.”

“You summed it out nicely. The original quote is from an ancient human work called the *Art of War*.”

“Ah. I guess that’s something your creators included as part of your programmed skills and knowledge?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “No. I just like to read.”

Reading wasn’t something she imagined him doing much of. Axe seemed more like the active sort, always busy in his workshop or out patrolling the lands around the colony. It reminded her that there was still so much about this man she didn’t know. For now, it was enough that she trusted him. There wasn’t enough time for anything else.

“I still think I should go with you.” Axe stood with his arms folded across his broad chest. Amun was perched on his shoulder, and both of them were glaring at her. They were close to the border where her escort waited but far enough away to talk privately.

“That would only complicate things. It’s better if we stick to the routine and act as if nothing out of the ordinary happened.” She made a show of holding up both hands and crossing her fingers. “If we get really lucky, no one was monitoring the drones.”

Axe shook his head. “Your optimism is adorable.”

To her surprise, he caught her by the hands and tugged her toward him as Amun chattered in annoyance and took flight. “If luck were with us today, those damned drones would have shown up *after* we finished our moment in the woods.”

He leaned down and kissed her before she could say anything. This time, his lips brushed hers tenderly, lingering just long enough to make her want more. Then he moved away, leaving her breathless and just a little dizzy.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“Because I wanted to know if your lips were as sweet as I remember.”

“Oh.” She had no idea what to say next. Her mind was a total blank. Though she was certain they’d been arguing about something.

“Shall we go meet your escort?” he asked so smoothly she almost agreed before her brain rebooted and remembered what they’d been discussing—all the reasons why he shouldn’t come with her.

“Nice try. You only managed to melt a few of my brain cells. I still remember why you need to stay here.”

He winked at her. “It was worth a shot. My friends swear that’s the only way they win any arguments with their human mates.”

“Your friends lied to you. Us human women are much too smart for that to work.”

“We’ll see. That was just my first attempt.”

“And you are welcome to keep trying. In fact, I encourage it.” She tipped her head toward the boundary. “But for now, I have to go. I’ll be back after lunch. If I’m not back at the usual time, you have my permission to storm into camp and find me.”

The look he gave her was commanding, confident, and undeniably sexy. “If you aren’t back on time, I won’t need your permission, sunshine. I’ll come for you no matter where you are.”

“I’m good with that.” She waved and set off toward her waiting escort.

Despite her act, Rin expected trouble when she arrived. Douglas was always unhappy about something. Today’s list

would just be longer.

Lunch turned out to be sandwiches with a double helping of ego on the side. She ate her meal in silence as Douglas seethed and raged about the lost drones. The surprising thing was, he blamed Axe.

“That *fraxxing* cyborg is going to answer for this. The land may belong to him—though so far I can’t get anyone on the council to confirm that’s the case—but even if he owns the land, he doesn’t own the sky.”

Rin ate in silence, waiting for Douglas to finish. She still wasn’t sure why he thought Axe was responsible. Had none of the hawks appeared in the footage? She hardly dared to hope that was the case.

Douglas slapped the table near her plate. “Dr. Rey, I want an explanation!”

The transition from rant to inquiry was so sudden it took her a few seconds to form a good response. She’d only get one shot at setting this up.

“I’d like an explanation too, Lieutenant. Are you telling me that you ordered those drones to spy on me? First I discover you’re tracking me and now this?”

Douglas’s expression turned into a confused combination of surprise, outrage, and what she thought might be guilt.

Gotcha, asshole.

“It was a security precaution. You’re taking too many risks with the subjects and your own safety.”

“I would never endanger the subjects. That would be unprofessional and unforgiveable.” *Like using military hardware to spy on people without their permission*, she thought.

“That is not your decision to make. It’s mine.”

“Yet you never mentioned this to me. Nor did you tell me I’d be under surveillance. When the subjects noticed the drones, they let us know about them. Axe and I assumed the drones belonged to an unknown third party and removed them. I intended to report them to you once I returned to camp. Now you’re telling me they were IAF property, but how was I supposed to know that? I did what I thought was necessary to protect the subjects and the project.”

The best part about that statement was that most of it was more or less true.

“You thought...” Douglas trailed off, his face reddening.

Rin went back to eating. “When I see Axe this afternoon, I’ll let him know who the drones belonged to.”

“Send him a message instead.”

She swallowed the last bite of her meal before asking. “Why? I’m going back out this afternoon. The other pair of subjects need their exercise.”

“You and the subjects are confined to camp for the rest of the day. A dangerous storm is coming this way. High winds, thunder, lightning, hail, and heavy rainfall. It’s not safe.”

She’d seen the reports already and knew the storm wasn’t due to arrive until tonight. This was pure pettiness on Douglas’s part. “The storm is still hours away.”

“The weather on this planet can be unpredictable. You are to stay in camp, Dr. Rey. That is my final decision.”

She got to her feet. “I think you’re forgetting something. This project is on a tight schedule. I have procedures that must be done this afternoon with the second pair of subjects. Because you insisted that one pair stay in camp at all times, I’ve been unable to observe all the subjects at once.”

“You’re telling me that you can’t miss a single day? Nonsense.”

“No. I’m telling you that partial data isn’t enough when working with only a few subjects, and we’re running out of time.”

Douglas flicked his hand in a dismissive gesture. “If you leave against my advice, you’ll be on your own. I won’t order my men to take unnecessary risks.”

She couldn’t believe her luck. No security detail meant the birds would be more comfortable, and she could start observing them the moment they left camp.

“I’m here to do a job, and I will perform it to the best of my abilities. That means I have to go back out this afternoon.”

“Then go. I’d task a drone to keep watch, but your pet cyborg destroyed the only ones we had.”

She didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, she gathered up the remains of her meal and tossed it all into the recycling unit. She still had time left on her break but saw no reason not to go back early. She just needed a few minutes to check on her subjects and release the two due for some exercise. Oh, and to remove the tracking devices she’d found in several pieces of her field equipment. She’d had enough of Douglas spying on her.

The sooner she got out of this camp and away from the controlling, arrogant asshole, the happier she’d be.

CHAPTER TEN

AXE RETURNED HOME after Rin went back to camp. Once there, he went straight to his shop. The hours he spent with her each day had put him behind on several projects, and he usually spent this time doing some work.

He'd been up late every night, too. His medi-bots allowed him to go for days without sleep, and thoughts of Rin had danced through his mind every time he closed his eyes. Staying busy was better than thinking about things he was sure he'd never have, so he'd work until Amun complained about the light and noise.

The hawk had taken over his workshop and now considered it his domain with Axe more of a tolerated guest. At least, that's how Amun saw things. Axe's version of reality was quite different, but most of the time, he let the bird have his delusions.

All attempts to get any work done failed as his thoughts returned time and again to that kiss in the woods. If those drones hadn't shown up... *Veth*, he got hard just thinking about what could have happened. Like all male cyborgs, his corporate creators had ramped up his hormones to make him more aggressive. They hadn't considered what that would do to someone like him, whose purpose was to operate alone.

By the time the war ended, he'd learned to ignore his physical needs. He'd controlled them for years by this point in his life... until Rin. Now she was all he could think about, even when he needed to focus on the higher priority mission—protecting the psy-hawks from the military, and anyone else who wanted to possess and control them.

Axe eventually gave up on working and went inside to eat. Amun followed him and settled on top of the open door. That worked for now when the weather was warm, but Axe made a note to build a proper perch for the hawk before winter.

He retrieved a plate full of roasted *tumpa* out of the cooler and carved off a few slices for himself as well as one for Amun.

“You caught it, so it’s only fair you get to enjoy it, too.” He tossed the slice to the hawk, who caught it in his beak and proceeded to tear into it. The bird had quickly learned to enjoy cooked meat, a fact Axe had no intention of sharing with Rin. She’d probably lecture him about Amun’s dietary requirements. When it came to the hawks, she was as protective as any mother in the wild. It was one of the many things he liked about her. Her kind heart and cheerful disposition were almost as tempting as her kisses. Almost.

He shook his head to free himself from thoughts about the pretty scientist and back to the crisis at hand. They needed allies, something Rin wouldn’t find among the military. That meant any help would have to come from Haven.

It was time he made some calls.

He considered contacting Striker, a friend and the leader of the rangers, but decided to go straight to one of the few cyborgs with real power in the colony. He didn’t know Edge well, but he respected him and trusted he would understand what was at stake. He’d been the leader of the cyborgs while they were prisoners and was one of the cyborgs chosen to sit on the leadership council.

He could have reached out via the internal comm channels all cyborgs on Haven shared. He didn’t. He opted to send a text message summarizing the situation and ended it with a request to contact him when Edge was free.

He might respect the man, but he was also aware Edge had a temper and his own way of doing things. This way might take longer, but it was more likely to bring Edge on board. If not, he’d have to go to River for help... and that would piss off Edge for sure. Axe had no idea what the deal was between

those two, but when they were together, sparks flew. What kind of sparks exactly was anyone's guess.

That done and lunch made, he carried his plate over to the table to eat.

He never got to finish his meal.

One second he had a mouthful of food and a head full of ideas about how to protect the hawks, and the next he was charging out the door with Amun screaming in his head and out loud.

Rin was in danger.

The beast came out of nowhere.

One second Rin was walking through the woods and the next she was fighting for her life... and losing.

Hera and the other hawks did their best to fend off the predator. They attacked it continuously, tearing at its face and slashing at its body while buffeting it with their wings. Rin did the best she could, beating away claws and teeth and yelling until her voice was hoarse.

If she could have run, she might have made it to a tree and climbed it the way Axe had told her to do. None of the local predators could climb well, but right now, neither could she. The initial attack had left her crippled, her left leg shredded from hip to knee by the animal's claws.

The pain was there, but it was a distant thing, easily ignored while she fought to stay alive. When she raised her hands to fend off the cat-like creature, they were coated in blood. She didn't know if it belonged to her or her attacker, but there was so much of it she knew one of them was in a lot of trouble.

This is how I die. The thought came to her with crystalline clarity, despite the chaos of the moment. Even knowing it was probably true, Rin didn't stop fighting. She needed to stay

alive. There was so much more she needed to learn about the psy-hawks and about Axe. She wasn't ready to die. She wanted to live. To find out if that kiss could lead to something more.

The next time she tried to raise her arms to ward off an attack, only one of them moved. She saw the gap in her defenses at the same time the predator did, and for a moment they stared at each other.

This was the end. She knew it. All she could do was look death in the face and scream in defiance, so that's what she did.

Only another sound drowned her out. A primal roar of challenge tore through the air, and Hera sent her a single image accompanied by a powerful surge of hope. The image was of Axe, the blade of his axe raised high over his head as he charged headlong through the trees.

The hawks fought until the last minute and then rose into the air as something huge and snarling slammed into the creature. Axe. He struck with enough force to knock it away from her, and she got a brief glimpse of him as he crossed through her rapidly narrowing field of vision.

Darkness crowded the edges of her vision as she collapsed onto the ground, the last of her strength draining away. She stared up at the canopy of trees above her, unable to move. The forest was beautiful from this angle, and Hera was in her head, sending thoughts of encouragement and concern.

Rin sent back thoughts of consolation and gratitude. Then the pain finally hit her in an agonizing flood that drowned out every thought but one. She had to see Axe one more time. If this was the end, she wanted to go looking at the face of the man she could have fallen in love with... if only they'd had more time.

Hera landed beside her, one taloned foot resting lightly on her shoulder as the bird chirped softly in distress.

"Axe okay?" she whispered.

Hera responded with a bob of her head Rin had learned was their version of a nod. If Axe was alive, the beast was dead. Good.

“If I die, you should stay with Amun and Axe.” Rin wasn’t sure if she actually spoke the words aloud or just held them in her mind. Either way, she hoped Hera understood. This place was safe, and Axe would take care of Hera.

The scientific part of Rin’s brain wanted to consider the ramifications of a bonded pair losing one of the partners and was frustrated she wouldn’t be around to find out. The rest of her just fought to stay awake long enough to see Axe.

She heard him hurry toward her, his footfalls hard and heavy.

“Rin!” She opened her eyes when he spoke her name and saw him leaning over her, his beard and face smeared with blood and his eyes dark with worry.

“You were right,” she whispered softly. “I should have let you come with me.”

“Yes, you should have.” He moved over her as he talked, every touch of his hands sending fresh waves of pain surging through her body. “That won’t happen again. I’m not leaving your side, sunshine. You hear me? You’re not to go *anywhere* without me.”

She reached up to touch his blood-splattered face but couldn’t lift her arm high enough. He saw what she wanted, though, and caught her hand in his much larger one, raising it to his cheek.

“Take care of Hera. Please?” Her words were soft and sounded mushy even to her own ears. Darkness filled her vision until he was the only thing she could see.

“You’re not listening to me. You aren’t going anywhere without me. That includes the *fraxxing* afterlife.” Axe squeezed her fingers and glared down at her. “Stay with me, Rin.”

“Want to. Don’t think. I can.”

“Yes, you can. There’s a way. You can stay here, but I need your permission.”

She didn’t understand what he meant, but she managed the faintest of nods and whispered, “I want... to stay. Please. Help me. Stay.”

“I will, sunshine. All you have to do is hang on.” He bent down to kiss her forehead. “I’m sorry, Rin. This next part is going to hurt.”

Before she could ask what was next, something wrapped around her injured leg and squeezed. As the pressure increased, so did the pain. She fought to free herself from the source of the agony, but she couldn’t make it stop. She heard a scream of pain that might have been her own. Then the darkness enveloped her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AXE HAD SEEN ENOUGH of war and its aftermath to recognize a potentially mortal wound when he saw one. Rin's left leg had been torn up so badly he could see glimpses of white bone beneath the river of scarlet blood flowing from the slashed flesh.

If he could get her to a med-center, they'd be able to do something, but would it be enough? Rin was an ordinary human with no nanotech or cybernetics to help her recover.

Fraxx, she couldn't even block pain the way he could. She had to be suffering, but all she'd asked for was him to take care of Hera. Selfless, reckless fool. Why had she been out here alone? Where was her damned security detail when she actually needed one?

He tore through her pack until he found the basic first aid kit he knew she carried. He used the canister of wound sealant on her injuries starting with the areas above the tourniquet. Then he used every bandage in the kit to make a field dressing. It was the best he could do, but it wouldn't be enough.

Fear and frustration tore through him as he cradled Rin's limp body in his arms. She'd passed out when he'd used his belt as a tourniquet for her leg, and the remains of his shirt were now wadded up against the dressing on her hip. He held her so her injured side was pressed against him. It was the only way he could think of to continue applying pressure while he got her to the only place where she could get the help she needed, including some that would come at a high cost for both of them.

She'd have her life but lose her freedom, and she might blame him for it. He looked down at Rin's pale, beautiful face and knew his decision was already made. If saving her meant she never forgave him? So be it.

He broke into a run, sprinting through the trees so quickly the hawks fell behind. "*Going home,*" he sent to Amun. "*Bring the others.*"

It only took a few minutes at his maximum speed to reach his home. Rin stirred and moaned once or twice, but never regained consciousness. Her silence spurred him on as he realized how much he enjoyed listening to her talk about the hawks, the project, and just about anything else she was passionate about. After a lifetime of solitude, he'd found someone he enjoyed spending time with. Now, the universe wanted to take her away from him. The universe could *fraxx* right off. Rin belonged with him. He would not let her go.

He held on to that thought as he opened an internal comm channel he'd never used before—the one that linked him to every cyborg in the colony.

"*This is Axe. I need help.*" With that confession out of the way, he went on to explain the situation: Rin's injury, their current location, his concerns about Lieutenant Douglas, and why he didn't want the officer informed about what had happened until Rin was stable.

He had no idea who would answer his call for help. To many of the cyborgs, he was little more than a name.

The response stunned him. Acknowledgments flooded in from everyone. Every single cyborg on the planet offered to assist. It almost overwhelmed him.

Then a single message came through as a priority. It was Edge.

"*I'm coordinating the response. River will bring the human doctor to you. Wreckage and Ruin are closest to you, so I've dispatched them to check the scene of the attack and secure it against contamination by the human soldiers,*" he informed Axe.

“Thank you. Oh, and tell those two to bring me back my axe. It’s still with the body of the ghost cat.”

“Done. What else do you need,” Edge said.

“A fresh vial of medi-bots. I don’t think she’ll survive without them.”

Edge fell silent so long Axe wondered if his request would be denied. If Edge refused, he’d try injecting Rin with some of his blood. It might work... but his nanotech was coded to his DNA. The newer medi-bots could be given to anyone.

“You know that’s not how things work,” Edge said. *“Humans need to be vetted before being accepted as citizens, and non-citizens are never offered the nanotech.”*

“You asked me what I need. I need her. Do you understand?”

“I think so.” Another pause. *“I’ll bring it over myself. There’s going to be hell to pay when the military learns what we’ve done. You ready for that?”*

Despite everything, Axe grinned to himself. *“Are you asking me if I’m ready for a fight? I think we both know the answer to that.”*

Edge chuckled. *“Yeah. We do. Keep her alive until we get there.”*

“I will.”

He charged the last stretch to his home and almost kicked the door off its hinges as he barreled inside with Rin still in his arms.

“Help is on the way, sunshine. Oh, and welcome to my home. You’re the first person to ever visit.”

Until today, he’d never allowed anyone inside, not even the handful of friends who knew where he lived. Now, everyone knew where to find him, and in a few minutes, his quiet home would be filled with the chaos and noise that always came with a crowd.

The thought didn’t bother him as much as he expected.

Rin woke to the unfamiliar sounds of people talking in hushed tones somewhere nearby. Who the hell were they and why were they in her habi-pod? When she opened her eyes, she quickly developed a new set of questions. Where the hell was *she*, and why was she here?

“Hello?” her voice was little more than a husky rasp, but it was enough to get someone’s attention.

“You’re awake!” She recognized Axe’s voice right away. But why did he sound so relieved?

“Awake but confused,” she said as she struggled to open her eyes.

Then Hera was in her head, sending her a flood of emotions. Happiness, worry, and more relief. Why was everyone so happy she was awake?

Hera sent her several images that explained everything. The first one showed her fighting with a large predator. The next was of her lying on the forest floor, her leg shredded and blood everywhere. The last one was of Axe standing over the corpse of the animal that attacked her, his blood-splattered axe gripped in his hand.

“Thank you, Hera. I remember now,” she said aloud and then turned to look at Axe.

“You saved me.”

“The hawks saved you. They kept the ghost cat distracted long enough for me to reach you. I just finished the job.”

“He also treated your wounds at the scene, carried you back here, and then called for help. I’m Dr. Clark and I was part of the group that came to assist you,” someone new joined the conversation and Rin moved her head enough to catch sight of the speaker. A human woman with graying brown hair and a warm smile stood not far from Axe.

“Hi, Doctor.” She had to force the next words out past her suddenly tight throat. “Did I lose the leg? I know it was bad...”

Axe smiled tightly. “You’re still in one piece, sunshine.”

“Yes, you are. I wish I could take credit for that, but all I did was regenerate your lesser injuries and treat you for shock and pain. The rest...” She looked at Axe and gave him an approving smile. “You can thank Axe for that.”

Rin looked at Axe, but the big man avoided her gaze. “Axe? What happened?”

The doctor cleared her throat. “I think that’s our cue to leave. We’ll be downstairs with the others. I’m sure they’ll want to hear the good news.”

She caught sight of several others as they retreated. None of them looked familiar. Two were Vardarian males, along with at least two more cyborgs—one male and one female. “Thank you,” she managed to raise her voice enough to be heard as they left.

Once they were alone, Rin gingerly sat up and looked around. “I see Hera and Amun, but where are the other subjects? Are they okay?” she asked.

“Douglas lost his mind when he found out what happened. He wanted both you and the hawks returned to his camp immediately. The doctor told him that wasn’t going to happen, and she was more qualified than a field medic to deal with your injuries. We had to send the hawks back, though. Douglas insisted. They headed out before the storm hit. Hera and Amun confirmed their safe arrival.”

Hearing that the other subjects were safe eased some of the knots in her stomach. The rest of the knots would have to wait until Axe explained things.

She raised the blanket to check and determined that she had on one of Axe’s shirts and not much else. *Fraxx*, who had undressed her? She hoped it had been the lady doctor, but a small part wondered if it had been Axe... and if he’d liked what he’d seen.

She decided to blame that entirely inappropriate thought on whatever pain blockers she'd been given and tried to focus on more practical matters, like taking stock of her surroundings. Sunlight streamed through a pair of windows, one of which was open to let in a warm breeze. Instead of a wall, the other side of the room had a railing. Hera and Amun were perched on it, both of them watching her intently.

Beyond the rail and the hawks was a vaulted ceiling over what she assumed was a living area of some kind. The wall ahead of her had a large, elegantly carved wardrobe and a door that led into a room with tiled floors. Probably a sanitation room. An open archway was cut into the wall beside the bed, leading into yet another room. A walk-in closet maybe? That didn't seem likely for a man with Axe's practical tastes.

His home wasn't what she'd envisioned at all. She'd expected something more rustic and simple. Once Axe had explained things, she was eager to look around.

That's when it finally struck her. She had no pain. She felt fine. Better than that, even. She felt amazing.

"Remind me to ask the doctor what pharma she gave me. I'm clear headed and pain free. I didn't know that was possible."

Axe cleared his throat and then sat down on the bed beside her. "It's not. I mean, the doctor gave you something for the pain yesterday, but it should be out of your system by now."

"Yesterday?" That couldn't be right. The attack had only been a few hours ago. Hadn't it?

He gently covered her hand with his, and she twisted it so she could twine their fingers together. "Tell me what's going on. Please."

"The attack was yesterday afternoon. You passed out when I put the tourniquet on your leg and didn't come fully awake again until now. It's midmorning."

"I've been out for most of a day?"

"You have. Hera has stayed with you since I brought you here. Amun's hunted for both of them, but she's refused to

eat.”

Rin glanced over at her hawk. “You need to eat, Hera. Go. I’m okay.”

The hawk bobbed her head, launched herself off the rail, and flew out the open window. Amun followed her.

“Those two are closer than ever,” she observed. “That might be a problem when I go.”

Axe’s fingers tightened around hers. “About that. You, uh.” He paused to scrub a hand through his beard, swore softly, and continued. “You can’t leave.”

“What? Why not? Wait, you mean I can’t go right away because I’ll need time to recover?”

“No.” He turned to look at her with haunted eyes and a grim expression. “Do you remember anything after the attack? We had a conversation before you lost consciousness.”

Rin racked her brain, trying to remember. She’d wanted to see his face again before she died. “I remember bits of it.”

“Good. I asked you to stay with me. You said you wanted to. I may have taken that as permission.”

“To do what?” she asked.

“To save your life the only way I knew how. We had to dose you with medi-bots. You’re not in pain because you are almost fully healed already.” He waited a beat before explaining further.

“The doctor consulted with some Vardarian healers to confirm everything was in order. You’re only a few hours away from a full recovery.”

Rin opened and closed her mouth several times as she tried to process what he’d told her. “I have nanotech?”

“You do. I’m sorry I did that without your permission. I…” He trailed off, but she got the sense he wanted to say more.

“You saved me! Don’t you dare apologize for that.” She grabbed a handful of his shirt and pulled him in close. “I’m alive because of what you did. Thank you.”

Then she kissed him. She'd meant it to be a light kiss of gratitude, but the moment their lips touched, it became something more. Heat flooded her veins as Axe growled her name softly and kissed her back.

It all felt too perfect, like a dream she'd wake up from any second. She was safe, whole, and in bed with Axe.

"Yes," she whispered against his lips.

He tore his mouth from hers with a frustrated sigh. "Actually, no. Not yet." He pointed toward the floor. "I have a house full of beings at the moment, and most of them have cybernetically enhanced hearing."

As if on cue, chuckles erupted from below.

"Cyborg hearing sucks," she muttered.

"It's not fun for us, either!" someone called back.

"That's Wreckage. He's an asshole." Axe raised his voice. "And it's about time everyone went home. Thanks for your help. Talk to you all later. Bye now."

Rin buried her face in the crook of Axe's neck, too embarrassed to say anything else.

"Rin says thanks, too," Axe added. "Oh, and can someone let that trumped up twit of a lieutenant know Dr. Rey is awake and expected to make a full recovery?"

"Already done," the doctor called out with only a hint of laughter in her voice. "I take it we're not sharing the details of her condition yet?"

"We are not," Axe confirmed.

"Hell no," someone else chimed in. "The leadership council needs to meet and come up with a plan before we tell the IAF we're keeping their scientist."

"That's Edge," Axe told her softly. "He's on the council, and he's the one who okayed your medi-bot treatment."

"Remind me to thank him later." She raised her head to give him a small smile. "Much later." She still had a lot to process. Her near-death experience, her new enhanced status,

and the fact that the nanotech might mean she couldn't leave the planet for the foreseeable future. It would take time to come to terms with it all, but for now, she just wanted to celebrate being alive.

And she wanted to do it with the man who'd saved her twice in one day.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HE'D EXPECTED confusion and anger once he told her what he'd done. After all he'd been through, he knew the value of consent and the pain that came when your choices were taken away. And that's exactly what he'd done to Rin. She had every right to be furious with him, but instead she was nestled in his arms, kissing him with a passion that made it hard to think of anything but how much he wanted her.

Was this why some of the others complained they didn't understand their women? He suspected it was, but right now, he didn't care. All that mattered was that Rin wasn't angry with him. In fact, she was anything but unhappy right now, and he intended to keep it that way.

"You're supposed to take it easy for the rest of the day. Doctor's orders." He kissed her softly and then moved back enough to be able to look her in the eyes. "So, if we're doing this, you need to promise me you'll tell me if anything hurts or you need to stop. I don't want to hurt you, sunshine."

"You'd never hurt me."

Re'veth. She meant that. This sweet, incredible woman wasn't afraid of him at all. "I'd never hurt you intentionally. But you're tiny and delicate."

She laughed. "Only you would see me that way. And I'm not delicate! Thanks to you, I have medi-bots. I'm almost immortal!"

Her smile faltered. "Holy *fraxx*. That's exactly what I am. Isn't it? I'm going to live for centuries."

He braced himself for the anger he'd expected earlier. "You will. I... I know that must be a shock."

She beamed. "It's amazing! Don't you see? I have decades of research to do on the hawks. It's a lifetime's worth of work and now I have several lifetimes to do it."

"That's one way to think about it." Once again, he marveled at the way Rin approached things.

"It's the only way to think about it." She raised her hands and then flicked out her fingers as if casting something away. "Oh sure, I could dwell on the fact I'll outlive my friends and family, but that could happen anyway. I could be unhappy about being confined to this planet because that's what the other human colonists agreed to when they came here, and it will probably apply to me, too. But this place is amazing, with new species of birds to be documented, and I'm the only ornithologist on the whole *planet*."

He caught her under the chin with one finger and lifted her head so she was looking at him. "And if you like... you can live here. With me. I've got plenty of space, and Amun seems to like it well enough."

She didn't say anything for several painfully long seconds. *Fraxx*. He shouldn't have said anything.

"Did you just ask me to move in with you? Live with you? In the house no one has ever even visited until today?"

"Yes, I did. And I'm still waiting for your answer."

She gave a soft squeal of delight and hugged him. "Yes. I know it's too soon and we're both crazy, but the answer is yes."

At that moment, he swore he heard the walls around his heart crack. "I don't think I'm crazy. I think I'm falling in love. Though I've heard it's hard to tell the difference."

Rin squeaked. At least, that's the only way he could describe the adorable little sound she made as she peppered his face with kisses.

“I’m falling for you, too. I told myself I couldn’t because you were part of my project and because you were so far out of my league you might as well be in a different galaxy.”

That stunned him. “Why would you think that? You’re lovely, sexy, sweet, and smart as hell.”

“Keep saying things like that and you’re going to be stuck with me forever.”

“Challenge accepted.” Axe gathered her close and rose from the bed, lifting her with him.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s time we started your tour of our house, my effervescent little beauty.” He would need to make a list of compliments for her and use them all. “First stop, the bath.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’d love a chance to clean up.”

“I thought you might. I’ll get the bath running and then give you a few minutes of privacy. Then you and I are going to enjoy a long, hot bath together.”

Rin groaned in delight, the sound traveling straight through him and sending all the blood in his body straight to his cock.

“That might be the sexiest thing anyone has ever said to me,” she said.

The thought of anyone else saying seductive things to Rin made him growl and grumble under his breath. If anyone even looked at her the wrong way, he’d tear their arm off and beat them with it.

“Whoa. What was that?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I just discovered I’m the jealous type. You’re mine, sunshine. No one else gets to talk to you the way I do.”

She laughed and patted his cheek. “The same goes for you, growly.”

He set her down and kissed the top of her head. If anyone else had called him that, he’d make them regret it. But when

Rin said it, he didn't mind at all. That confirmed what he already suspected... he really was in love.

How the *fraxx* had that happened?

The sanitation room was another surprise to Rin. The tiled floors were textured and colored to look like pale beach sand with smooth tiles the same color on the walls. One entire end of the space was an open shower, and next to it was a large, square bath, more than big enough for two. The wall above the tub had a window that let in air and light while providing a view of the forest outside. For a man as rough around the edges as Axe, he certainly liked his personal comforts.

Hot water poured into the tub, blending with a citrusy scented product Axe had added before he left her alone for a few minutes.

The last thing she did before calling Axe back was to pop a quick dissolving dental-tab into her mouth. The mint-flavored foam worked quickly, freshening her breath and cleaning her teeth.

She kept her borrowed shirt on, even though she knew they wouldn't stay dressed for long. Then she picked up several thick, fluffy towels and carried them closer to the bath. With everything ready, she peeked her head into the bedroom to call him... and got her first look through the archway beside the bed.

It was a library. Shelves full of real, physical books lined the walls. She hadn't seen so many in one place since leaving university. Her solitary cyborg was full of surprises.

"The bath is ready," she called.

Axe stepped into view immediately, and he was quite the vision. He was naked, and she allowed herself a few seconds to appreciate the view. The man was impossibly perfect with washboard abs, a trim waist, broad shoulders, and thighs as thick as tree trunks. His chest hair narrowed to a treasure trail

that led her eyes down to... *wow*. He was big and thick *all* over.

“You’re still dressed,” he complained as he moved to join her.

“I uh, thought...” she waved her hands in front of her as she lost the ability to speak.

“No thinking. Not right now.” He caught the shirt by the hem and drew it up slowly.

All she had to do was raise her arms and then she was naked. He was right. Now wasn’t the time to think. Now was the time to *feel*, and holy hell, she felt so much. She wanted him. Ached for him. Not just his touch or his kisses, but all of him.

She stepped into his arms and pressed her body to his, skin to skin for the first time.

His cock throbbed against her belly as he bent down to kiss her hard. The heat of his mouth and the strength of the arms that closed around her made her dizzy with need, and she kissed him back with all the passion in her soul.

She surrendered control to him and allowed him to guide her to the tub while never breaking their kiss. Then her feet were off the ground as he lifted her into the air and lowered her gently into the water before joining her.

The water was perfect, hot enough to soothe without scalding her skin. They somehow managed to lower themselves into the tub without letting go of each other. Axe leaned against the side of the tub with his legs outstretched while Rin sat facing him with her legs straddling his thighs and her hands on his shoulders for balance.

They looked at each other for a moment in silence, lips only a whisper away from each other’s mouth. The air almost crackled with anticipation. This was what she’d wanted since the first time they’d met, and a little voice inside her head told her she’d never stop wanting this... never stop needing him.

“Yes,” she whispered, not even sure what she was agreeing to.

“Yes,” he answered, and then his mouth was on hers, branding her with his kisses and claiming her body with every touch of his hands.

He palmed her breasts in his hands and raised one leg to press it against her pussy. She moaned into his mouth, arching her back and rocking her hips so she could grind herself against his thigh.

She slid one hand between their slick bodies and wrapped her fingers around the thick length of his hard cock. Axe responded with a shuddering groan that sent her libido into overdrive. Her movements sent water splashing against the sides of the bath, the rolling motion creating currents that threatened her balance.

Axe dropped his hands to her hips to hold her steady, changing the angle of their bodies so that his cock slid across the seam of her pussy.

She used her fingers to part her lower lips, exposing her clit. The first contact made her gasp and shiver as she guided him into the perfect position and held him there while they ground against each other, groaning into each other’s mouths as they teased themselves with pleasure.

When she was almost to her breaking point, Axe’s grip tightened, and he raised her off his lap, holding her there until she wriggled in protest.

His face broke into a smug grin and he winked as he lowered her slowly onto his cock.

“You’re mine, now, sunshine.”

A sense of light and wonderment bubbled up inside her, momentarily eclipsing her desires. “Always were. Always will be.”

Then passion took over, and she added, “Now fuck me, please.”

He drove his hips up as he pulled her toward him, burying himself to the hilt inside her body.

Pleasure bloomed, her entire body shuddering. Her breathing was reduced to ragged gasps and soft pants as he lifted her again and then snapped his hips up in a thrust that put him deep inside again.

“More. Please. Yes.” The words fell from her lips as she flexed her body around him, trying to give him as much pleasure as he gave her. They fell into a rhythm, the sounds of sex and need blending with the slush and slap of the water as they raced each other toward orgasm.

He broke their kiss to bury his face in the side of her neck, nipping and kissing her as he groaned her name.

She clung to him, nails digging into his shoulders, her legs tightening and toes curling as she reached the apex of her climb and tumbled over the edge and into a release that stole her breath and momentarily shattered her mind.

He came soon after, muffling his last cry against her flesh as he emptied himself inside her.

After that, neither of them moved for a long time. She dropped her head to his chest and floated, sated and happier than she could remember. They still had problems to face and questions to answer, but all that could wait a few more hours. For now, she had everything she wanted right here.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RIN DOZED on his couch while he made them both something to eat. The doctor had mentioned she'd need plenty of protein and calories to regain her strength and help her body finish healing. With that in mind, he made two large omelets with fresh vegetables from the garden and fried up several locally made sausages and slices of the Vardarian version of bacon to go with it.

The food dispenser brewed up a pot of tea and produced several slices of toast slathered with butter. He took one look at the pile and decided to add a more. It was his first time cooking for a guest, and he didn't want to seem stingy.

He brought her a cup of tea and set it down on the table closest to her. He watched her sleep for a few seconds, amazed that this incredible woman was here, in his home and in his life.

"Food is almost ready," he said softly, almost regretting the need to wake her.

Rin yawned and stretched, and his cock went instantly hard as he envisioned her arching beneath him as he powered into her. He stopped that line of thinking before all his good intentions vanished and he took her right here on the couch.

She had other needs he should see to, like eating and sleeping. She might have medi-bots now, but she was still only human. He'd have to remember that.

"Smells yummy," she said, her voice still muzzy with sleep. Then she perked up. "Is that bacon?"

“It’s close enough to make no difference, and it’s local,” he told her.

“I think I’m really going to like it here. Fresh bacon. Now if you tell me you have fresh eggs, too...”

“I do. I keep a few chickens out back.”

She sat up and stared at him. “You have chickens? Here?”

“I have chickens,” he confirmed. “Why does this surprise you? I like animals and the colony permits us to have a variety of livestock.”

She waved her hands. “It’s not that. I haven’t seen a chicken since I left my parents’ farm. I’ve missed fresh food so much.”

He grinned. “Would now be a good time to mention I have my own garden, too?”

“Be still my heart. You have a library, chickens, and a garden. Anything else I should know?”

“I cooked breakfast myself.”

Rin threw a hand to her forehead and pretended to swoon. It was ridiculously dramatic, but he loved it. “That’s it. I’m proposing. You are the perfect man.”

“Cyborg,” he corrected her. “And I’m far from perfect.”

Whatever she was about to say was cut off by an intense mental blast that nearly knocked him off his feet.

It was Amun, and whatever was happening, the hawk was frantic about it. So much so that Axe had no idea what the bird was trying to convey.

“*Slower,*” he sent back. “*I cannot comprehend.*”

Rin pinched her nose with her fingers and closed her eyes before saying, “I’m here, Hera. I don’t understand what’s wrong. Explain slowly.”

So whatever it was, both hawks were aware of it, and Axe got the sense it wasn’t an immediate threat. At least, not to them. So what was it?

Amun went quiet for several seconds and then sent an image of a hawk. One became two, became three, and soon there were six images. Then two vanished and Amun sent another pulse of alarm. “*Gone! No find.*”

Now he got it. “Two of the hawks are missing. I can’t tell which ones. Can Hera tell you?” he asked Rin.

She paused for a few seconds and then nodded. “It’s the two you sent back to camp yesterday. Hera says they’re gone and she can’t find them.”

“Amun said the same thing.”

Rin jumped to her feet. “What the *fraxx* has that idiot done now? Where are my clothes? We need to go to the camp and find out what the hell is going on.”

“Your clothes were ruined. Remember? River brought over a bunch of stuff she thought would fit. I’ll get it. You stay here and check your messages. Maybe there’s an explanation for this.” He didn’t believe that for a moment. Rin was right. This had to be Douglas’s doing.

He dashed off, but even at his increased speed he didn’t make it back to her before Rin howled in fury.

“That asshole! That stupid, arrogant popinjay on a power trip!”

Axe grabbed the entire bundle of clothes and rushed back downstairs. “What happened?”

“Lieutenant *fraxxing* Douglas happened. He knew I was injured and unavailable, but he sent me messages, anyway.” Rin’s voice was tight with barely controlled rage and her hands shook as he pointed to her comm unit. “According to him, my reckless behavior and disregard for his authority put the entire project at risk. He has therefore decided to end the project early. All personnel, equipment, and test subjects will depart the planet later today. Given my *ongoing resistance to his authority and disregard for security procedures*,” her voice dripped venom at those words, “arrangements will be made for my transport at a later time. That son of a starbeast has basically cut me out of the program and used our argument

yesterday to blame me for everything he's doing. The rat bastard."

"And now two of the hawks are missing." Dread sank its claws into his guts and twisted as he considered what Douglas might be up to. None of the answers were good ones.

Rin paled. "What's he done to them?"

"Get dressed and meet me outside. We can figure this out on the way." He left before Rin could say anything else. It would take him a few minutes to get their ride ready, and the clock was ticking.

"What the hell is *that*?" Rin demanded, her voice almost drowned out by the low rumble of the twin engines.

Axe pulled her in for a quick kiss and then handed her a helmet. He waited for her to put it on so they could use the built-in mics to speak instead of yelling. Once she fastened it in place, he pointed at their ride.

"It's a sky-sled. I use it to transport raw logs to my shop and deliver finished products to town. Hop on and strap in. We don't know how much time we have."

She bounded up the ladder and sat down in the jump-seat he'd unfolded along one side of what he considered the cockpit. The vehicle was basically a metal platform welded to a pair of air-bike chassis with the controls for both bikes rerouted to a central dashboard.

"Okay, I'm secured. Let's go!" she said.

Axe had already leaped on board without bothering with the ladder and had them in the air in seconds. Amun and Hera rose with them, both of them screaming battle cries that needed no translation. The hawks were as pissed as their two-legged partners.

They talked through the most likely scenarios on the short flight to the IAF camp. They both agreed that Douglas was

using her attack as an excuse to cut the mission short and return to civilization. He'd been unhappy about the assignment since the decision to come to this planet.

What they couldn't work out was what had happened to the two missing subjects. They'd returned to camp safely and should have been secured in their cages. If they'd released themselves to go flying, their link to the others would have faded gradually with the increased distance. They'd just vanished, and the other subjects didn't know where they'd gone.

"I think Douglas saw the drone footage and realized I hadn't told him everything." Rin sighed loudly enough he heard it over their comms. "But that doesn't explain why he's packing up so quickly. All he had to do was send a report back to base. They'd believe him, and it's not like there's some way for anyone to swoop in and take the subjects away from the military. They're too well-guarded."

That's when it hit him. "Guarded from you. Yes. What about from someone on the inside?"

Rin stilled for several seconds and then burst into a string of curses before saying, "That has to be it! He's taken two of them and is going to sell them to the highest bidder. That explains why he's scrambling to leave. He needs to make the deal and disappear before anyone figures out what he's doing. *Fraxxing* bastard. No wonder he didn't want to come to Liberty! It's the only location we considered that doesn't allow ships to enter the atmosphere without proper clearance."

That made sense. Because of the various threats against the colony and its citizens, access to the planet was carefully controlled and monitored. Whoever his buyer was, they were likely blacklisted and wouldn't be able to even approach the planet. "He'll do the exchange outside this system, somewhere no one is watching."

"We can't let him leave." Rin sounded frantic.

"We won't. Like you said, Liberty's air space is carefully controlled. Give me a moment, I'm sending a message to Edge

and a few others. They'll arrange for a lockdown of all traffic on and off the planet."

"Ask for backup, too. I can't see the lieutenant letting us ruin his plans without a fight, and his men are all loyal. I wondered why he wanted to pick his own team for this. Now I see. He's planned this since the beginning."

Axe relayed both requests and heard back immediately. Shutting down all traffic wasn't a problem. Getting to the camp in time to help would be an issue. Most of the colony's weapons were stored in bunkers. Apart from the rangers and a few other exceptions, none of the citizens carried firearms of any kind. The Vardarians preferred blades, and the cyborgs were weapons themselves. Going up against armed soldiers with bladed weapons was too risky, and it would take time they didn't have to get everyone armed and organized.

"Get there when you can. I'll try to delay and distract the asshole until you show up."

Edge chuckled. "Sure you will. And when it goes to hell you'll wade in and kill them all before we get a chance to join the fun. Kick ass and stay alive, my friend. We'll see you soon."

My friend. Despite everything, the words made Axe smile. He had more friends than he realized.

They were two minutes out now, close enough that with his enhanced optics he could see the camp was already partially dismantled. Men hustled here and there, some packing, others loading a military-style shuttle bearing IAF markings.

"*Fraxx.* They've already brought down a shuttle. That will make things trickier." And a lot more dangerous. That was a military shuttle, which meant it would be armed and hardened against weapon fire. It also represented a chance for them all to escape, and there was nothing more dangerous than an armed adversary who thought they had a chance to get away.

"Do you know how to fire a blaster?" he asked.

Rin laughed. “My mom’s retired law enforcement. I can shoot just about anything with a trigger.”

“Good.” He took one hand off the controls and unholstered the plasma pistol he wasn’t supposed to have. “Take this. Power bank is full, safety is on. If anyone does something stupid, shoot them.”

She took the pistol, gave it a quick once-over, and then nodded in his direction as calm and collected as if she was a seasoned soldier. It was sexy as hell.

“Got it. You think they’ll fight?” she asked.

“No idea, but it’s better to be prepared for the worst. And you might want to stay out of sight until we know what’s going on. They think you’re too wounded to move right now. Let’s use that to our advantage.”

She nodded again, unstrapped herself and hunkered down on the floor, out of sight.

“One more thing, sunshine. Don’t get hurt. I don’t ever want to go through that again. My heart can’t take it.”

She flashed him an achingly beautiful smile. “Same goes for you, growly. One day with you is not nearly enough.”

The last thing they did was tell the hawks to fly to a safe distance and stay clear. Then, he gunned the engines and dropped the nose so they’d make their final approach hard and fast.

As they descended, it struck him that everything was different this time. He wasn’t going into this fight alone. In fact, if things went well, he might never be alone again.

He flew into the camp grinning like a lunatic.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RIN KNEW how to use a weapon like the one Axe had handed her, but she'd never been in a situation where she'd have to use one against another person. That wouldn't stop her from firing if she had to. It was one thing to hope for a peaceful outcome, but Axe was right. It was best to be prepared for things to go sideways.

Hera circled the camp and fed her images. The shuttle wasn't the one they'd flown down in. This one was larger, and she assumed it was the one used for transporting equipment.

She'd almost forgotten about the ship they'd arrived on. It had remained in orbit around the planet with a skeleton crew all this time.

They had to keep Douglas and the others from reaching that ship.

Axe landed the sled in the middle of the camp, the engines sending up clouds of dust and debris. They came to a stop with a thump that made her glad she had a tight grip on the seat she crouched beside.

"Sorry. I got carried away," Axe said. "Stay out of sight for now. Let's see how this plays out."

"Good luck." The need to kiss him was so powerful she almost gave in to it and to hell with the plan, but if Douglas saw her in a lip-lock with Axe, it would probably send him into orbit. Since the goal was to keep him calm and talking until backup got here, she stayed where she was.

Axe's hand strayed to the *kes'tarv* that hung from his belt as if to check it was still there. Then he bent his knees slightly and launched himself into the air. He cleared the side of the sled with ease and vanished from sight, but Hera could still see him. The hawk fed Rin a real-time view that flowed like video. Axe landed some distance from the sled, the dust swirling around his feet and legs. He kept his eyes locked on the shuttle, but she couldn't tell why.

This kind of information from Hera was new. Until now, the hawk had only sent single images. Rin had no idea the hawk could manage this kind of surveillance. It was more evidence that whoever had created these animals had intended for them to be used as spies. They probably never imagined a scenario where their creations would act against the ones trying to control them.

Surprise, assholes.

“Do not take another step, cyborg. You're trespassing on Interstellar Armed Forces land.” The voice was immediately recognizable as Douglas's, and Hera shifted her view to pick out the lieutenant standing near the lowered ramp of the shuttle.

He had a hand on his blaster but hadn't removed it from its holster, and his posture was so puffed up he looked like he might explode at any second.

Axe opened his hands in a friendly gesture and took a step forward. “I'm here to relay messages from Dr. Rey. She is awake and has read your messages. She had some concerns about the transportation of the subjects.”

“Damn right I do. Starting with where you transported my missing subjects,” she muttered under her breath.

“Dr. Rey is no longer attached to this project. She gave up the right to have *concerns* when she disregarded my orders yesterday. Her actions put the subjects at risk.”

“Be that as it may, she is still the expert when it comes to these birds. She asked me to see to it that they're all loaded

safely onto the shuttle. Once that's done, I'll go. It would set her mind at ease if you would allow me to do that."

Axe sounded calm and reasonable, but she knew it was an act. He'd been angry before they left his house and had only gotten more so on their way here. Douglas blaming her for what happened would only piss him off further.

"I don't give a *fraxx* about the doctor's peace of mind. You're not getting anywhere near the subjects. You've already stolen one. I should have you charged for that."

Axe took another step. Several soldiers appeared from the partially dismantled buildings and took up ready positions to watch the confrontation. They were all armed, but none of them pointed their weapons at Axe... yet. She hoped it stayed that way. As tough as he was, Axe wasn't immune to weapon fire.

"I haven't stolen Amun. He chose me."

"So you say. Too bad you're sleeping with the only person who could verify that. Dr. Rey has made one poor decision after another since arriving here. I'll be sure to convey my concerns to the oversight committee. Could you let her know that? It would set my mind at ease if you would."

She hissed and clenched her free hand into a fist. "Such an asshole."

Thanks to Hera, Rin saw Axe's jaw clench and his shoulders tighten. If Douglas didn't stop talking, this would blow up like a supernova.

"Of course. That way she'll have time to draft up a rebuttal to all your lies." Axe took another step. He was only a few meters away from Douglas, now. She'd seen Axe move and knew he was close enough he could cover the distance before the lieutenant could do anything.

"I said don't come any closer!" Douglas drew his blaster and aimed it at her lover.

After that, things happened too fast for her to track. One second Axe stood facing Douglas. The next, the lieutenant was on the ground with Axe's boot on his chest and his staff

extended and pointed at Douglas's throat. The lieutenant's weapon lay a few meters away, too far for Douglas to reach.

"Do. Not. Move." Axe's commanding voice rumbled with the power of an avalanche. Without looking away from Douglas, Axe raised his voice and added, "And no one else do anything stupid. Your lieutenant is an idiot, but he was right about one thing. I *am* one of the most dangerous weapons in the galaxy."

Rin shivered, a response that had nothing to do with the tension of the moment and everything to do with the sudden spike of lust that slammed into her without warning. *Not now*, she told herself. *You can go gooey over the badass cyborg later.*

The others had a different reaction to Axe's warning. They lowered their weapons.

"Take him down!" Douglas yelled. "Why are you just standing there?"

"Because they're smarter than you," Axe snarled. "And none of them want to die today."

Douglas kept blustering. "He's alone! You *fraxxing* cowards are a disgrace to the uniform."

Rin decided to join the conversation. She rose into view, making sure everyone could see the plasma pistol she held. "Actually, he's not alone. And for the record, Lieutenant, I think you are a bigger disgrace to that uniform."

"How the hell are you here?" Douglas lifted his head to stare at her, which earned him a poke with Axe's staff.

"Don't move," Axe reminded him.

"I'm a fast healer," she replied. "Now, where are Subjects Four and Six?"

"They never made it back to camp. Your bad decisions cost the program both—hnggh. His sentence ended with a wheeze as Axe pressed down on his chest.

"We know that's not true. They made it back here safely, which means they were in your care when they vanished. You

either lost them or did something to them. Either way, I want to know.” Rin channeled all her anger into her words, which helped keep her voice steady and strong despite how worried she was.

“How could you possibly know they made it back?” Douglas’s voice was a raspy wheeze, but she heard him well enough.

“The subjects are psychically linked. Testing the extent of that link was one of the reasons for this mission. It turns out they can stay connected for more than the kilometer we confirmed previously.”

“That’s not in your reports,” Douglas whined.

Rin saw an opportunity and took it. “You mean it wasn’t in the daily summaries I submitted to you. You only saw what I wanted you to see.”

“That’s what you think. I saw the drone footage. They used coordinated, strategic attacks against the drones. Those creatures are weapons of war, and you want to treat them like *pets!*”

“No, Lieutenant. I want to treat them like intelligent, sentient beings.”

“Then you’re a fool. Do you know what even a sample of their DNA is worth?”

Axe growled. “You want to enslave them the same way the corporations tried to enslave cyborgs like me. They’re not property to be used or sold. Now for the last time, Lieutenant. Where are the missing psy-hawks?”

Sutherland spoke up. “They’re in the shuttle already. We slipped them some knock-out gas while they were asleep and removed two from their cages before the others woke up. They’re in cryo-pods. I saw two more pods in the same section. Could be more of them.”

“You backstabbing bastard,” Douglas said, glaring.

“This was your idea from the beginning. We signed on because you promised us an easy assignment with a big

payday for almost no risk.” Sutherland gestured around them. “Then we get sent to the ass-end of nowhere and aren’t even allowed to set foot in the one and only town on the whole planet.”

“Shut up. You’re ruining everything.” Douglas sounded more like a toddler having a tantrum than a grown man.

“I figure this is my chance to get out of the shit you got us into.” He looked over to Rin and shrugged. “I’ll cooperate. You want to know the details? I’ll give them to you. Someone out there wanted those birds of yours and they were going to pay us a fortune to get them. It was all planned, but then we got sent here and the lieutenant had to figure out a way to make it right with the client or we were all going to get the blame.” Sutherland shrugged. “I don’t know who they are, but they’re dangerous. Some of the things they threatened to do if we didn’t come through...” The soldier shuddered.

“Shut up. Shut up! Shut up! They’ll kill us all if you keep talking, you idiot!”

“Who will?” Axe demanded.

“*Fraxx* you, machine.”

Axe removed his boot from Douglas’s chest, bent down, and grabbed him by the front of his uniform. Then Axe hauled him into the air so Douglas’s feet hung in the air. “Want to try that again?”

“*Fraxx* off.”

Rin didn’t see Douglas pull the second blaster. It seemed to materialize in his hand between one heartbeat and the next. Axe didn’t seem to notice it either.

At the same time, Amun dropped out of the sky and streaked like a meteor straight at Douglas’s head. The collision stunned everyone—the hawk, the human, and the cyborg.

Amun crashed to the ground, too dazed to pull himself out of the dive while Douglas tried to wipe the blood flowing into his eyes from his newly lacerated scalp.

Axe looked away from his prisoner to check on Amun, and in that moment Douglas raised his weapon... and Rin fired.

The man's head vanished in a pinkish cloud of vaporized tissue. Rin trained her weapon on the nearest soldier, but all he did was raise his hands and take a step back. The others did the same thing. No one seemed overly upset that she'd just killed their commanding officer. Maybe they didn't like him that much after all.

Axe snapped his head around to stare at the dead body dangling from his hand.

"Nice shot, sunshine!" he called over. Then he dropped the corpse onto the ground and hurried over to Amun.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

Hera sent her a pulse of affirmation at the same moment Axe held up a fist, thumb up. "He'll be fine."

Rin exhaled and suddenly had to plant a hand on the side of the sled to stop her knees from giving out. They'd done it. She had no idea how to make sure that the hawks would never be exploited or abused again, but she knew they'd find a way to make that happen, too.

She and Axe were a team, and so much more. She was his sunshine... and he was her everything.

EPILOGUE

AXE SAT in a beam of autumn sunshine, watching the psy-hawks as they soared in lazy circles overhead. Rin lay beside him, her head and neck resting on his thigh.

“Do you think they’re as happy as we are?” she asked, pointing a finger at the sky.

He chuckled. “I know they are. Amun keeps sending me the psychic version of smiling emojis. It’s annoying as hell, and he knows it. Damned bird.”

These days what little grumbling he did was all for show. Over the last few months he’d come to realize that he’d grumbled mostly to have a reason to speak aloud, even if no one else was around to hear him. It was one of the ways he’d tried to stave off feelings of loneliness, but that wasn’t necessary anymore. He had Rin and the hawks to talk to, and Amun was always just a thought away.

They even had visitors from time to time. He’d discovered that cooking for other people was gratifying in ways he couldn’t articulate, and he’d come to enjoy their dinner parties. But only once a month.

Despite that rule, Rin had somehow talked him into hosting an open house of sorts. The entire colony was invited to drop by for a weekend-long social to learn more about the psy-hawks. She’d even convinced him to put some of his work on display. He’d only agreed when she promised that Anya and the staff at the Bar None tavern had offered to cater the event.

Mostly, he'd agreed because it would give the hawks a chance to meet more of the colonists. So far, only Amun and Hera had bonded with anyone. Rin hoped to change that.

For now, all eight of the birds stayed with them. Amun and Hera shared the workshop while he'd built the others an open-style mews with multiple roosts and access points. They were free to come and go as they pleased, which was a far cry from their previous existence.

It took some time for them to adjust to their new reality. Axe understood all too well what it was like to transition from captivity and slavery to a life of freedom. It took even longer for the four hawks Douglas had put into cryo-pods. When they'd boarded the shuttle to track down the missing subjects, they'd found the two that had been taken that morning and the two the lieutenant claimed had been left behind. Rin had been both heartbroken and furious at the discovery.

All four had short-term health issues from being placed in cryo without any of the standard preparations and procedures, but Rin had diligently nursed them back to full health. Now they were recovered, it was time for the birds to meet the rest of the colony's citizens.

After what Douglas had done, the IAF had no choice but to give in to Rin's demands that the hawks be allowed to stay on Haven. It helped that the local council backed Rin, and they even called in a few favors with other agencies to ensure the hawks would have permanent protection and recognition as a sentient species. Nova Force even got involved at one point. They ensured that every scrap of information was scrubbed from the record except for a single copy that was handed over to Haven's council. It meant no one would be able to create more psy-hawks or use the data for anything else.

"Did I tell you I heard from Jade this morning?" Rin asked.

"You didn't, but as I recall, you didn't say much of anything when I came in for lunch." He laughed as he remembered seeing her walk into the kitchen gloriously naked and offering herself up as the main course.

Rin reached up to pat his leg. “Is that a complaint?”

“*Fraxx* no. No complaints at all, sunshine.” He caught her hand in his and held on to it.

“So, what did our non-royal cyber-jockey have to say?”

Rin snickered. “She hates it when you call her that, and so does the princess.”

“Not my fault we have two people with the same skill set. How else am I supposed to differential between them?”

“You could use their names, you difficult man.”

“Difficult *cyborg*. No need to get insulting.”

“Very difficult cyborg. And Jade said the encryption on the project’s files was the best she’s ever seen, but she’s making progress. She’s got the name of the scientist who started the psy-hawk project.”

That got his attention. “Who was it?”

“I’ve never heard of him before, but Jade said the council was alarmed when they heard the name.”

“What name?” he asked, hoping she said any name but one.

“Dr. Jules Absalom. Do you know who that is?”

Fraxx. Of course it would be him. “I know the name, and what he’s done. Jules Absalom was an evil, soulless bastard. He’s the one who created the cyborg program and was involved with the original theft of the DNA from the Vault of the Fallen. He also unleashed a fully sentient AI into the galaxy, experimented on cyborgs after the wars ended, and was wanted for an entire laundry list of illegal acts until his death last year.”

Rin sat up. “Holy hell. So there’s no doubt that he intended to use the hawks the same way he ended up using the cyborgs?”

“None at all. And now we know that, we can make a solid guess as to who was trying to buy the hawks from Douglas.”

Rin nodded. “I’ve heard the rumors. It could have been one of the corporations, but you think it’s the group calling themselves the Shadows. Don’t you?”

“I do.”

Worry creased Rin’s face, and he knew he needed to do something to reassure her. He tugged at her hand until she moved close enough he could draw her into his lap and then kissed her several times.

“What do we do now? How do we protect the hawks?” she asked.

“They are under the same protections as the rest of the colony,” he reminded her. “They’re even recognized as citizens. If trouble comes, we’ll fight to defend our home and *everyone* living here.”

She blew out a breath and nodded slowly. “You make it sound so simple.”

He caught her face in his hands and smiled down at her, still amazed that this woman had chosen him. “It is simple, sunshine. Love is always worth fighting for. I love you and the life we’re building here, and I will fight to my last breath to keep it.”

She leaned into his arms with a sigh that morphed into a burble of laughter. “I love you, too. I just hope we don’t have to fight anyone to prove it.”

“Me too, sunshine. Me too.” Even as he said it, Axe knew it wouldn’t be that easy. Trouble would come to Haven eventually. When it did, they’d have to be ready... and enjoy every minute together until that day came.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan lives out on the Canadian west coast surrounded by open water, dear family, and good friends. She has jumped out of perfectly good airplanes on purpose and accidentally swum with sharks while visiting the Great Barrier Reef. She's passionately in love with the written word, chocolate, and more than a few of her heroes. Writing is her joy, her escape from reality, and the only way she knows of to quiet the nagging harridan of a muse she claims the universe assigned to her.

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THE CYBORG WAY

CYBORGS OF MARS
BY HONEY PHILLIPS

DESCRIPTION

After a year on Mars, Ellie is thrilled with how much progress she's made on her homestead - although she can't deny it gets lonely at times. Her only visitor is a big cyborg ranger who insists on keeping his distance.

When she finds an impossible little creature lurking in her lichen - a creature who shouldn't exist - she should be terrified. Instead, Henry turns out to be a delightful companion, and she's determined to keep him hidden from the ruthless corporation controlling Mars.

L-485 takes his responsibility as a ranger very seriously - especially when it comes to a certain pretty little settler. He knows she'd never be interested in a gruff, older cyborg, but that doesn't stop him from watching over her.

When he realizes that Ellie is hiding a potentially dangerous secret his duty is clear - but how can he betray her trust? Can Henry bring two lonely people together as they try to solve the mystery of his existence?

CHAPTER ONE

SOMETHING MOVED IN THE LICHEN, and Ellie's heart skipped a beat. It was impossible. There were no living beings on Mars except the humans trying to terraform the planet.

It must have been the wind.

Except there was no wind. The usually ever-present wind that swept across the deserts of Mars had dropped as evening approached.

A trick of the light.

That explanation sounded more reasonable. As the pale sun dipped lower in the sky, uneven shadows from the surrounding mountains slanted across the ground. Nodding to herself, she straightened and put a hand on her aching back. It had been another long, hard day but as she looked around at her homestead, she was filled with satisfaction.

She'd been here on Mars for almost a year and her hard work had paid off. Part of the requirements for the homestead claim was to cover fifty percent of the ground with lichen over the first five years and she was ahead of schedule. She had expanded her original habitat to include a separate greenhouse dome and a third dome that housed her small, precious flock of chickens. It was far more than she had hoped to accomplish, especially by herself, but grief and loneliness had driven her.

If only her mother had been here to see the results. Even after almost two years, a wave of grief made her throat tighten, but she pushed the sorrow aside as she always did. She was

fulfilling her mother's dream, and she had to believe that that was the most important way to honor her memory.

As she stretched again, she caught another flicker of movement from the corner of her eye. She whirled around to face the area directly but as soon as she moved, everything went still. Despite that, she was sure she'd seen something. Fighting back the urge to panic, she put her hand on the holster of her gun and moved cautiously towards the base of the cliff that rose up behind her claim, hoping she looked more threatening than she felt.

She'd never fired the weapon except in practice, but L-485, the cyborg ranger in charge of her territory, had insisted that she wear it at all times. She hadn't seen the point, but he'd looked at her with that stern, grey gaze.

"Not all men can be trusted. You should be ready to defend yourself."

"Do you really think that's necessary?"

Growing up on an overpopulated Earth with too many unemployed and hopeless individuals, she'd always been alert to the possibility of violence, but here on a planet populated only by homesteaders, it seemed very unlikely.

"You must remember that there are very few women on Mars. You are very desirable."

For the briefest second, his gaze was no longer stern and cold, but hot and hungry. The look vanished so quickly she wasn't sure if she'd imagined it. But after he dragged a promise from her to wear the gun and left, she'd found herself thinking about that hungry look. She'd been attracted to the big cyborg ranger since the first time she'd seen him, but despite his frequent visits, he rarely showed any sign of reciprocating the attraction.

The thought of him gave her courage and, tightening her grip on the holster, she carefully approached the base of the rocks. The lichen had been specially bred for the low oxygen levels and subzero nights of Mars. All the homesteaders were planting fields of it to assist in breaking up the soil and to

provide additional traces of oxygen to the atmosphere. Several different types had been mixed together so the colors ranged from muted greens to oranges and golds that mirrored the native Martian soil.

The movement had come from one of the greener areas and she stared down at it, trying to determine what had attracted her attention. There was another slight flicker and she suddenly realized what she was seeing – a small lizard, no longer than from the tip of her middle finger to the heel of her hand perched on the patch of lichen. Its skin was a combination of muted greens with a streak of dull orange along each of its sides - the colors mingling perfectly with the lichen on which it was resting. As she stared at it in shock, the small head lifted and two bright, dark eyes stared back at her.

It's impossible, she thought again, blinking. No life existed on Mars. They hadn't even found any traces of ancient life. Every living thing on Mars had been imported by humans. Was it possible that this was another one of GenCon's experiments? GenCon was the corporation Earth Government had chosen to partner with in the development of Mars. They appeared benevolent enough, but she and her mother had had their own unfortunate experiences with apparently benevolent organizations before. Could they have bred the lizard to handle the environment?

“What are you doing here, little one?”

The lizard tilted its head and gave a soft chirp, as if responding to her and she laughed, the sound surprising her. How long had it been since she laughed? Or had anybody to laugh with? Other than L-485's visits, the only time she ever saw anyone was on her quarterly trips to town.

“Did you show up to keep me company?”

The lizard chirped again and hopped closer to her. Unable to resist, she bent down and extended her hand. Those big eyes looked at her hand, then up at her face, and then it hopped up on her hand. Filled with unexpected warmth by the gesture of trust, she raised her hand very carefully to eye level.

“Hello there. My name is Ellie. I wonder what your name is?”

It tilted his head again, and the combination of the head position and the curiosity in its gaze reminded her of a boy she'd gone to school with a long time ago. His family had been forced to move to one of the outer ring developments when he was ten and she'd never seen him again, but they had been good friends before that.

“How about Henry? Do you think you'd like being called Henry?”

Henry didn't respond but he blinked at her a few times, then settled down on the palm of her hand, sending another little wave of warmth through her. But his easy acceptance didn't explain how he'd come to be in her lichen field - or how he could survive on the surface of Mars.

The project to terraform Mars has progressed to the point where the atmosphere was safe for humans - and other Earth creatures - but the oxygen levels were still low enough to require supplemental oxygen from breathing masks like the one she was wearing. Even the specially bred chickens and goats available for the settlers to purchase were kept inside oxygenated domes.

Once again, she considered the possibility that he was a GenCon experiment. It seemed unlikely given their emphasis on practical matters, but perhaps...

A sudden gust of wind interrupted her thoughts and she shivered. The shadows were lengthening and it would soon be full dark. She looked at Henry, now curled peacefully in her palm and then down at the patch of lichen. He must have been all right out there, but somehow the thought of returning him to the cold ground bothered her.

On the other hand, what if the oxygen-rich environment inside the habitat turned out to be a problem for him? Maybe it would be best to leave him where she'd found him. But when she regretfully attempted to put him down, he curled long toes around her fingers and refused to let go, not responding to her gentle nudges. He was so small and delicate that she was

afraid to use any additional force, so eventually she sighed, picked up her tools with her free hand, and made her way back to the airlock. Keeping a careful eye on him, she closed the outer door and set the airlock to cycle.

As oxygen flowed into the space, he almost seemed to smile, his nostrils flaring and a small sack expanding beneath his chin. Since he didn't show any sign of distress, she carried him inside.

“Welcome home, Henry.”

L-485 brought his horse Blaze to a halt high on a rocky outcropping, looking out over the plain below. Not that Blaze was actually a horse, although the big cybernetic creature was based on the ancient Earth animal. Blaze was a machine, just like he was a machine, but he still found himself leaning forward to pet his neck as he studied the area in front of him.

The rocky orange desert stretched out in the distance, reaching to the base of the mountains ringing the great crater. When he'd first come here to work on the terraforming project, nothing had disturbed the huge, empty plain. Now human workers continued those efforts and he'd become a ranger, a representative of law and order for the scattered homesteads sprinkled sparsely across the desert. For now, the signs of life were still diminished by the vast emptiness, but how long would that last?

Humans were an invasive species and as the great terraforming project progressed, more of them would appear. He had mixed feelings about that knowledge. He had become used to being alone in the cold and dark — *almost* used to it.

His eyes turned, as they so often did, to the homestead nestled against the base of the outcropping. Unlike most of the homesteaders who had chosen open areas out on the plain, Ellie had established her claim on a slight rise beneath the rock cliff, her habitat looking out over the rest of the desert and protected by the great wall of rock behind her.

I should stop and check on her. Except it hadn't even been two weeks since his last visit.

He visited all of the settlers in his territory on a regular basis, and for most of them, that meant every month or two. In Ellie's case, he had difficulty preventing himself from stopping by every day. The small, curvy woman working so hard by herself constantly occupied his thoughts. As much as he admired her bravery and determination, he wanted to make her life easier. To make sure she was safe and watch the myriad expressions playing across that bright, expressive face. To hold her soft body against his...

No. She was human and he... was not. He had given up his humanity when he made the choice to become a cyborg. Not every soldier had a choice — if their injuries were deemed terminal, the agreement they had with the military allowed the government to transform them into cyborgs. His own injuries hadn't been fatal, but they would have left him paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life. He had chosen this path instead, knowing that in the eyes of Earth Government — and of the majority of Earth's inhabitants — he would no longer be human.

On the whole, he hadn't regretted the decision. He was once more strong and capable. Almost as importantly, he still had a purpose. After a lifetime in the military, he needed to feel that he was useful. It wasn't until he met Ellie that he had actually experienced any doubts about his choice.

But then again, even if he had still been human, she was too young and pretty to have been interested in a cynical, older soldier. Any relationship between them was even more impossible now. All he could do was watch over her and help out when he could. It was enough. *It had to be enough.*

Which meant he had three more days to go before his self-imposed two-week gap between visits was up. He patted Blaze's neck again and directed him towards the trail back to New Arcadia, the largest — and only — town on Mars. The horse hesitated, tossing his head in the direction of the path down to Ellie's homestead, and an unwilling smile crossed his face.

“I want to go that way too, but not yet. Back to town.”

A metal hoof pawed at the ground, but the horse finally obeyed, setting off down the ridge as L-485 cast one last longing look back over his shoulder.

CHAPTER TWO

THREE DAYS LATER...

The pale Martian sunrise came flooding in through the uncovered front windows of the habitat, and Ellie rolled over with a sigh. This was her least favorite part about being on Mars - waking up to cold and silence. The frigid air gnawed at her skin as she reluctantly emerged from under the covers and hurried over to the RTG — the Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator — to turn up the heat. She didn't really need to turn it down at night, but after a lifetime of conserving resources, it felt wasteful to heat the entire dome while she was snug in her bed.

Henry seemed to agree. He was still curled up in the covers, only the very tip of his nose visible. She had worried that the warmth of the dome would be a difficult adjustment for him after the cold temperatures he must have been used to at night, but he had taken to it as enthusiastically as he had taken to the increased supply of oxygen.

She shivered, pulling her heavy silk robe tighter as she huddled by the RTG, holding out her hands as it began to emit a gentle heat. The robe had been one of the few indulgences she'd permitted herself to bring on the voyage — a present from her mother when their application for a homestead had been accepted — and it was a pleasant change from her usual practical coveralls.

After brewing a cup of tea, she perched on the cushioned window bench and watched the sun make its way across the

endless desert, the desolation eased by the small sparks of light from other habitats. She liked knowing they were there, but at a comfortable distance.

As warmth filled the room, she finished her tea and headed into the attached dome holding her hydroponic garden. It was always warm and humid in here and she nodded with satisfaction, delighted with how well her small ecosystem was thriving. The plants provided food for her and the chickens, and would eventually help feed the fish she hoped to add to the water tanks.

She stripped off her robe and turned on the shower she had added on one side of the garden dome. Although there was a small prefabricated bathroom unit connected to her main living area, she enjoyed showering in the warm environment, surrounded by greenery. It was also a practical solution. The used water was recycled and flowed through the filters back into the garden so nothing was wasted.

As she ran her soapy hands over her body, she found herself thinking about L-485. He was due for his biweekly visit today. The thought sent a flare of arousal through her body, and she shivered pleasantly as she slowed her movements, running a thumb across suddenly taut nipples.

It had been her first full day on her claim. She had taken her rover full of supplies out to her new home and started assembling the first dome. The dome consisted of a series of prefabricated panels that snapped together on a framework of Martian iron. The panels were designed for one person to handle, especially given the lower Martian gravity, but her lack of inches and her unfamiliarity with the process had made it a frustrating experience.

By midafternoon she'd only managed to get half of the dome together, and she was casting nervous glances at the sun beginning to creep slowly down across the sky. The sound of hoofbeats made her look up as a man came riding towards her. Not a man, a cyborg, astride one of the marvelous mechanical horses the rangers rode. He frowned down at her as he dismounted, muscles straining against the faded black shirt and pants the rangers had adopted as a type of uniform.

She had seen some of the cyborg rangers in town before she left, but this was the first time she'd ever been close to one. Her eyes widened as he came to her side and she looked up at him — way up — his sheer size making her feel ridiculously small, and he immediately took a step back.

Although she knew he was a cyborg, she didn't see any immediate physical indications as to which of his parts have been replaced by cybernetic ones. The only outward sign of his nature was the lack of a facemask, and she couldn't resist an envious sigh. She was already tired of wearing hers every time she was outside. Pushing her jealousy aside, she gave him an uncertain smile.

“Um, hi. I'm Ellie.”

“I am L-485.”

He looked down at her, and her breath caught as their eyes met for the first time. His were stern and grey and might have been intimidating, but instead she felt an immediate connection to the big male. For a brief second she thought she saw a similar response on his face, but then he looked away, his face hardening.

“You have not completed your habitat,” he said gruffly.

“I know.” She gave him a rueful smile. “It's a little more complicated than it seemed in the videos I watched on the voyage, but I'm getting there.”

He studied the partially complete dome and shook his head.

“Not before nightfall.”

She sighed. “No, I think you're right. I'll have to spend the night in the cab of the rover.”

It wouldn't be the most comfortable environment in the world, but the rovers were designed to provide supplemental oxygen and enough heat to prevent her from freezing overnight. His frown deepened.

“That is not acceptable. You should return to New Arcadia.”

“It would be silly to waste the rest of the afternoon going into town and then having to turn around to make the trip back out here again in the morning. I’ll be fine.”

“You will not be fine. You will be cold and cramped.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“Not that cramped. I don’t take up very much room.”

His eyes flicked down over her body, just the briefest glance, but they left a surprising trail of heat behind.

“You will still not be comfortable. You will still be cold.”

“I can sleep in my coat, and I have some thermal blankets as well.”

He shook his head and strode over to the pile of building materials, picking up one of the panels with frustrating ease. She hurried after him as he carried it over to the half-completed structure and fitted in place quickly and efficiently.

“You don’t have to do that. We were told that you rangers aren’t here to help us with tasks we should perform on our own.”

“It is our choice on whether or not to offer assistance,” he responded, already returning to fetch another panel. “I choose to help you.”

“But why?”

Did a shadow of hesitation cross that hard face? Before she could decide, he shrugged.

“This is my territory.”

With his assistance, the dome had been completed in time for her to spend her first night in her own habitat. He hadn’t lingered after the work was completed, but he continued to visit her regularly.

Those visits were always a bright spot in her life, even though their conversations were mostly about the mundane realities of life on Mars — he’d never even accepted her invitation to come into the dome and have a cup of tea. Until

Henry came along, he was her only visitor. She couldn't wait to tell him about Henry.

Wait a minute. Can I tell him?

Although the rangers were employed by Earth Government, they worked closely with GenCon. If Henry was some type of escaped experiment, would L-485 feel obligated to tell the corporation that she had found him? Even worse, what if Henry was what she had come to suspect — an actual native of Mars? Would L-485 want to hand him over so that GenCon could research him?

A sudden flare of unreasonable panic made her race through the rest of her shower and back into her living quarters. Henry was still curled up under the covers, and she sat down next to him with a sigh of relief. Of course he was still there.

He gave a protesting squeak as she ran a gentle finger down his back and she realized that in her haste, she hadn't dried off completely. Her hand was still damp and although Henry had taken to warmth and oxygen, he had a strong distaste for moisture of any kind. She laughed and dried her hand more thoroughly before stroking him again. This time he made the little purring chirp that she had learned indicated his satisfaction.

"I can't tell him about you, can I? What if he wants to take you away from me?"

Even though it had only been a short time, she couldn't imagine her life without Henry in it any longer. The nights no longer seemed so long and empty. Even though he couldn't talk to her, he'd proven to be a wonderful companion — intelligent, inquisitive, and surprisingly sensitive to her moods. No, she wasn't going to let anyone take him away from her. Which meant that she couldn't tell L-485 about him. Her decision felt wrong — she'd never had any secrets from him before — but she just couldn't take the chance.

Still fighting her conscience, she dressed slowly, made herself another cup of tea, and ate one of her protein bars. Henry nibbled at the small bite she gave him while she went to

feed the chickens. When she returned, he was perched on top of the counter, searching for crumbs, and she laughed.

“Caught in the act. You’ve had enough breakfast. Come here.”

She held out her hand, watching in delight as his wings extended from the slits along his sides, shimmering translucent membranes that were designed more for gliding than flying. She’d been shocked the first time she realized that was what the orange streaks concealed, but they only made her more convinced that he was not from Earth at all.

He landed on her palm and tilted his head inquisitively.

“Yes, it’s time to go to work, but I think you’d better stay inside today. I don’t want L-485 to see you and start asking questions.” She placed him gently back on the bed, but he hopped down and followed her to the airlock, chirping as she pulled on her thermal coat and small facemask. “Not today, Henry. Or at least, not until after he visits me. You can come out with me this afternoon.”

She shut the inner door to the airlock behind her, ignoring what sounded like a mournful chirp from inside as she waited for the outer door to open. As she gathered up her supplies, the fact that her surroundings seemed unusually quiet and empty only confirmed her decision. She already missed Henry’s presence, but she would rather miss him for a few hours today than take the chance of losing him. Sighing, she mixed up a supply of the nutrient and spore mixture that was the basis for establishing the lichen and set to work.

Less than an hour later she heard the sound of hoofbeats and despite her nerves, she looked up and smiled as L-485 came riding out of the rocks towards her.

“Good morning,” she called as he came to a halt next to her and swung down, muscles rippling beneath his usual faded black shirt.

Her heart skipped a beat as she looked up at him. Dark hair cut military short and turning grey at the temples, a rugged face too weathered to be called handsome, and a big, powerful

body. He was a long way from the slender vid stars of her adolescent dreams, but her body responded to his presence with unmistakable arousal.

“Good morning,” he responded in that deep voice that always sent a shiver down her spine. “How are you?”

“Fine. Just fine. I mean everything is going really well and the lichen crop is thriving and...” She stopped abruptly, aware that she was babbling nervously.

He studied her face, his grey gaze unusually penetrating, and she found herself blushing guiltily.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, no, not at all.”

She couldn't quite resist a quick look towards her habitat, but did her best to hide it by moving to the horse's head and running her hand down the metallic nose. The small white scar on the otherwise sleek skin had been the inspiration for his name and she gave it an affectionate pat.

“Good morning to you too, Blaze.”

L-485 sighed.

“You did not have to give him a name.”

“Of course I did. Everyone deserves a name.” Flustered by the fact that he was still studying her face, she blurted out, “What's your name?”

His face turned even harder.

“You know what it is. I am L-485.”

“You weren't born with that name.” She had always wanted to ask him, but never quite had the courage before. “What was your original name?”

For a moment, she thought he wasn't going to answer her, but he finally shrugged.

“I was born Levi. But that was the name of the man I was. I am no longer a man.”

“Of course you are.”

“I am no more a man than my horse is a living animal.”

She stopped petting Blaze long enough to frown at him, and the horse immediately nudged her hand. She laughed and resumed her strokes.

“I don’t think Blaze agrees with you. And neither do I, Levi.”

There was that look again, that brief flare of hunger as she said his name. Her body instinctively responded, but her conscience nagged at her and she ducked her head, looking away.

“Is something wrong? You seem... different this morning.”

“No, no. Everything is fine.”

Dammit, she didn’t even sound convincing to herself and she gave the dome another guilty look. He followed her gaze, frowning at her habitat.

“Is something wrong with your home?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said quickly, trying to sound confident, but her efforts were unsuccessful.

Levi gave her a thoughtful look, then headed for the airlock.

“Good, then perhaps this is a good time to take you up on your offer of a cup of tea.”

“No!” she cried, hurrying after him and grabbing his arm.

Oh my. It was the first time she’d ever touched him and, despite her concern, she couldn’t help noticing the warm, firm muscles beneath her hand. He made an odd sound, almost a growl, and she looked up to find him staring down at her hand.

“You object to me entering your home?” he asked stiffly.

“I...”

Why did she suddenly have the impression that if she said yes, she would hurt his feelings? But if she said no, he might find out about Henry. He frowned again as she tried to come up with a reasonable excuse.

“Are you offended by my presence?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. Then we will have tea.”

Without waiting for a response, he strode off towards the airlock, and she hurried after him, praying that Henry had crawled back under the covers.

CHAPTER THREE

LEVI MADE his way through the outer door of the airlock to Ellie's home, then waited for her to join him. He half-expected her to resume her protests, but she stood silently as he closed the outer door and they waited for the air to cycle. Even though she had invited him to enter many times before, he was uncomfortable with his assertiveness. However, his instincts were telling him that something was wrong, and a soldier learned never to ignore his instincts.

This was the first time they had ever been quite so close, and he was overwhelmingly conscious of her — of her diminutive size and sweet scent. Her body was so sweetly curved that it was easy to forget how small she was, but she would fit easily beneath his arm. As oxygen flowed into the room, more of her scent filled his head — delicious, enticing, arousing. To his shock, his shaft began to stiffen. How long had it been since he'd had an erection? He immediately ordered his body to calm, but for once his nanites failed him. He remained achingly erect as the inner door opened into her habitat.

Her scent was even stronger here and did nothing to help him assume control of his errant body. In a vain attempt to distract himself, he looked around curiously. It wasn't the first time he'd been inside a homesteader's habitat, but although they followed the same basic pattern, they were all different. He'd tried to imagine Elle's home many times, but he hadn't realized how warm and inviting it would appear. Just a few simple touches made all the difference — colorful lengths of fabric framing the big window panels across the front of the dome, a collection of rocks polished to a soft sheen on the

shelf below them, and multiple plants added for decoration as well as to freshen the air.

As he looked around, his gaze snagged on the disheveled bed built into an alcove along one side of the room. He kept the bed he barely used at Ranger headquarters with military position, but there was something undeniably appealing about the tangled mess of bedding. He could picture her small body nestled amongst the covers, her cheeks flushed and her eyes heavy with sleep — or passion. *Fuck*. The image did nothing to help control his erection.

“Well? What do you think?” she asked, her expression still anxious as she pulled off her facemask and shrugged out of the heavy thermal coat.

His mouth went dry. The mask had been one of the smaller ones, only concealing her nose and upper cheeks, but without that small barrier, she looked even prettier than usual. And young. Far too young for him. But that knowledge didn’t stop his eyes tracking down the soft curves straining against her practical coveralls. The neck was open, revealing a small expanse of pale flesh, and he saw the pulse in her neck flutter.

“It is very... appealing,” he managed to say at last.

“Thank you. Um, did you want some tea?”

Her eyes darted around nervously as she spoke and he frowned, following her gaze. She gave the bed a worried look and he automatically took a half step towards it before she grabbed his arm again.

“What are you doing? I mean, where are you going?”

Her big blue eyes looked almost frantic with worry, and he couldn’t resist touching her cheek in a comforting gesture. At least, he meant it to be comforting, but the silky softness of her skin beneath his hand sent another wave of arousal surging through his body. Her eyes widened, the worry replaced by something that looked suspiciously like... arousal?

Don't be foolish, he told himself. He was projecting his own desires onto her. He started to take a step back, not realizing that the bed was almost directly behind him. Her eyes

widened again, and she suddenly wrapped her hands around his neck as she pulled his head down towards hers. He was too shocked to resist, and then the impossible softness of her lips touched his and all thought of resistance disappeared.

He groaned against her mouth and her lips parted beneath his. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he deepened the kiss, delving into the impossible sweetness of her mouth. For a fraction of a second she froze, but then she sighed into his mouth and responded, her tongue dancing shyly with his as she returned the kiss. A year of pent-up longing and need urged him on as he yanked her harder against his body, barely remembering to temper his strength. She didn't seem to mind, pressing herself even closer, the lush mounds of her breasts a tormenting pleasure against his chest. Her small hands tightened on his shoulders, urging him on. By the time he reluctantly raised his head, she looked dazed and breathless, but she smiled up at him, her lips pink and swollen.

“That was –”

A flicker of movement from the kitchen area caught his attention, and he whirled in that direction, automatically thrusting her behind him. His head went to the holster of his gun before he remembered he couldn't fire within the habitat and take the chance of breaching the dome.

“No! No, Levi, you can't.”

She grabbed the hand he had on his holster as she tried to step in front of him. “Don't hurt him!”

“Him?”

An immediate and unexpected flare of jealousy raced through his body before he realized that there couldn't possibly be another male in the small space. Easily keeping her behind him, he frowned at the kitchen area for another moment before he finally realized what he had seen — a small, lizard-like creature perched on the counter, regarding him steadily through bright, dark eyes.

“You have a pet?”

No, of course not. There was no such thing on Mars. The only living beings transported to Mars were humans. Even the chickens and goats available for the settlers to purchase were transported in an embryonic state.

“Kind of,” she said nervously, her hand clinging to his arm again. “It’s complicated.”

“Explain,” he ordered, still keeping a wary eye on the creature.

It looked harmless enough, especially given its small size, but just because something was small didn’t mean it couldn’t be deadly.

“I wish I could.” Her fingers kneaded his arm in an unexpectedly provocative gesture as she spoke. “He... he just showed up three days ago.”

“Showed up?”

“Yes, outside in the lichen.”

“He can function without additional oxygen? Does he have nanites as well?”

“I don’t know. I suppose he might, if he belongs to GenCon.”

Her voice tightened on the last words, and he finally looked away from the creature long enough to frown down at her.

“You think he’s a GenCon experiment?”

“I don’t know,” she repeated. “I can’t imagine why they would have created him, but I can’t think of another explanation. Unless...”

“Unless?”

“What if he’s actually native to Mars? I know it sounds impossible,” she rushed on. “But maybe Henry and his species simply aren’t detectable to our technology.”

“Our technology is certainly capable of picking up movement, as well as body heat.”

He wasn't familiar with all of the advanced scientific apparatus that had been used to survey Mars, but even the military had basic detection equipment.

"He's not very big, and I think his temperature reflects his surroundings. Maybe he normally lives amongst the rocks, or even underground."

He was shaking his head before she finished speaking.

"I don't think that's possible. There would be nothing for him to have lived on before the lichen. I know we haven't found any traces of organic matter."

She sighed. "I suppose you're right. He must be a GenCon experiment."

"I'm sure I am, but I will make inquiries to verify."

"No, don't," she said immediately. "Even if they did create him, he's not just some experiment. He doesn't deserve to be locked up in a lab. And if they didn't create him, what if they want to examine him... or dissect him? You can't let anybody know he's here."

Her fingers tightened on his arm as she spoke, just as they had tightened on his shoulders during their kiss, and his heart suddenly sank. No wonder she'd kissed him. How could he have been foolish enough to think it was because she desired him? She was only trying to divert his attention from the strange little creature.

"I see," he said stiffly, taking a step back and forcing her to release his arm. "I appreciate your concerns, but I will not let you distract me from my duty."

"Distract you? What are you talking about?" Her small brows drew together in an all-too-appealing frown.

"The kiss," he said, even more stiffly.

Her cheeks turned an enchanting shade of pink, but he also saw the trace of guilt on her face.

"That wasn't... I mean, it kind of was, but I've also been thinking about kissing you for a long time."

He wanted to believe her, but he knew better.

“It was unnecessary.”

“I’m sorry if you didn’t like it,” she said softly, biting her lower lip, still swollen from their kiss.

In spite of everything, he wanted to smooth away that disappointed expression and assure her that he had liked it very much. *Too much*. He reminded himself again that it was his duty to protect her, not to seduce her.

He looked back over at the creature, debating the best course of action, and as he did, small translucent wings flared out from its sides as it hopped into the air, gliding towards Ellie. He would have intercepted it, but she stepped in front of him with a pleading look as she held out her hand and it landed in her palm.

“This is Henry.” She raised her hand as if introducing him. “Henry, this is Levi. He won’t let anything happen to you, will you?”

He looked from her anxious face to the dark gaze studying him curiously.

“I will have to consider the matter. I will let you know what I decide.”

He turned and strode towards the airlock before he gave into temptation, drew her back into his arms, and promised to do anything she wanted.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELLIE STARED AFTER LEVI, her mind a troubled swirl of emotions. She was still worried about Henry, of course, but the fact that Levi hadn't immediately insisted on taking him away gave her hope. And despite her lingering concerns, she found herself thinking about their kiss. He hadn't been entirely wrong — when she'd seen him getting closer to the bed, she'd assumed that Henry was there and she panicked. Putting her arms around his neck had been intended to distract him, but she'd also told the truth when she told him that she'd been thinking about kissing him for a long time.

And what a kiss. She had no idea that such an explosion of passion existed behind that stern facade. He'd always seem so rigid, so in control. He'd certainly taken control of the kiss, but with a passionate intensity she hadn't expected, and the only thing rigid about it had been the iron bar of his erection against her stomach. A very large bar.

Not that she had much experience with erections — any experience really — but it had seemed unusually large to her. Was that because he was large all over? Or had becoming a cyborg enhanced all parts of his physique? Although such actions would not have been permitted on Earth, she knew that several female settlers had taken cyborg husbands. If they were all as well-endowed as Levi, she could certainly see the attraction.

Levi.

The fact that he had told her his name felt almost as intimate as their kiss.

“Levi,” she repeated softly. Henry chirped, and she smiled down at him. “Do you approve of him, Henry? I think he’s on our side — or at least I hope he is. I wonder how long it will take him to ‘consider the matter.’”

He hadn’t meant another two weeks, had he? No, she didn’t think he would leave her hanging that long. She ran her finger across her lips, still tender from the intensity of his kiss, and found herself smiling. When he returned, she had every intention of showing him that it hadn’t just been a distraction.

“In the meantime, I suppose I better get back to work. Do you want to come outside with me now?”

It was a rhetorical question, of course, but Henry scrambled up her arm to his usual place on her shoulder as she went to get her breathing mask.

The pale Martian sunlight was unusually warm for this late in the year, and Henry stretched out a small boulder, soaking up the rays. She noticed again how easily he blended in with his environment. As far as she could tell, he wasn’t a chameleon. He didn’t change color completely to match his surroundings, but the mottled shades of his scales varied from time to time, at least enough to help him blend into a surprising variety of backgrounds.

“Are you really a Martian, Henry?”

Levi seemed convinced that his species wouldn’t have been able to evade detection, but there still so much about Mars that was unknown and unexplored.

Species. The word suddenly made her hesitate as she looked over at her small companion. Was she being selfish by keeping him here? Did he have a family — a mother? Her throat threatened to close again, but she pushed the sadness away. *My mother would have liked Henry,* she thought and the thought gave her comfort.

Besides, it wasn’t as if she were holding Henry prisoner. Although he couldn’t operate the airlock, she never tried to restrain him when they were outside. In fact, the first time she brought him back outside, she’d half expected him to scurry

away. Instead, he'd settled down, just as he had now, watching as she went about her tasks. If he did have a family, he showed no sign of anxiety about returning to them. Hoping she wasn't just trying to convince herself, she set to work.

Work occupied her as it always did throughout the long day, but whether she was planting lichen or feeding the chickens or gathering greens, her thoughts kept returning to Levi and to their kiss. It wasn't the first time she'd been kissed but it was certainly the best, and the feelings he'd aroused in her body were definitely new.

Her mother had been obsessed with migrating to Mars and from the time Ellie was a little girl, she had shared that enthusiasm with her. Perhaps as a result of that, she'd never really been interested in pursuing a relationship with anyone back on Earth, convinced that she would be leaving the planet behind. In addition, her mother hadn't encouraged her to date. Although she hadn't exactly forbidden it, she'd always made it seem... unnecessary.

Instead, Ellie had spent her life working and studying and planning for their eventual future. She couldn't regret that even now, but it had certainly left her with a lack of experience when it came to the opposite sex.

When she went to bed that night, she found herself unusually restless, despite her usual exhaustion at the end of the day. Her nipples felt swollen and sensitive and there was a low throbbing ache between her thighs. She slowly brushed a hand across her aching nipples and shuddered at the resulting spike of pleasure. Her other hand slipped lower, delving between her thighs.

Her fingers slid easily between her damp folds and she shuddered again as she brushed a finger over the swollen nub of her clit, imagining that it was Levi's hand touching her. She was quite sure that even a single one of his fingers was probably twice as large as hers, so she added another finger, testing the thickness as she slipped them between her legs. Oh yes, that was even better. How much better would it feel if he were touching her? Would he watch her with that intense grey gaze as his thick fingers explored?

She rubbed harder, imagining him bending over her, perhaps even using his mouth on the aching peaks of her breasts. The hand still on her breast tugged on her nipple, a line of excitement streaking straight to her clit and sending a shockwave of short intense pleasure washing over her. Her pussy clenched, feeling strangely empty, and then her body relaxed.

That had been... unexpected. She was usually too tired and too preoccupied at the end of the day to have any interest in attending to any needs other than food and sleep. Even her previous dreams about Levi had been primarily platonic, but something had shifted now that she'd kissed him...

A previously dormant part of her was definitely waking up, she thought, then smiled as the thought was followed by a yawn. She snuggled down under the covers as Henry gave a small purring chirp.

Her dreams that night were definitely not platonic and she awoke feeling achy and aroused. She was tempted to explore that arousal more in the shower but since she hoped that Levi would be coming back today, she hurried through it instead. Despite her hurry, she was just pulling her robe back on when there was a knock on the inner door of the airlock.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SUN WAS STILL below the horizon as Levi rode back towards Ellie's homestead the next day. After he'd left her the previous day, he'd gone straight to Sam's home. Former Major Sam Wilson, nicknamed the Judge, had operated as de facto law enforcement for the territory until he had limited his duties in order to spend more time with his human wife. Not only did Sam have an indisputable reputation for integrity, Levi had served under him back on Earth and knew that he would understand Levi's concerns.

He found Sam in the vehicle shed outside his habitat, working on one of the big six-wheeled rovers used for transportation across the rough surface, but he looked up and nodded as Levi dismounted. As soon as he released Blaze, the horse wandered over to join Blackie, Sam's horse, and the two animals touched noses. He shook his head ruefully, remembering Ellie's insistence that the cybernetic horse was alive.

The two horses remained at the edge of the plateau where the habitat was located. Because Sam's wife was a scientist, he didn't need land for homesteading and instead had chosen this elevated position looking out over the valley floor. After Levi's years in the military, he understood the desire for a defensive position, even though the only predators on Mars were human. He appreciated the fact that Ellie had also chosen a slightly elevated position for her habitat, although he didn't believe her intentions had been for defense.

He thought that Ellie would appreciate other aspects of the well-established residence. In addition to the central living

dome, there were workspaces for both Addie and Sam. They had even added separate bedrooms for themselves and their daughter. A daughter. Had Ellie considered having a child one day? The thought of her lush body swollen with child - with *his* child - sent most of the blood in his body rushing to his cock, despite the efforts of his nanites to control it.

I'm too old for such things, he told himself as firmly as possible, and went to join Sam. After one penetrating look at his face, the other male returned to his task.

“What can I do for you, L-485?”

“I need to ask your advice.”

Uncertain of how to begin, he paced to the end of the shed and back. He didn't want to betray Ellie's trust, but what if the tiny creature was dangerous? Or what if there was more at stake than just an unexpected visitor?

“There have never been any signs of life on Mars, have there?” he asked at last.

“We have never discovered any,” Sam said slowly, but there was something in his voice that made Levi frown at him.

“Is there something you're not telling me?”

“My wife believes it is possible that there was a civilization here, even a quite advanced civilization, that did not leave any traces of its existence.”

“How would that be possible?”

“Her theory is that they only manipulated natural materials and those eventually returned to their original components — like pottery crumbling back into dust.”

“But it's just a theory?”

“Yes.”

Again there was an odd note in Sam's voice, but he didn't elaborate. Still, even if there had been life on Mars in the very distant past, he couldn't see how it would relate to Henry. He turned to the more likely possibility.

“Do you think GenCon is attempting to create a species capable of surviving on Mars?”

Sam frowned.

“Creating? Are you referring to the fact that they’ve been making genetic alterations to the chickens and goats to improve their chances of survival here?”

“Not exactly.” He paced again. “Those are both native Earth animals with a practical use. I meant something more... unusual.”

“L-485 -”

“Levi,” he interrupted, remembering how pleasant it had been to hear his name after all these years.

“Levi. I have the distinct impression that you have a very specific question but you don’t want to ask me directly.” A flash of humor crossed the stern face. “I should let my wife drag it out of you.”

He sighed and hunched down next to Sam.

“This may involve GenCon,” he warned.

“I have no allegiance to them — and even less trust.”

“There is a... settler in my territory who discovered a small lizard living in her lichen. It almost seems to be native to the planet, but everything I know leads me to believe that’s impossible. And the only alternative...”

“Is a GenCon experiment.” Sam nodded, then shot him another quick look. “A female settler by any chance?”

“Yes,” he said evenly, glad that his nanites would not permit him to show embarrassment.

“Then I suppose she is already protective of this small creature.”

Levi couldn’t hide his surprise, and Sam gave him a wry smile. “I have a wife and a daughter — I am quite familiar with their protective instincts towards anything they perceive as helpless.”

“But what if it’s not helpless? What if it could endanger her in some way despite its size?”

Sam rocked back on his heels, nodding thoughtfully.

“A lizard you say?”

“Yes, with wings.”

That odd expression crossed the other male’s face again.

“My wife believes that the lighter gravity on Mars may have encouraged winged... creatures.”

Levi waited, but Sam didn’t add anything else.

“Do you think I should report it to GenCon?” he asked tentatively, relieved when Sam immediately shook his head.

He did not want to disappoint Ellie, but more than that, when she had mentioned the possibility of the corporate scientists experimenting on Henry, he’d felt a pang of sympathy. Even though he had chosen to become a cyborg, he still remembered the horrifying feeling of being restrained on the lab table as the doctors began the transformation. His volunteer status made no difference — once they began their work, he was no longer human to them, just another experiment. How much worse would it be for a small, defenseless animal?

“But what if he turns out to be dangerous in some way? I wouldn’t want to take any chances with Ellie’s safety.”

Once again Sam gave him a penetrating look, but didn’t ask any questions. Instead, he nodded thoughtfully.

“My wife has several scanners in her equipment. You could use one of them to examine him — it might also help to determine his origin. If you would permit it, I’m sure she would also be interested in seeing the results.”

“I have no objection to her seeing them, but would she be required to share the results with GenCon?”

Sam grinned and shook his head.

“They have a mutual understanding. Since she is more valuable to them than they are to her, she has a wide degree of

freedom.”

“Good. In that case, it would be helpful — and I’d like to have some answers as well.”

Sam had given him the scanner and sent him on his way. Even though he’d been tempted to return to Ellie immediately, night was falling and most of the settlers kept early hours. She might already be in that cozy nest of a bed. His cock jerked at the image. What would it be like to join her there, to kiss her again and hold her body against his?

He was still torn about the kiss. He wanted to believe that her response had been genuine. It had certainly felt real at the time — but why would a young, beautiful human be interested in him?

Maybe she’s just lonely. Although, she certainly didn’t have to be. As he’d warned her on many occasions, the small number of women on Mars were highly valued. He’d made it quite clear to the men in his territory that she was under his protection and that she would have to initiate any relationship. So far, she’d made no attempt to find companionship amongst the other settlers.

Perhaps she doesn’t want a permanent companion. If that were true and she’d assumed any... involvement between them would be temporary, was he prepared to accept it? He’d never had any inclination for short-term relationships. Even back on Earth when so many soldiers indulged in casual liaisons, they had never appealed to him.

He sighed. This was all useless speculation, especially since he was still not convinced that she was attracted to him. Although when he’d thought about their kiss as he rode away, he was sure he had detected the sweet scent of her arousal. Enthusiasm might be faked, but her body’s reaction could not be. Perhaps they could... discuss the matter further when he returned.

But not tonight. He realized that while he’d been debating the matter, Blaze had already started heading towards Ellie’s claim. He shook his head and guided the horse back towards ranger headquarters instead. Due to his cybernetic

enhancements, he didn't really need to sleep, but most of the cyborgs continued to observe some type of rest state during the night hours. However, he simply tossed restlessly on his bunk before getting up as soon as the sky lightened, frustrated and aroused.

Despite the early hour, the lights were already on in her habitat when he arrived. *At least I won't be disturbing her in her bed.*

Instead, it was worse — or better, depending on how you looked at it. When he knocked on the inner door of the airlock, she opened it dressed in a heavy silk brocade robe in a shade of blue that brought out the color of her eyes. The light brown hair that was usually confined in a tight braid was piled loosely on top of her head, damp tendrils curling around her fragile neck, and her skin flushed and glowing. All of the efforts he'd made on the ride here to control his erection were in vain. He was once again aching hard and ready.

"I'm glad you're back," she said breathlessly. "What did you decide?"

He forced his attention away from the open neck of her robe and sighed.

"I have decided that reporting Henry to GenCon may not be the best solution."

"Thank you so much." She stepped closer, putting her hands on his arm as she smiled up at him. "I really appreciate that."

Does she appreciate it enough to kiss me again? He pushed the errant thought aside.

"But I do have one condition," he added, and held out the scanner. "I want to scan him and confirm that he's not dangerous."

"Of course he's not dangerous," she said indignantly, her pretty face turning pink.

"Then you have nothing to worry about. This will only confirm that."

“It’s not going to hurt him, is it?”

“No, it’s just like the scan you had during your medical exam for the voyage.”

To his surprise, she bit her lip, an uncertain look on her face and his heart raced, despite the attempts of his nanites to calm it.

“What is it, Ellie? Was there something wrong with your scan?”

CHAPTER SIX

“THERE WASN’T ANYTHING WRONG,” Ellie said quickly. “I just didn’t have a scan.”

“Why not? It’s a standard procedure.”

Damn. She’d been braced for the question when she first arrived on Mars, but no one had ever asked, and she was no longer prepared.

“No special reason — I just didn’t have one. Would you, um, like some tea?” she asked nervously, trying to take a step back.

He prevented her from moving away by taking her hand in his much larger one, rough fingers curling gently but inescapably around hers.

“What’s wrong? Tell me,” he ordered.

She tried to think of the convenient stories she’d developed, but all of them escaped her and besides, she didn’t want to lie to him.

“I didn’t have a medical exam,” she burst out. “My passage was arranged for me.”

“Arranged? Who arranged it?”

This was the worst part. She dropped her eyes, unable to look at him as she answered.

“Apparently, he was my father.”

She hadn’t even known he existed until a week after her mother’s funeral. She’d been sitting alone in their apartment, still in a state of shock from her mother’s unexpected death. A

key suddenly turned in the lock and a distinguished-looking man entered. He gave her a quick, assessing glance from cold blue eyes.

“Do not be alarmed,” he said calmly, but she’d been too sad and numb to be frightened. She simply stared at him.

“You are Eleanor, are you not?” he asked.

“My name is Ellie.”

He frowned. “I was told it was Eleanor.”

“That’s the name on my birth certificate, but everyone calls me Ellie.”

“I see.”

They stared at each other for a moment longer and although she was sure she had never seen him before, she suddenly had the feeling that there was something vaguely familiar about him. Curiosity finally penetrated her grief enough for her to ask the question she should have asked immediately.

“Who are you? And what are you doing in our apartment?”

He cleared his throat, but it didn’t seem to be a nervous gesture, more as if he were debating what to say.

“Technically, the apartment belongs to me. I arranged for you and your mother to live here.”

“I don’t understand.”

They had lived in the small unit since she was a baby. It was one of the things her mother used to rhapsodize about — the unlimited space that would be available to them on Mars. The memory brought tears to her eyes and the man took a quick step back.

“There is no need for that. You are, of course, welcome to remain here. Unless... unless you still wish to settle on Mars?”

How would he possibly have known about that, she wondered dully, but she only shrugged.

“Our application was for two people. I will have to go through the entire application process again.”

“Is that what you wish to do?”

She tried to think past the grief. The one thing of which she was sure was that her mother would still want her to go.

“Yes,” she said, surprising herself with the firmness of her answer. “Yes, I would still like to go.”

Did he look relieved? It was hard to tell given his expressionless face, but she thought that he did.

“Then I will make it happen. I believe you should be able to leave on your originally scheduled voyage.”

“How?” The application process was long and complex and the departure windows for the voyages were very narrow.

He raised an arrogant brow. “I have useful acquaintances.”

She should have let it go at that, but she couldn't.

“Why? Why are you doing this for me?”

He hesitated, looking at her, and she had the distinct impression that he was deciding whether or not to tell her the truth, but in the end he did.

“Because you are my daughter.”

Her mouth dropped open, suddenly realizing why those blue eyes looked so familiar. They were the same ones that met hers in the mirror every morning.

“You can't be,” she protested anyway. “My mother told me my father was dead.”

Why would her mother have lied to her? The sense of betrayal sweeping over her was almost as painful as the sense of loss.

“That was our agreement. We have been... acquainted for a long time. When she decided she wanted to have a child, I agreed. I even arranged for a child-bearing license so you would have legal status. However, there was no room in my life for a child nor was I willing to act as a father.”

The fact that he hadn't wanted her stung, despite her already overwhelming grief, but she did her best to hide it.

"I see," she said as calmly as possible.

"Your mother agreed to the terms." He didn't even sound defensive. "And of course, I provided for both of you."

Some odd little pieces of their lives suddenly sprang into place — such as how they could afford the apartment. Given the housing crisis on Earth, the two tiny bedrooms made it extraordinarily valuable despite its diminutive size, and her mother only worked part-time as a medical transcriptionist. Or had that been true?

"Did my mother work for you?" she demanded, and he looked slightly pained.

"I would not have put it in those terms. We had an arrangement — a mutually agreeable arrangement."

"What kind of arrangement?"

"I don't believe I intend to discuss that with you," he said calmly.

She supposed it wasn't really necessary. Her mother had been a very pretty woman. She looked at the stranger standing so arrogantly in what had been her home and knew that despite their biological tie, they had no relationship. There was nothing to keep her here on Earth.

"Then I'll take the trip to Mars," she said, and he nodded.

"I will notify you about the arrangements." He hesitated for a moment longer, but she could see that he had already reached the same conclusion that she had.

"Goodbye, Eleanor," he said, and left.

She had never seen him again, but he had kept his promise. The next day she'd received all of the paperwork to complete the voyage as they had originally planned, bypassing the entire lengthy official process. He'd been generous as well, arranging for additional supplies to be provided for her once she arrived, including the small flock of chickens and their habitat. He had also deposited a large supply of credits in her account,

although she rarely touched them. Even though she had accepted the supplies, it seemed wrong to take money from a man she didn't know, even if they were related.

She'd been so lost in her memories, she'd forgotten that Levi was still standing there patiently holding her hand until he gave it a gentle squeeze.

She sighed. "It turns out I had a father I never knew I had. My mother kept it a secret from me my whole life, even though she continued to see him."

Levi's face darkened.

"I don't understand how any man could not acknowledge his own child."

"Apparently he wanted it that way." She sighed again. "And I think perhaps my mother did as well."

She had thought about it a lot on the long voyage to Mars, trying to understand why her mother had kept the secret. Despite her best attempts to move past it, the sense of betrayal still lingered. Eventually she'd decided that the arrangement had probably suited her mother just as well as it had suited him. Her mother had created a cozy little world for the two of them, and Ellie didn't think she'd wanted anyone else to be part of it.

The fact that her mother had continued to see her father surprised her more, but apparently her mother had enjoyed seeing him. Despite her subtle attempts to discourage Ellie from having a relationship with a man, she'd always come home from her "job" smiling and happy. But whatever the reasons, it didn't change the facts of her own life, and she lifted her chin defiantly.

"In other words, I'm the illegitimate daughter of a man who didn't want me."

Levi shook his head, his hand tightening around hers.

"I'm very sorry, sweetheart. I find such behavior incomprehensible. I was brought up in one of the state-run orphanages, and I always dreamed of having a family. I would never deny my child."

His child. Her breath caught as she suddenly envisioned sharing a child with him. She was quite certain he would be a wonderful father.

“Now, of course, it’s too late,” he added.

Was it? Was there a reason why a cyborg couldn’t have a child? Before she could ask, he nodded thoughtfully.

“I think perhaps that is why I joined the military as soon as I was eligible — to find some type of family bond.”

“I understand,” she said softly. “And I guess now you have that with the other rangers?”

He looked surprised, then nodded thoughtfully.

“I suppose that’s true, although we were certainly never encouraged to think of ourselves as having those types of emotions.”

She turned her hand in his, not in an attempt to get free, but to clasp his and tug him gently closer. “I told you before. As far as I’m concerned, you’re still a man.”

And then she went up on tiptoes and kissed him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHATEVER GOOD INTENTIONS Levi might have had, they went flying out the window as soon as Ellie kissed him again. He groaned and slid his hand around that bare, tempting neck, holding her in place for his kiss. She returned it as enthusiastically as she had the previous day, her soft curves molding against him as she pressed closer.

His nanites raced to calm his system, but it was no use. His cock was once again stiff and aching, his heart racing, and his skin on fire with longing.

Even with her robe and his shirt between them, he could feel the hard little points of her breasts against his chest. Unable to resist, he cupped the lush mound. When he stroked his thumb across the stiff little peak, she gasped into his mouth. He half expected her to pull back, but she made an eager noise and pushed against his hand, seeking more.

He obliged, tightening his grip around the impudent nub. Her body quivered in his arms as she gasped again and the sweet scent of her arousal filled his head. Her fingers dug into his shoulders eagerly, urging him on. He slipped his hand beneath the silky robe to the even silkier skin beneath, the warmth of her breast filling his palm. She moaned, and he was on the point of tearing off the robe and carrying her to her tempting nest of a bed when a loud trill filled the room.

Startled, he jerked his head up and found Henry staring at him from the kitchen area. He could have sworn the lizard was giving him a disapproving look but even if he was simply projecting his own feelings onto him, the interruption reminded him of who — of *what* — he was and he drew back.

“I am not a man,” he said gruffly. “You should find a human male.”

Her look of dazed pleasure turned into a skeptical frown.

“You mean one like the man who fathered me? Content to simply have a limited sexual arrangement with a woman for more than twenty years without making her part of his life?”

How could any man be satisfied with that? He was afraid that if he ever had Ellie in his bed, he would never be able to let her go.

“Not all men are like that.”

Her frown didn't disappear, and once again he found himself wanting to smooth it away.

“I don't care. I'm not interested in anyone else — I mean, anyone.”

A rush of warmth filled him at her words, but then she crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at him. “And if it bothers you so much, you can leave anytime.”

“I am not leaving,” he growled, then hastily amended his words. “*Yet*. I still need to scan that lizard.”

She lifted her chin and for a moment he thought she was going to argue with him. Instead, she sighed and held out her hand.

“Come here, Henry.”

The tiny creature extended its wings and glided across the room to land in her palm, still giving him that disapproving look.

“Can I hold him while you do the scan?” she asked.

“Yes. Try and keep him still.”

She hummed softly to the lizard as he pulled out the scanner and ran it over him. It immediately pinged and told him to repeat the scan. The second time, it beeped several times but eventually displayed the results.

“Well. What does it say?” she asked impatiently as he stared at the information.

“He does not appear to be either poisonous or venomous,” he said slowly.

“I told you he wasn’t dangerous,” she said triumphantly.

“It appears you’re correct.” He studied the results again, then added reluctantly, “Your other theory may be correct as well.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean that he belongs on Mars?”

“It’s possible,” he admitted. “The pouch beneath his neck is used to absorb additional oxygen from the atmosphere, and he has two hearts. The scanner did not identify any Earth creatures with those specific features.”

“I knew it! You’re my little Martian, aren’t you, Henry?”

She kissed the top of the small creature’s head and it gave a purring chirp. Levi did his best to ignore a ridiculous spike of jealousy — he was the one who had brought their kisses to an end after all — and tried to decide if there were any other possible explanations for the results.

He still couldn’t eliminate the possibility that GenCon was working on adaptations to support human life. Because of their nanites, the cyborgs could thrive on Mars without additional assistance, but because they weren’t recognized as human by Earth Government, they didn’t possess the same rights as humans. They weren’t allowed to own property or marry, although Sam and several other rangers had ignored that last prohibition. Sam certainly didn’t seem to care that his marriage was not technically legal. What would it be like to claim Ellie as his wife?

He pushed that thought aside as well, despite the surge of longing, still considering GenCon. If they could find a way to give humans the same ability to survive as the cyborgs — without causing them to lose their rights — the number of willing settlers would increase exponentially. Unfortunately, he just didn’t have the scientific background to know if it were possible.

“If you don’t object, I would like to share the results with Sam’s wife, Addie.”

“Why?”

“She’s a scientist — and before you ask, yes, she does work with GenCon but she functions independently. She and Sam have both had... negative experiences with them and I don’t believe she would ever betray your secret.”

She frowned, stroking Henry’s small back, then nodded.

“I suppose that’s all right. Maybe she can help figure out where he came from, and if he’s okay living here with me.”

How could he not be? He couldn’t imagine a more desirable existence, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

“Very well. I’ll return the scanner to her now.”

Despite his words, he didn’t move, still looking down at her. The neck of her robe had parted when he slid his hand beneath it and the shadowy valley of her cleavage was an almost unbearable temptation. His cock jerked, pressing so tightly against his pants that it felt as if it would force its way free.

“I have to go,” he said abruptly and turned for the door.

She immediately put her hand on his arm, the delicate touch impossible to resist.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “Thank you for listening to me and for not betraying Henry.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Are you going to come back — I mean, is it going to be two weeks before I see you again?”

“I...”

He knew he should say yes but the words didn’t want to come out.

“I just thought that if you weren’t busy, maybe you could come back for supper tonight?”

She gave him a hopeful look from those big blue eyes, but he hardened his heart and opened his mouth to refuse.

“I could,” he said instead, and she beamed up at him.

“That’s wonderful. Just come back whenever you’re finished with your work.”

He was undoubtedly a fool, but that didn’t stop him from grinning triumphantly as he left.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELLIE SHOOK her head as she watched Levi mount Blaze in one smooth motion, muscles rippling. She could hardly wait until tonight — to share a meal with him, and perhaps more. Why did he find it so hard to believe that she was genuinely attracted to him? More attracted than she'd ever been to anyone else and for much more than just that big, powerful body.

She suspected that part of it was his protective nature. Ever since that first time he'd shown up and helped her assemble the dome, she'd known that he was looking out for her. Even between his visits, she'd caught sight of him on the ridge behind her claim. Her mother had wrapped her in a similar blanket of protection, although Levi was more willing to let her act independently.

She also couldn't imagine him lying to her — he was far too direct. As much as she loved her mother, and even though she thought she understood why her mother might have chosen to keep secrets from her, the sense of betrayal hadn't disappeared completely. She didn't believe Levi would ever betray her.

Pushing aside thoughts of the past, she watched him ride away.

“We're having company for dinner,” she told Henry. “Won't that be nice?”

He gave a non-committal chirp and she laughed. He had gotten used to having her full attention.

Deciding to take a break from outside chores for the day, she focused on her habitat, cleaning and polishing her admittedly minimal environment until it shone. She even tidied the bed and made it neatly, trying not to think too hard about why she was doing that.

She set a mushroom stew simmering on the small stove, then made a salad with fresh greens and two precious tomatoes. There was very little she could do about her own appearance, but she took another shower, then smoothed lotion over every inch of her skin, doing her best to ignore the arousal already simmering through her body. She left her hair down, simply tying it back with a blue ribbon, and put on her one dress.

Her preparations were finished by midafternoon, and she gave Henry a rueful smile.

“Now what am I going to do?”

He glided over to her hand and tilted his head meaningfully. She laughed and stroked him.

“I’m not going to spend the rest of the afternoon petting you. Maybe I’ll read instead.”

She lifted him up to her shoulder as she went to get her tablet. But even though the time to read was a precious gift, she couldn’t concentrate. Her eyes kept going to the windows, waiting for Levi to appear, even though she didn’t expect him until closer to dark. But the next time she looked up, he was riding towards her.

As soon as he dismounted, she rushed over to the inner door of the airlock, waiting impatiently as it cycled. The door opened and he stepped through, filling the room with his presence, and she felt suddenly, ridiculously shy, automatically dropping her eyes.

“You look... nice,” he said gruffly, but when she peeked up at him, the hungry look was back in his eyes.

The look reassured her and she smiled up at him.

“So do you,” she said truthfully.

He was still dressed all in black, but his clothes looked crisp and new. His shirt hugged those broad shoulders and his pants clung lovingly to thick thighs — and the thick ridge between them. *Oh my.* She quickly snatched her gaze away from that very evident erection as he held out a carefully wrapped package.

“This is for you.”

“You didn’t have to -”

“I wanted to.”

Cheeks warm with pleasure, she carefully unwrapped the package and found a small flowering plant, its heady scent filling the room.

“Oh, it’s beautiful. And it smells so good. Thank you.”

She could have sworn the skin across his cheekbones darkened as he gestured around her living space.

“You seem to like plants since you have them -” He came to an abrupt halt. “You made your bed.”

Now it was her turn to blush.

“Yes. I know it’s usually a mess.”

“I like it that way. It’s like your nest.” His hand touched her cheek as it had done earlier. “Little bird.”

Her breath caught at the warmth on his face. She very carefully put the plant on the table, then turned back to him, sliding her hands up that broad chest to curl around his neck.

“Kiss me. Please.”

This time she didn’t tug his head down but waited as patiently as possible. She could see the indecision on his face.

“I shouldn’t.” He sounded more as if he were trying to convince himself rather than her.

“Why not?”

“I’m a cyborg, remember?”

“And I told you I didn’t care.”

“I’m also too old for you.” He fingered the ribbon in her hair. “You’re so young and pretty.”

“Mmm. Maybe that just means I need someone older. To protect me.” Her voice dropped to a husky whisper that she didn’t recognize. “To guide me.”

The heat in his eyes intensified.

“Guide you?”

“Through all the things I haven’t experienced.”

Their bodies were close enough that she actually felt his cock jerk at her words, and she pressed even closer. His face was so tortured that she almost felt sorry for him, but then he groaned and kissed her, and her sympathy vanished in a haze of delight.

His mouth was hard, demanding, and she melted into it, meeting him eagerly. His hand slid down to her ass and he lifted her easily into his arms, bringing her face up to his for more of those hot, hungry kisses. Her legs parted automatically to circle his waist and she sighed with pleasure as her swollen clit rubbed against the ridged muscles of his abdomen. She wiggled against him, trying to relieve the throbbing ache, and he helped her, the big hand on her ass rocking her against his body until another one of those short, sharp bursts of pleasure rushed over her.

“Responsive little bird,” he murmured approvingly as he finally raised his head.

She knew she was blushing, but she didn’t care, the ache already beginning to return.

“More, please.”

“I thought we were going to have dinner.”

It was a half-hearted protest at best, and she grinned at him.

“Later. Now take me to my — what did you call it? Oh yes, my nest.”

“Are you sure? I will not take this... lightly.”

“Good. Neither will I.” She leaned closer and brushed a quick, gentle kiss against that hard mouth. “I know what I’m doing, Levi. I want this. I want you.”

He shuddered, then quickly carried her across the room to the bed. Henry suddenly trilled again, but she wagged her finger at him over Levi’s shoulder.

“Hush now. I’m fine.”

He tilted his head, then hopped up into her new plant and settled down amidst the branches.

“Only fine, little bird?” Levi murmured provocatively as he placed her on her feet next to the bed.

Before she could respond, he lifted her dress up over her head, leaving her in her plain white bra and panties. They were nothing special but he didn’t seem to care, his gaze warm and appreciative.

“You are so beautiful.”

His rough finger traced the upper swell of her breasts above the edge of her bra and she shivered with anticipation. He circled a pebbled nipple, making her clit pulse with excitement, and she reached back impatiently and unhooked her bra. His big, warm hands briefly covered her breasts before he shocked her by lifting her again, higher this time, high enough to fasten a hot wet mouth over a throbbing nipple. Her back arched as he sucked hard, each pull of his mouth throbbing in her swollen clit.

She was on the verge of another climax when he pulled free and put her back on her feet, groaning as he looked down at her now red and distended nipples.

“Was I too rough? I am having a hard time remaining in control.”

“Not at all.” Her nipples ached, but from arousal not pain. “And you don’t need to be in control.”

“I do. You placed your trust in me.”

“And you’re doing exactly what I want,” she said firmly. “But it’s your turn to take off your clothes.”

He hesitated for a second and she was afraid that his overdeveloped conscience would object, but then he toed off his boots, stripped off his shirt, and discarded his pants. She cast a brief glance at that broad, impressive chest before her gaze dropped to his cock and her mouth went dry. Huge and swollen, the wide head dark red and already gleaming.

She automatically reached for him, but her fingers couldn't even close around the thick shaft. He didn't seem to mind, his hand tightening over hers as he urged her to stroke him. His skin was surprisingly smooth, almost silky beneath her touch despite the rigid shaft and she hummed appreciatively. Her thumb slipped over the head, feeling the slickness coating it, and he groaned again. This time it was appreciation rather than regret.

“You are not helping my control, little bird.”

“Good. Can I... taste you?”

His cock jerked beneath her hand, but he shook his head.

“Later.”

He picked her up again, but this time he placed her gently on the bed, stripping away her panties and leaving her completely naked and exposed to his avid glance.

“We'll take this slowly,” he promised as he came down over her.

But she didn't want slow and careful. She wanted passionate and uncontrolled. She squirmed beneath him, lifting her legs to circle his hips. For one glorious second his huge cock pressed between her legs before he pulled back.

“Slowly,” he repeated, his voice a hoarse growl, and kissed her before she could object.

She loved his kisses, but she loved it even more when his hand slid down between her legs the way she had envisioned previously, his fingers as thick and exciting as she had anticipated. They slid with almost embarrassing ease through her drenched folds as he growled again.

“You're very wet.”

“And very ready. Please, Levi.”

He hesitated for the briefest second, then finally slid the thick width of his cock between her legs, but not to enter her. Instead, he rubbed slowly back and forth across her clit. Each time the broad head passed over her clit it seemed to vibrate, adding to the sensations rocketing through her. Her climax swept over her, not quickly this time, but in a long wave of pleasure. As she cried out his name, he lifted her hips and slid into her with one long, hard stroke.

Her body exploded again in a confusing mixture of pleasure tinged with pain - shocked, overwhelmed, and completely satisfied.

CHAPTER NINE

MINE!

Triumph roared through Levi as Ellie's tight little channel convulsed around him, squeezing him almost to the point of pain. He forced himself to still, to wait until her eyes opened, suspiciously bright.

"I'm sorry. I -"

"Don't you dare apologize." She bit her lip, then wiggled experimentally, the slight movement testing his control. "I feel so... full."

"You are very small."

Her lips curved.

"And you are not."

Unable to resist, he bent his head and kissed her. She gasped as the movement changed the angle of his cock, and then her hips lifted towards his, just a fraction, but it was enough. His cock jerked forwards as he buried himself an impossible inch deeper into the hot fist of her sweet little cunt. Her channel fluttered wildly around him and he was lost, thrusting mindlessly as fire streaked down his spine and his body exploded in long, endless waves of heat. When they finally ceased, leaving him as weak and helpless as a full human male, he was immediately horrified at his loss of control.

"Ellie, are you all right? Was I too rough?" he asked anxiously.

She sighed dreamily as her eyes fluttered open.

“That was amazing. I had no idea what I was missing.” She smiled up at him. “But then, I don’t think it would have been the same with anyone else.”

He kissed her, slowly and gently, then carefully withdrew before his cock escaped his control again. Her breath caught as he moved and a new wave of remorse swept over him at the sight of the red, swollen folds, but the contentment on her face couldn’t be denied. He stood, intending to fetch a cool cloth, and she suddenly gasped.

“Levi — your back.”

Fuck. In his desire to tend to her, he had forgotten that he had removed his shirt and his scars would be visible.

“My spine was damaged. They replaced it with a cybernetic one.”

She sat up, her small fingers tracing along the metal ridge that ran down the center of his back.

“Did it hurt?”

“It’s difficult to describe,” he said truthfully, but vaguely. He suspected the details would upset her.

His spinal injury had left him completely numb, and the burning heat as the nanites began to heal him was simultaneously a fiery agony and a relief. He’d been restrained on the lab table, helpless to do anything but endure, but the knowledge of what he was gaining had helped. He hadn’t been as conscious of what he would lose, of what ten years on a cold, dark Mars would do to shut off his emotions. Emotions that Ellie had reawakened.

“I’ll be right back,” he said quickly, escaping before she could ask for any details.

When he returned and gently parted her legs to cleanse her, she blushed, looking impossibly innocent, but his guilt had eased with her obvious pleasure and satisfaction.

“You don’t have to do that,” she protested weakly.

“I enjoy tending to you, little bird.”

Her color deepened, but she didn't object as he gently wiped away the glistening traces of his seed from her reddened flesh. Useless seed thanks to Earth Government sterilizing all of the cyborgs. Of course, the rangers had since discovered that their nanites could heal that process as well. Once again the thought of her carrying his child made his cock stiffen, but he did his best to ignore it as he finished cleansing her.

She smiled up at him, as flushed and sleepy in her tempting nest of a bed as he'd imagined, and held out her hand.

"Come back to bed."

He obeyed willingly and she snuggled against him with a contented sigh, her soft body fitting perfectly against his side as if she'd always belonged there.

She does belong with me. How am I ever going to let her go?

"Levi, is something wrong?"

"Just thinking."

"Well, stop." She gave him chest an admonitory pat. "Let's just enjoy the moment."

He wasn't sure the future could be so easily dismissed, but he nodded and commanded his nanites to relax his muscles. Her hand ran lazily up and down his chest, but despite her words, she also seemed to be in a thoughtful mood.

"Do you miss Earth?" she suddenly asked.

"Not really. I told you that I didn't have any family, and while there is a bond between soldiers I was never really close to anyone in particular." He had refrained from casual friendships, just as he had refrained from casual relationships. "What about you?"

She shrugged, the movement causing her breasts to rub enticingly against his side.

"I miss some things — like being able to walk outside without a face mask. But then I never had any reason to go anywhere other than first to school and then to work. I didn't

really have any close friendships either, other than with my mother.”

Her voice quivered on the last word and he pulled her closer.

“What happened to her?”

“A stupid accident — one of those old transit trains went off the rails and all of the passengers were killed.”

It wasn't the first time he'd heard of such an incident. The old systems were pushed far beyond their limits in a vain attempt to keep up with the ever-increasing population. Despite everything Earth Government had tried to do to stop it, there were simply too many people on Earth.

“I'm so sorry, little bird. It must have been hard to lose someone you loved so much so suddenly.”

“We were so close — or at least I thought we were until I found out about my father.”

The hurt on her face made his chest ache, but then she gave him a rueful smile.

“Maybe I was just naive. It didn't occur to me that a woman — even a mother — might want to have a relationship with a man as well as a relationship with her child. But then I didn't know how satisfying it would be...”

Her words echoed in his head as her hand traveled down to his cock. She thought that they had a relationship? Did that mean he could spend the night? What about the next day, and the next?

His thoughts were interrupted by the soft slide of her hand along his shaft as she leaned closer, studying his once again fully erect cock.

“Earlier, when you were... stroking me.” Her cheeks had turned that pretty shade of pink again. “It felt like you vibrated.”

“I did.” Her eyes widened as he sent another vibration through his cock, and he smiled. “It's one of the benefits of

being a cyborg — I have control over the various parts of my body.”

Although she certainly tested the limits of his control.

“I see.”

She hummed thoughtfully as she leaned even closer and the warmth of her breath on the damp head of his cock made him shudder.

“You know — you said I could taste you later.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she looked up at him. “It’s later.”

“You haven’t had dinner yet.”

“Later,” she teased, and then her hot little mouth closed over the head of his cock.

She had clearly never done this before, but it didn’t matter. She was so sweetly enthusiastic, her mouth so warm and willing, that she drew a climax from him far too quickly. Even as his hips jerked, his seed flooding into her eager mouth, he knew he needed more. As soon as the rush of heat subsided, he flipped her onto her back and surged into her.

“Ohh!” She arched up helplessly to meet him as he thrust hard and fast, the vibrations in his cock sending her into another climax, the tight little pulses causing a second eruption before he collapsed down over her, his nanites struggling to slow his racing pulse.

“Wow,” she murmured sleepily. “I thought men needed more time to recover.”

“Men do. Cyborgs do not.”

He knew he sounded smug, but he loved the fact that he could satisfy her as often as he wished.

“Another benefit.” She yawned. “But you may have to wait a little longer for me to recover.”

“I will wait forever.”

The words slipped out unintentionally, but she only smiled and snuggled closer as she yawned again.

“I don’t think that’s necessary. I just need to rest for a few minutes.”

Her breathing slowed and a few seconds later, she slept. He rolled to his back and adjusted her more snugly against his chest as he stared up at the ceiling of the dome. A low chirp attracted his attention and he looked over to find Henry staring at him with that bright, inquisitive gaze.

“She’s safe with me,” he said quietly, then immediately felt ridiculous for talking to the lizard. But Henry dropped his head in response, his eyes closing as silence settled over the dome.

CHAPTER TEN

WAKING up on Mars was different when she woke up in Levi's arms, Ellie decided as the sky outside the dome began to lighten. She wasn't alone and she certainly wasn't cold. His big body radiated a comforting warmth and she nestled closer.

How am I going to go back to waking up by myself?

The future loomed before her, suddenly cold and empty, and she had the oddest desire to cry. She'd told him she wouldn't regret their time together and she didn't — she wouldn't have traded it for anything — but she hadn't realized how difficult it would be to watch him ride away. Would he return in another two weeks? And would he spend the night with her again?

If those biweekly visits were the only time she could spend with him, she would take them, but it would be a long two weeks between each one. Was that how her mother had felt, she wondered suddenly. Had she loved Ellie's father enough to settle for their limited arrangement? And yet, she'd been willing to leave him behind and journey to Mars. If she had been in a similar position, she didn't think she would have been able to leave Levi.

The thought made her hug his arm tighter against her. His breathing was still slow and even but she didn't think he was truly asleep. Based on what she had read, the cyborg rest state was not the same as human sleep.

"I know you're awake, little bird," his deep voice rumbled against her, proving her assumption.

“Yes I am,” she protested, quickly closing her eyes, and felt the vibration of his laugh.

He rolled her to her back and leaned over her, his big body a warm, comforting weight as he studied her face.

“How are you this morning?”

“I’m wonderful. How are you?”

He tilted his head as he considered the question, reminding her suddenly of Henry, and she bit back a smile.

“Happy,” he said at last. “And very satisfied.”

Despite his words, she could feel the thick ridge of his erection against her stomach. She started to arch against him, then winced as previously unused muscles protested. A shadow immediately crossed his face.

“I’m just a little stiff,” she said quickly, before he started feeling guilty again. “Nothing a hot shower won’t cure.”

“An excellent idea.”

He picked her up and started to carry her into the small bathroom, but she directed him into the garden dome instead. He looked around and nodded approvingly as he placed her beneath the showerhead.

“Your plants are thriving.”

“I enjoy working with them. More than with the chickens, although they’re very useful. I thought I might add a greenhouse in the spring.”

“You’re full of plans,” he murmured as he turned on the water and stepped under the shower with her.

Plans that she hoped would include him, but she didn’t quite have the courage to ask. Instead, she let herself enjoy the moment and the feel of his hands as he washed her slowly, thoroughly, and not entirely innocently. His careful strokes between her legs left her shuddering with pleasure, but despite his obvious erection, he simply finished washing her.

When he was done, he reached for the faucet but she held out her hand for the soap instead.

“My turn — and don’t tell me I don’t have to.”

His lips quirked and he obediently handed over the soap.

She started with his arms, admiring the way the hard muscles flexed beneath her touch, then ran her hands back over his shoulders as she moved behind him. The metal spine that laddered down his back formed a harsh contrast to the strong muscles surrounding it and she found herself tracing it gently with a soapy finger. He immediately stiffened.

“You don’t need to touch me there.”

“Why not? It’s part of you as well.”

“A non-human part.”

She sighed and stepped closer, sliding her hands around to his stomach as her breasts rubbed against his back.

“I know you’re no longer strictly flesh and blood, but you are still human, still a man.” Her hands slipped lower to glide along that big, ever-ready cock. “And as we discussed last night, the changes you’ve gone through have some definite advantages.”

He groaned, thrusting into her hands.

“Perhaps you have a point.”

“I know I do.” She pressed a kiss against his metal spine. “I lo — I enjoy every part of you.”

His body tensed and she wondered if he’d realized what she’d almost said. She deliberately squeezed his cock, hoping to distract him. She succeeded.

He spun around and lifted her into his arms before sliding her down over that thick, wet cock. Her body fought to adjust to the still overwhelming fullness and he reached between them, supporting her easily with one arm as he stroked her clit. The slight burn transformed into pleasure, and she rocked eagerly against him.

“It seems a shame not to take advantage of those differences,” he said solemnly, but his face had relaxed.

“I agree. Now move.”

He laughed and obeyed, but instead of the almost frantic movements of the previous night, he kept the pace slow and gentle. The hot water poured over them as he rocked her easily back and forth on his cock until she finally tumbled over into a long, sweet climax. He followed her over, the warmth of his seed mingling with the warmth of the water when he finally lifted her free.

“It’s a good thing I have unlimited hot water,” she murmured.

He returned her smile, tugging her closer.

“Indeed, since I’m going to have to start washing you all over again.”

She laughed and shivered and went happily into his arms.

A good deal of additional water was sent to her filters before he finally turned off the shower, wrapped her in a towel and carried her back into the living area. Henry chirped disapprovingly when he glided over to land next to her and realized she was still wet.

“He doesn’t like water,” she told Levi.

“I’ll keep that in mind in case I need to discourage him.”

She and Henry both gave him an indignant look.

“You wouldn’t.”

“No I wouldn’t, little bird, but it’s fun to tease you.”

He looked almost shocked at his own words and her heart ached. How long had it been since he’d had any fun?

He’d carried her over to the bench next to the RTG and now he started drying her as he gave Henry a thoughtful look.

“I spoke to Addie when I returned the scanner. She thinks that if there is any life present on Mars, it would be deep underground, or concealed in one of the caves.”

“That’s what I said.”

She gave him a triumphant grin, and he flicked her nose with a teasing finger before continuing to dry her with slow,

soothing strokes.

“I thought perhaps I would do some exploring today and see if there are any caves nearby — or any more Henrys.”

Her heart skipped a beat. He wasn't going to rush off?

“I think that sounds like a wonderful idea. Could I come with you?” she asked eagerly. She didn't want to miss any time with him. “We could even have a picnic.”

“A picnic?” He shook his head, but he was smiling. “I would be happy for you to join me, as long as you don't mind riding on Blaze with me.”

“I'd love to — that is, the two of us won't be too much for him, will we?”

“I doubt he'll even notice the difference.”

“In that case, I just have to feed the chickens and check the filters first.”

“I'll take care of that while you get dressed.”

He gave her one last pat with the towel and rose to his feet, dropping a quick kiss on her lips before pulling on his own clothes and heading back through the garden dome to the chicken habitat. Her eyes suddenly threatened to fill with tears. After a year of doing everything on her own, having him take over her chores, even for a morning, was a wonderful gift.

“I'm being silly,” she told Henry. “I can't get used to this.”

He tilted his head and chirped a response, and she smiled.

“I suspect that means to let future chickens hatch themselves.”

She dried her eyes and hurried off to dress and put together the promised picnic. By the time Levi finished the chores, she was ready to go.

Instead of her usual coveralls, she had pulled on a pair of faded jeans that hugged her curves and a soft blue sweater the same shade as her eyes. From the look on his face, he approved, but he simply helped her into her thermal coat, then frowned as Henry glided over to perch on her shoulder.

“You are bringing him along?”

“Why not? He might even recognize something.”

She bit her lip as it occurred to her that if he did, he might choose to return to his previous home.

I can't keep him if he doesn't want to stay.

Just like she couldn't keep Levi. But they were both here now and she decided to focus on that as Levi sighed but didn't raise any additional objections as she put on her face mask and they left the dome.

Blaze was grazing — absorbing micronutrients from the soil — by the base of the rocks but he immediately came to join them. He butted his head against her and she stroked his nose, suddenly filled with guilt.

“I didn't think about poor Blaze alone out here all night. I have some extra building material — maybe I could make him a shelter -”

She stopped abruptly, blushing as she realized she was assuming that the horse — and Levi — would spend the night with her again. But he only smiled as he lifted her and Henry easily onto the horse.

“I promise you he doesn't need a shelter,” he said, as he swung up behind her. “But if it will make you happy, we can build a shelter.”

“It would,” she assured him. Both the shelter and the fact that he would be returning.

Henry suddenly scampered down from her shoulder and up the horse's neck, perching between his ears like a miniature lookout. Blaze's ears twitched, but he didn't seem to mind, responding easily when Levi urged him forward. Levi's arms curved around her waist and she settled happily back against him as they set off on their journey.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LEVI HADN'T REALIZED how satisfying — and arousing — it would be to have Ellie accompany him. The lush curve of her ass massaged his cock with every stride, a deliciously frustrating experience. He actually started to consider the possibility of sex on horseback before he forced himself to concentrate on his objective instead.

He did want to look for any signs of where Henry might have come from, but he'd also made the suggestion because he wanted to remain close to Ellie. He had been afraid she would object if he simply followed his heart and remained with her, but the fact that she had wanted to accompany him gave him hope. Perhaps she did want more than a temporary arrangement.

They talked very little as they rode along the base of the cliff, but it was a comfortable silence. How different from all those silent nights in the cold when he was by himself. The warmth of her presence filled the silence even when she wasn't speaking.

I don't want to go back to the silence.

As he scanned the rock for any openings, he considered the best way to convince her to allow him to remain with her. He could stretch out building a shelter for Blaze for a day or two. Perhaps he could even offer to begin building the greenhouse she'd mentioned...

"Is it getting darker?" she asked suddenly, and he swore under his breath as he looked out across the valley.

His eyesight had adjusted automatically to the change in the light, and he'd been so focused on the woman in front of him that he hadn't noticed the increasing darkness, or the clouds on the horizon. Not rain clouds, but clouds of sand. A powerful sandstorm was approaching.

"We need to get back to your habitat," he said grimly, and started to turn Blaze around.

As he did, Henry gave an excited chirp and glided away from his perch between Blaze's ears, heading for a row of tall rocks.

"Henry!" she cried, then grabbed his hands as he lifted the reins. "We can't leave him."

"There's a storm coming. You can't survive out here without protective gear."

"What if he can't either? I can't leave him out here by himself."

He swore again as he looked down at her pleading face, then glanced back across the plain. The storm was still a long way off.

"Five minutes, no more. I don't like taking chances with your safety."

"I'm sure it won't take me long to find him." She gave him a grateful smile. "I'll just check behind those rocks."

"*We* will check," he said firmly, dismounting and helping her down.

He grabbed her hand as she tried to hurry away, then led her in the direction where Henry had disappeared, Blaze trailing along after them. There was no sign of Henry behind the first group of rocks, just more scattered boulders, some twice his height.

"I don't understand. Where can he be? Henry!"

Had he heard a distant chirp? He couldn't be sure, but they went in that direction, weaving through more giant boulders. Henry was still nowhere to be found and they were almost at the cliff wall.

“We’re going to have to go back, little bird. I’m sure that Henry will be fine. Remember that he managed to survive out here before you found him.”

Tears sparkled in her eyes, but she nodded.

“I suppose you’re right -” Her head suddenly tilted. “There! Did you hear that?”

She managed to tug her hand free before he could prevent her and darted around another one of the huge boulders, this one leaning directly against the rock face. The narrow space behind it wasn’t as tight as it first appeared and both he and Blaze managed to follow her into a partially concealed slit in the cliff.

“Henry!”

“Stay where you are,” he ordered. “It’s too dark for you to see.”

His eyes adjusted enough to reveal that the opening continued deeper into the rock. He heard a distant chirp, but he couldn’t detect any sign of movement up ahead. She had stopped obediently at his order, but she gave him an anxious glance over her shoulder as he approached.

“He’s here, I know he is.”

“I think you’re right, but it doesn’t look like he wants to come out. We need to leave. Now. He’ll be safe in here,” he added when she started to object and she gave a reluctant nod.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I know I am, and you’ll be more comfortable at home.”

She sighed, but took his hand and followed him. As soon as they retraced their steps to the edge of the boulder concealing the entrance, he knew it was too late. The wind was already swirling, small particles of sand stinging his cheeks, and he quickly pushed her back into the shelter of the rock

“It looks like we’ll be spending the storm with Henry after all,” he said grimly.

The situation wasn't critical — the rock would provide protection and they had supplies — but neither would it be comfortable for her. He only hoped it wasn't one of the storms that lasted for days.

“I'm sorry. I should have listened to you.”

“I'm the one who should be apologizing. I should have done a better job of protecting you.”

She smiled up at him, her face soft.

“You listened to me instead. That's just as important.”

Her words didn't erase his guilt, but he gave her a quick kiss as he considered their options. The angle of the slit still allowed some wind to penetrate, so he decided to go a little deeper into the rock before preparing a place for her to rest. Thankfully, all of the rangers were provided with survival equipment — not for themselves but for humans in need of aid — and he pulled a small lantern out of Blaze's saddlebags. She breathed a sigh of relief when he turned it on.

“That's better. The darkness is a little overwhelming.”

“But you rushed in here anyway.”

“Because of Henry. You can't let fear stop you from going after those you love.”

Her words echoed in his head as they traveled further along the passage until they found a larger and more protected space opening to one side of it. He retrieved the rest of his supplies from Blaze's saddlebags, then the horse settled against the wall in a rest position while he prepared a temporary camp.

He set up a small portable heater where the heat would radiate back from the surrounding walls, then sat down on a rocky ledge and pulled her onto his lap, wrapping a thin thermal blanket around both of them. He directed his nanites to increase the temperature of his skin slightly and she sighed with pleasure as she nestled against him.

“This isn't so bad. It's like our picnic turned into a camping trip.” She smiled up at him. “Not that there was any

opportunity to camp back on Earth, but I used to read about them and imagine what it would be like.”

“I doubt you dreamed you were in a cold Martian cave with a cyborg,” he said dryly.

“If I’d known about you then, I would have done.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Of course I do. All this time I was waiting for you — I just didn’t know it.”

Don’t let fear stop you. His nanites were helpless in the face of the torrent of emotions rocketing through his body.

“I love you, Ellie,” he blurted out. “I know it’s too soon and I know I’m not much of a catch, but I want to stay with you.”

Her smile was as bright as the lantern.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he added quickly. “I just wanted to tell you.”

“But I want to say it. I love you too, Levi.”

He groaned and kissed her, overcome with emotion - and need.

“I want you,” he growled.

“Yes,” she whispered against his mouth, and reached between their bodies to free his erection.

He shuddered as her small, cool fingers touched him, already on the verge of climax, but he needed her with him. Too desperate to take his time, he shoved her jeans and panties down her legs, doing his best to keep her covered by the blanket. He shuddered again as he stroked between her legs and found her wet and ready. He growled and lifted her over him, bringing her down onto his cock in one fast, hard stroke.

He climaxed immediately, his useless seed erupting in a torrent of liquid heat as she gasped and clung to him until the seemingly endless flow finally stopped. Her arms were tight around him, clinging to his neck, and when he finally raised his head, her eyes were bright with tears.

“Are you all right, little bird?”

“What was it you said this morning? I’m happy — and very satisfied.”

“I will make you even more satisfied,” he promised, and began to move.

A considerable time later, she was once again dressed and curled in his arms, sleepily staring at the lantern.

“Where do you think Henry is?”

“Deeper in the rocks. His instincts must have warned him about the storm.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?”

“I would return to you,” he said truthfully, and she smiled.

“I think he was happy with me, but maybe he has a family here.”

He found the thought of a swarm of unknown creatures troubling, but he knew she wouldn’t understand his concerns.

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait and -”

“Listen,” she said urgently, suddenly sitting up.

He heard a faint chirp from deeper in the cave and sighed, already anticipating her next move as she scrambled off his lap.

“It’s Henry! We have to go after him.”

He rose as well, picking up the lantern.

“We can try, as long as the passage isn’t too narrow.”

“All right.”

He took her hand again as they traveled deep into the rock. Several minutes passed and he was beginning to wonder how deep they would have to go when Henry chirped again and came gliding out of the darkness ahead of them to land on Ellie’s shoulder. She reached up and he climbed into her palm

and curled up as she sighed with relief and cradled him against her chest.

“You worried me,” she said sternly, then dropped a kiss on the tiny head. “Where did you go?”

Curious himself, he took a few steps in the direction from which Henry had come.

The narrow passage opened into a cave. An enormous cave with a faint orange light coming from a narrow slit far overhead near the back wall. He heard a faint scratching noise and realized that sand from the storm was drifting down through the small opening. Sand from previous storms had settled on the floor beneath it.

“Levi,” Ellie whispered, her voice shaking. “Look.”

He turned immediately to find her standing at the entrance to the cave, staring at the stone next to her, mottled orange like much of the other rock.

“What is it?”

Instead of answering, she took his hand and guided it to the wall. The surface was soft, almost furry beneath his fingers.

“Lichen?”

“Or something very similar. And no one would have planted it here. It’s like Mars is coming back to life.” They stared at each other as she bit her lip. “Lichen I could almost understand — it’s a very basic form of plant life. But Henry? Where could he have come from?”

“I wish I knew.”

If Henry had appeared from nowhere, what else might do the same? He found his hand on the holster of his gun at the thought, even though there was no reason to assume a threat. He scanned the cave again, looking for any other signs of life. His eyesight, enhanced by his cybernetics, was exceptionally good, and he saw that the back of the cave appeared to lead into yet another space. Was there a whole network of caverns down here?

He took a half-step in that direction, but she put her hand on his arm.

“I don’t think we should go any further.”

“Why not?”

“Whatever is happening here — whether it’s a whole new ecosystem or the revival of an ancient one — is still very new and fragile. What if we disturb it and cause some kind of damage?”

She had a point. Perhaps it would be better just to observe for now.

The light coming through the tiny opening in the ceiling began to brighten and the trickle of sand stopped.

“I think the storm is ending.”

“Good. Then let’s go home. Our home,” she added, taking his hand and warmth flooded him.

Home.

He finally had a home, and it wasn’t the cozy habitat waiting for them — it was with the woman he loved.

EPILOGUE

A YEAR LATER...

Ellie smiled as Henry swooped down from the top of the cabinet and landed on her shoulder, peering down at her daughter. He was fascinated with the baby and she often found him perched on the side of Janelle's crib, warbling a series of soft notes as she cooed happily. Now he chirped peremptorily and she laughed.

“Yes, I know it's her bedtime, but Levi will be back soon and I want him to have some time with her before I put her down for the night.”

With Henry still perched on her shoulder, she carried Janelle to the window seat, rocking her gently as she peered out into the gathering darkness. *There*. She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the familiar figure of horse and man riding past the new greenhouses they'd added.

Since their marriage, Levi had resigned from most of his ranger duties and they were rarely apart. He assured her he was perfectly content to stay home and work on the homestead with her. With his very able assistance, they'd made a significant amount of progress — so much progress that he'd broached the subject of purchasing an adjoining parcel of land.

He'd intended to pay for it, but she'd decided to use the credits her biological father had deposited for her. It seemed oddly fitting that they would be used to help establish a legacy for the granddaughter he would never know. Levi had used his

own savings to purchase the plot behind them — the steep rocky land that contained the caverns from which Henry must have emerged. All of the land was in her name of course, since cyborgs were still unable to own property, but the name on the deed made no difference — this was their home, their family's home.

The thought made her smile again, and she was still smiling when he'd settled Blaze into his shelter and came to join her.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he said softly, kissing her as stroked the baby's cheek.

“Are you talking to me or Janelle?”

“Both.” He grinned at her, face relaxed and happy. “It's good to be home. Is she ready for bed?”

“Bathed, changed, and fed. How did it go?”

“Why don't I put her down first? Then we can talk.”

The stern expression she so rarely saw anymore flashed across his face and her heart sank, but she nodded.

“Do you want something to eat?”

Even though he could obtain nutrients from many sources, he usually ate with her. Tonight, he shook his head and reached for the baby. Janelle waved her chubby little fists excitedly and his face softened again.

“I'll put her down and be right back.”

He disappeared through the archway where her bed had once been. Now it was a passageway leading to two additional bedrooms. She put away the stew she'd left warming for him, dimmed the lights, and sat down in one of their new chairs. Lights sparkled in the other habitats scattered across the valley floor and she smiled at them. She still liked knowing they were there — but not too close.

Levi returned a few minutes later, scooping her up, then settling back down in the chair with her perched on his lap.

“Now tell me,” she demanded.

He sighed and tugged her closer.

“We decided to leave the caves alone.”

She gave a big sigh of relief and he shook his head.

“I knew you’d be pleased, but I’m still not convinced that we should ignore them.”

Nothing appeared to have changed in the year since Henry had appeared — there were no rumors of other flying lizards or caves spouting vegetation — but Levi had been monitoring the cavern they had discovered and found that the plant life had spread. The walls and ground were now covered by lichen, noticeably thicker and healthier.

He’d left today to meet with Sam, Addie, and several other rangers to discuss whether or not they should explore deeper into the rock.

“What does Addie think?”

“She still agrees with you about not disturbing the ecosystem.”

“Don’t you trust her judgment?” she asked softly.

“I do, but that’s part of the problem.” He tilted his head and she suspected he was listening to Henry warbling to their daughter. “You know her theory is that it was our presence on Mars — the changes we are making — that created Henry.”

She nodded. Addie believed that as the atmosphere stabilized and the oxygen levels increased, the tiny lizard could have hatched from an egg that had lain dormant for millennia. It seemed almost impossible, but there had been similar incidents in Earth’s past, although none quite so ancient.

He frowned. “I still worry that something... larger and more dangerous might also emerge.”

“But Henry is so small, and he could survive on the lichen. Anything larger — if there were anything larger — would starve. And don’t forget that as far as we know, Henry is the only one of his kind to make that transition.”

“Unless all the other female settlers have a secret companion,” he grumbled, but his face no longer looked as worried.

“I don’t see why they would.” She started toying with the button on his shirt. “They don’t all have big, handsome cyborg husbands.”

“I’m not handsome, little bird.”

Despite his objection, she could see the pleasure on his face — pleasure and hunger as she released the top button.

“You are to me,” she whispered as she opened a second one.

“Then that’s all that matters.”

He groaned as her fingers danced down his chest, teasing along the edge of his waistband where his cock was trying to push free.

“Carry me to our nest, love, and make love to me all night long,” she whispered, then smiled. “Or until Janelle wakes up again.”

He kissed her and obeyed, abandoning his concerns about the future to the pleasures of the present.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Honey Phillips writes science fiction romance with a little edge, a lot of steam, and a heaping spoonful of sweetness. The ride may be rough, but the end always satisfies. Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

ALSO BY HONEY PHILLIPS

See all of Honey's books at <https://www.honeyphillips.com>

THE ALIEN'S FALCONER

ALIENS AND ANIMALS
BY SKYE MCKINNON AND ARIZONA TAPE

DESCRIPTION

Georgia never chose to work as a space pirate. Abducted from Earth by aliens as a teenager, she's had to become tough to survive the depths of lawless space. Violence and deceit are all she knows... until she steals from the wrong woman.

When alien Captain Ellabee responds to a stranded ship's call for aid, she's astonished to find a human and her sassy pet bird on board. But the gorgeous female isn't all she seems. Suddenly, Ellabee's ship and crew are in danger, and Georgia won't help unless she gets what she wants.

Once the crew unravels some of Georgia's past, Ellabee's anger and frustration give way to compassion for the clever human... and something else she never expected to find. Love.

Georgia is torn between fear that Ellabee's kindness is a trick and hope that Ellabee is as good as she seems. Can two lonely women surrender their hearts to love, or is the mistrust and betrayal too much to overcome?

CHAPTER ONE

I CAREFULLY MANEUVERED through the thick jungle part of the planet, the rough orange leaves threatening to cut the underside of my arms. Luckily, I was wearing my makeshift guards. That was the advantage of camping somewhere familiar.

And Planet Bevba was definitely familiar. To most, it was just one of the many deserted island planets around the Tarran sun, but it was my playground.

A shrill cry alerted me to the menace from above, and I held up my hand to receive the visitor. A medium-sized bird with blue wings attempted to land on my forearm, his sharp talons scratching into the material of my brace as he missed his landing. He crashed into the sharp plants in front of me, and it wasn't the first time I was glad he was covered in scales to protect him.

"You're no falcon, are you?" I said, sighing as I plucked him from the mess.

Aba let out a soft thrilling noise. "No falcon," he mimicked.

A pang of longing shot through me as it always did whenever he repeated something I said. As human as it sounded, it was nothing compared to the real thing. A real conversation with someone who cared.

This was as close as it got.

I plucked some of the thorns from his scaly chest and he looked at me with adoration in his four eyes.

“Four eyes and still no depth of vision, huh?” I teased while stroking the top of his head where his feathers were the softest. As much as I liked ribbing on him, he was my dearest companion and I wouldn’t trade him for anything. Not for all the money in the world or the fattest cargo ship in the galaxy. Maybe for a Mister Whippy from the seaside, *maybe*, but only if he was particularly annoying that day.

My mouth salivated just from thinking about ice cream and I quickly pushed the thoughts to the back of my mind. There was no use longing for something I couldn’t get.

Aba whistled to himself as I let him ride on my arm and I enjoyed the familiar weight. It reminded me of when I trained birds of prey with my grandfather and it was moments like this that made me feel like myself.

I trekked through the wilderness until I arrived at the landing site of my space shuttle and Aba flew up, cawing happily at the sight of home. The loading bay door slid open when it sensed the unlocking technology embedded in my shoulder, a crude piece of technology compared to what was out there, but it did the job.

I instantly felt a sense of relief as I got out of the sun. Even though these planets circled around a yellow star, it was much harsher than what I was used to, certainly compared to the poor excuse of summer in England.

“I need some more sunblock,” I told Aba.

“Sunblock. I need more sunblock,” he replied, flying up from my arm. “Sunblock! That damned sun is going to kill me one day!”

There was something uncanny about hearing my own words echoed back to me, especially things I said a while ago. It made me hopeful that one day, he could master the language and say things of his own though. One day, maybe.

I unlocked the second door to the main part of the ship by pressing my hand on the modified scanner.

“Welcome back, Captain Georgia,” an automated voice said.

“Good to be back,” I replied gruffly.

The doors slid open while simultaneously locking the loading bay behind me. If there was anything I’d learned from my time in space, it was to never leave anything unlocked. That was a cardinal rule.

I did a quick check around as I walked in but everything was how I left it. Perks of being on an uninhabited piece of land. Besides, what could people want from this piece of junk?

Aba flew towards the pile of pillows that was his bed, landing badly in it. He was definitely not made for confined living spaces but it wasn’t like I kept him on a string. He was free to go if he wished.

I pulled my arm guards off and put them back in their compartment by the door. They were starting to get worn out but I didn’t have the material to fix them up.

“Shall we listen to some music?” I proposed, hitting the old radio I acquired not that long ago. It sprung to life and an unfamiliar song came on through the static. It sounded Ralish or maybe even Kyvenish in genre, not that I cared. None of those were planets worth visiting. The aliens there were just like anywhere else, cold, foreign, and without compassion for someone like me. To them, I was just a non-Galactic entity without rights, something that had been made clear to me time and time again.

I involuntarily traced the raised scars on my underarms, memories of a time I’d rather forget.

“Maybe no music,” I decided. I turned the radio off and made it through the living space into the small kitchenette. My stomach rumbled and I searched the cupboards for something easy to eat but came up short. My last haul hadn’t been very successful and it showed in the sad selection of canned food I had left.

I selected a packet of ship crackers and some pink slurry in a jar that didn’t taste unlike mashed potatoes when heated right. It would do for my immediate hunger, but it wasn’t

exactly a good home-cooked meal. For that, I'd have to go 'foraging' first.

Aba watched me with four greedy eyes when I sat on the threadbare sofa and started munching my food.

"You had an entire snake yesterday, you don't need any food for at least a week," I told him sternly. That bird was prone to overeating, which usually resulted in me having to clean the ship. Even at three years old, he still hadn't learned that he only needed to eat every ten days or so. Or maybe he simply didn't want to understand.

I reached for my tablet, cringing at the cracks on the screen. I really needed a new one soon, but none of the ships I'd encountered recently had contained tech compatible with my own ancient vessel. One day, I'd have to upgrade, but my entire process depended on having an old ship. The ruse wouldn't be as believable with a modern starcruiser, as much as I'd prefer to live in one.

Repressing a sigh, I swiped through the maps of the sector, plotting my route. As nice as it had been to feel solid ground beneath my feet, I never stayed in any place for long. Even though I hated to admit it, the B3RR-Y had become my home. Not that I'd ever admit that to anyone, not even Aba. The alien parrot was still eyeing me jealously. At least he didn't beg for food. Despite his intelligence, it wasn't easy to train him, mostly because he was a moody male who refused to do my bidding ninety percent of the time. The fact that he was behaving now probably meant that he had plans to make my life difficult later on. As much as I loved the silly bird, he was also a pain in the arse.

I was so lost in thought that I hadn't realised I'd eaten the last spoonful of pink slurry. I was still hungry. Ugh. I didn't feel like foraging. It was time to leave this planet and go back to work.

"Ready for takeoff," I announced, waiting for my avian echo. Aba promptly repeated my words. If he'd been human, I would have interpreted his chirpy voice as joy, but it was hard to tell for sure. I sometimes suspected that I read too much into

Aba's behavior, seeing emotions and intention where there was only mimicry. I knew nothing about his species. Stars, I didn't even know if he really was a male. If I had friends, I'd ask them what he was exactly. No, first I'd tell them the story of how I'd almost eaten him as an egg. That would make them laugh. We'd laugh together, slap each others' backs, then someone else would tell an equally funny story.

"Ready for takeoff," Aba cawed for a second time as if to remind me that I had work to do.

"Thanks, buddy. You're right, dwelling on the impossible isn't good for me. Let's get off this planet. Time to fly."

Aba shook his wings in agreement and flew over to the main console, landing in his favorite spot where he had the perfect view of both me in my chair and the large, if slightly blurry, viewscreen.

I entered our course and crossed my fingers. With a bit of luck, I'd eat a proper meal soon.

CHAPTER TWO

SOME DAYS, I hated being in charge. Every time I thought I'd have a moment to myself, someone else came to ask for my permission, advice, or simply seemed to seek my company. I glared at Katak's back as he shuffled off, clearly not happy with the answer I'd given the pilot. It wasn't my fault that he'd had to move into a smaller cabin. Space on the POTA-2 was limited and now that we had another mated couple on board, I'd had to make changes. I'd given Katak an extra day off to make up for it, but he still wasn't satisfied. So be it. As much as I wanted my crew to be happy, I also valued my reputation as a strict captain. I had to set boundaries and rules.

I cautiously looked around the bridge. Everyone was focused on their consoles, ignoring me. Finally, this was the moment I'd been waiting for.

“Crew, I'll be in my quarters,” I announced. I'd be relaxing in my soft podchair in just a few clicks. “If you need any-”

With a soul-destroying beep, the emergency sensor flickered to life.

Rak. Seriously? This was the worst timing ever.

I forced down the string of curses threatening to spill from my lips and turned to Lini. “What's triggered the alarm?”

“A nearby vessel is sending an emergency signal. I'm having trouble receiving more than just a basic life sign from the ship.”

“Show me the ship on the screen. Inil, scan on all frequencies. I want to know what’s going on.”

The small green Biblib nodded which made his mohawk bounce. “Aye, Captain.”

I turned towards the left cockpit where my pilot was being distracted by her mate. I couldn’t be too mad since Atina had been a lot happier since Heather joined our crew, but still, this was not the time for frolicking.

To break them up, I snapped my fingers at them. “This is not the time.”

The two broke apart, both with a sheepish look on their face. Even if Atina was the normal Kyven blue and Heather had pale skin from her Earth planet, it was true what they said about couples who spent too much time together. They did start to look alike.

“Sorry, Captain,” Atina said, turning her attention to the command.

Heather chuckled awkwardly. “Yes, sorry. I’ll get out of your hair.”

I involuntarily touched my braids, confused about what she meant until I remembered that they used a lot of weird expressions on their Earth Planet. I could ask for clarification but this was not the time. She was leaving, that was all I wanted.

“Lini, what did the scan reveal?” I called, keeping a close eye on the map.

“Distress signal has come from an Xcruiser174. That’s a small vessel, four-unit capacity. The signal was sent 24 clicks ago and I located it to Planet Torrap,” Lini said as he ran a hand through his colorful mohawk. “I also did another scan, we’re the only ship within a detectable radius.”

That was bothersome. Planet Torrap was only a small detour, but that wasn’t my main issue with the situation. Depending on what we’d find, it would delay our course and shipments, which was an issue by itself. Delayed shipments

meant dissatisfied clients and dissatisfied clients meant no payment.

But on the other hand, could I really ignore a distress signal?

“Lini, is your brother healthy enough to function?”

“Inil is virus-free, Captain.”

“Good. I want a report of our ship. Are we in any condition to respond to this emergency call?”

The eyes on the back of Lini’s head opened and turned red as he performed a diagnostic scan. It was good to have them back in shape and able to run the ship.

Lini turned around to give his twin on the other side of his head a chance to talk in his monotone voice. “System scan complete. P0TA-2 is operating at optimum capacity. Energy reserves, five out of seven. Food reserves, nine out of eleven. Weight capacity, four out of five. We are ahead of schedule by twelve centi-clicks.”

Those were good numbers. It certainly confirmed that we could make a detour and help the Xcruiser174, even if it was at full capacity.

“Atina, set course towards the vessel. Approach with caution. We don’t know what condition the ship is in. Let’s stay clear of any explosions this time,” I said.

They all sprung into action, not needing any further instruction from me. Despite my exhaustion, I couldn’t help but feel proud of my crew. Receiving an SOS from a ship in peril didn’t happen very often. I couldn’t even remember the last time we’d responded to an emergency like this. Space was so vast that we rarely ever encountered another vessel outside the main shipping routes. Right now, we were quite a distance from the closest space station, with just a few uninhabited planets showing up on the star map. What were the chances of us being here just at the right time to come and help the stricken ship?

The signal grew stronger as we neared the planet. Another scan brought up a more accurate picture of what we were

getting into and I could make out the Xcruiser174 stranded on a flat meadow with yellow grass. The image was blurry but I could make out some dark smoke and what looked like perhaps a dent in one of the wings. I wasn't an expert in these kinds of vessels but it looked like an unfortunate crash.

They were lucky we'd received their distress signal.

"Do we know how many sentient life forms we're dealing with yet?" I asked.

Lini activated another scanner. "Looks like just one, but I can't get a data code. It's saying Unknown, so it must be a sentient entity that isn't part of the Galactic Union. Shall we return?"

That made the situation a little trickier. The guidebook of the Galactic Union strongly advised limiting contact with non-Galactic Union beings, but there was another code that I abided by that overruled any suggestions from the GU. The code of a Kyven Captain.

"Keep going down and send a reply to their distress signal," I said firmly. I didn't know exactly what we were going to find on landing and maybe it wasn't the smartest to stray from our route, but I wasn't going to turn down a call for help.

CHAPTER THREE

A LARGE SHIP temporarily blocked the harsh sun as it descended from the sky and I jumped up, waving my arms to get their attention. A universal distress signal that seemed to work no matter where I was in space. I'd chosen Tarrop, a small planet with breathable air, as the place for my supposed crash. Behind me, smoke was rising from the B3RR-Y and I'd spread some random ship parts all over the sandy ground to make it look more real.

Aba cawed and rose from the seat next to me. I caught him before he could fly away.

"Stay here, you silly bird, or it'll turn you into minced meat," I chided him.

"Minced meat," he echoed cheerily.

I shielded my eyes as I looked up. The ship coming down looked medium-sized and modified to carry cargo which was fantastic. That was just what I needed to restock my own supplies.

A small voice in the back of my head chided me for using this distress ruse to trick people but I squashed it quickly. It was dangerous to feel compassion and empathy for aliens, a lesson I'd learned a long time ago. Besides, it wasn't like I was harming anyone. If my rescuers were kind, I never took more than I needed. If they weren't kind... then they deserved this.

The ship's boosters came on as it landed on the other side of the meadow, just like they always did. It was a natural

landing strip that no pilot could resist. That put them right where I wanted them.

“Go on, then,” I told Aba, letting him go so he could investigate. I knew he’d be back in time for the fun to start; he always was.

He flew towards the ship, and I resisted the urge to follow him. It was always better if I let them come to me. Safer. If they were unsavory, it wouldn’t be hard to get my ship up and running and get the hell out of here.

After a small wait, two figures emerged from their loading dock. Even from a distance, it was easy to identify them as aliens from Kyven. They were humanoid in many ways except for their deep blue skin, their sixth finger, and surely some other features that I hadn’t discovered yet and had no desire to either. While they looked human, they definitely weren’t.

When they were more than halfway, I got up from the log I was using as a seat so I could go towards them. Now that they were closer, I could make out that they were both female.

I held up my hand and clicked a simple greeting in their native language. “Hello.”

The Kyven on the right, a woman with night-blue skin and silver-white hair in braids that I was instantly jealous of, nodded in acknowledgment. “Hello. Did you send out a distress signal?”

“Yes. I land bad. I crash here, I need help,” I replied, my tongue already hurting from a simple sentence. It wasn’t a language that came naturally to me but I could understand it fairly well, which put me at an advantage.

The other female eyed me curiously. “Where did you learn to speak our language?”

I was starting to regret using the meet-and-greet ruse instead of ambushing them. It was going to take time. Still, this one usually ended without bloodshed.

“I had... crew colleague. Kyven. He teach me.”

Such a euphemism. Klen had tortured me for his amusement. He'd left me with a rudimentary understanding of his native language, along with scars and nightmares. These were the first Kyvens I'd met since my escape. A cold shudder ran down my back despite the glaring sun above us. Not a memory I wanted to dwell on.

"Engine wrong," I continued, gesturing to my ship. "Can you help?"

"I'm Captain Ellabee," the braided woman introduced herself. "I'm not an expert in mechanics, but Ja'lal here will take a look at your engine. If you don't need any medical assistance, I shall return to my ship and will await Ja'lal's report."

No, I needed both of them to go inside.

"Aba hurt."

I hated having to use my pet as an excuse, but the little bugger would probably love to be involved in this deception. His naughty streak had got him in trouble more than once.

"Who is Aba?" Captain Ellabee asked with a frown. Interesting, I didn't know Kyvens frowned like humans.

"My... don't know word. Come in."

I wasn't sure if she believed my excuse, but when I stepped back into the ship, both women followed me. Nice. Step one was completed. Time for step two.

While walking further into the B3RR-Y, I discreetly started a subroutine programmed into the ship's AI. I hadn't written the code myself, my tech skills were way too rudimentary for that, but you could get anything and everything on the black market. It had been one of my best purchases ever.

I mentally counted down from five, making sure I was past the barely visible mark on the wall, and waited for the siren.

It was so shrill I wanted to cover my ears, but for the ruse to be effective, I had to look as surprised as my two visitors. I turned to them, faking a look of shock, before the heavy fire locks slammed shut between us, sealing them in. I double-

checked that the locks behind them had also closed before hurrying to the bridge.

“Fire, fire!” Aba welcomed me happily, perching on the back of my chair.

“Yes, clever bird. And what comes next?”

“Next. Next. Next.”

“No, that wasn’t the right answer.” I patted the sleek scales on his head. They instantly turned from pale gold to a shimmering ruby red. The color change had only started once he’d reached maturity — or at least that’s what I thought had happened when he’d stopped growing. Now, his scales reminded me of one of those cheap mood rings I’d had as a child. Half the time, I could predict what color he’d turn based on his behavior, but he still managed to surprise me.

A notice appeared on the screen, waiting for me to proceed with the subroutine. I confirmed with a tap on my console. A pre-recorded message echoed through the room, repeated in several languages, including Kyven. The two captives would be hearing the same in their improvised holding cell.

“The ship has been locked down. Fire extermination in progress. Please await further updates. You are safe.”

I smiled wryly at the last sentence. That had been my addition after a panicked captive had tried to ram his horns through my wall.

Flicking to the surveillance cameras, I checked on the women. They looked startled and surprised but not terrified or overly suspicious. Hopefully, they’d really think that there was a fire that I had to deal with. I made sure the signal dampeners were active, preventing any contact they might seek with their ship, before broadcasting my own message on the only frequency that wasn’t blocked.

“Kyven ship, I has your captain. Surrender cargo if you want her return. Do not dare using A-beam to get captain back. You will fail.”

I made my voice as deep and serious as I could.

“You will fail,” Aba echoed ominously just before I ended the transmission.

I grinned at him. “That will give them a nice riddle. They’ll assume I’m not the only person on board.”

“Not the only person.”

“Yes, that’s right, you’re almost a person. Now let’s see what they’ll reply.”

I leaned back in my chair and watched the Kyvens. The woman whose name I didn’t know was sitting on the floor, seemingly relaxed, while the captain was pacing back and forth. The space they were locked in was only about five meters long, enough to give her freedom to pace but not enough to let them see much of the ship. Hopefully, they didn’t have to stay in there for long. I’d once had someone piss themselves, of course during the one month that my cleaning bot had been broken. I shuddered at the memory.

No answer yet. I double-checked my transmitter. It was working, so they should have received my message. Didn’t they want their captain back? One of my nightmare scenarios was coming across a mutinous ship that was happy to have their captain removed from power. Then I’d have to deal with them...somehow. I was not a violent person. I didn’t do this because I enjoyed it. I’d never chosen this life. It had been forced on me, and now there was no way back.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOMETHING WASN'T RIGHT. We'd been here for hours, and there hadn't been another update concerning the fire. If that fire had ever even existed.

I looked around the entrance bay that Ja'lal and I were locked in, not that there was much to see. It was mostly just an empty hold with two sealed doors on either side. I knew some ships had emergency protocols, but the Xcruiser174 wasn't one of them. Maybe it had been modified, but still, it shouldn't lock the hatches like that.

"Is this normal?" I asked Ja'lal.

She shook her head. "No, it's not. Not for a ship this size anyway."

Just like I suspected. I knew we should've been more careful in our approach, but all my caution had gone when I'd seen a single Kyvenoid that looked suspiciously like Heather from Earth Planet. As good as Heather was with wrangling rashipis and other flock animals, she was pretty fragile. From the stories I'd heard, they periodically needed self-induced hibernation and they couldn't survive a simple disembowelment. Any Kyven youngling could regrow their bowels, but not these humans.

Still, I shouldn't have underestimated anyone commandeering a ship, regardless of size. This was definitely my mistake.

I ran my hands over the locked doors, trying to figure out what kind of system we were dealing with here. It was solid, though, with no way for us to get through it.

“What do you think is happening out there?” Ja’lal asked, the concern evident in her voice.

“Probably a misunderstanding,” I replied, checking the other hatch that led into the ship. This one was different. It was a different model and much older. Some of the hinges were exposed and I gestured for Ja’lal to come and check them out.

She understood instantly and balled her fist, delivering four forceful strikes against the steel. The material cracked and the doors opened with a hiss, allowing us further entry into the ship. It seemed foolish to go in deeper when we had no idea where that would lead us, but I wasn’t going to let some Kyvenoid trap me.

I didn’t expect to find a small living space on the other end of the hatch. It was messy and filled with all kinds of junk, but it looked lived in. There were even attempts at making it nice and personalized. Pictures on the wall, some pillows, little trinkets. That made the whole situation only more confusing.

If this Kyvenoid was trying to trap us, why would she do it in her home? Maybe this was all a big misunderstanding.

A buzz sounded and a hatch on the opposite side of the living area opened. Instead of the Kyvenoid, a blue head appeared. Atina.

“What happened?” I asked, quickly making my way over to her. I was keen to get out of here.

She helped me out. “We captured the human and Inil disabled the safety mechanism. It was easy, there’s just one of her.”

What a weird situation. I had so many questions, but I wasn’t going to make the mistake of going in blind this time.

“Get the ship ready for take-off,” I told Atina. “We’re not staying here any longer than necessary.”

“And the human?”

“We take her with us. I want answers, but I’ll get them someplace where I’m in control,” I commanded. I was going

to find out what the human's ulterior motives were. "Where's the human now?"

Atina gestured behind her. "Katak and Estaniu are holding her. She was easy to overpower."

I made my way over to the human who was stubbornly fighting her restraints. I took another good look at her. She had a similar skin color to Heather and the same rounded shells of her ear, but her hair was the dark brown of the honglui tree. Her amber eyes glistened with intelligence and anger but I could deal with that. She wasn't the first person to look at me that way.

A strange calm came over me now that I was back in control. "Who are you?"

"Screw you," she spat.

What a weird name, but Heather had said many times that they had strange customs on their Earth Planet.

"Why did you trick us?" I asked.

Screyu gave me a withering stare. "Let me go."

"Take her to the ship. Put her in a cargo bay," I instructed Katak.

With a nod, the two males pulled the human towards the POTA-2. With a last glance at her small ship, I followed. This whole thing was confusing, but I wasn't going to let one measly female foil me.

We got back to our ship and they took the human away. I returned to the bridge with Atina who got settled in her cockpit while Lini reconnected himself to the ship's mainframe. If we made haste, we could be out of Planet Tarrop's atmosphere and back on course in a few clicks.

"C-Captain?" Lini said with a faint voice. "I'm sorry."

"What?" I joined him by the command panel, where a host of red lights flickered. "No, what's happening?"

"I think I caught a virus from the cruiser," Lini said, turning around to give his brother access. "Performing full

scan of P0TA-2.”

I couldn't breathe while I waited for the results. A virus sounded nasty, and without Lini to help navigate the ship, we were almost guaranteed an accident. It was possible to fly manually without him but not for long and certainly not on unfamiliar routes. That was asking to get hit by a stray asteroid or something.

Inil opened his mouth, revealing the lack of teeth. “Full scan complete. P0TA-2's security changed. Permission to take-off not granted.”

“What? Override it, I'm the captain.”

“Attempting to override. Attempt failed.”

I couldn't believe my ears. This was a real issue. If we didn't have permission to launch, we were stranded. And it was all my fault.

The thought of staying on this cursed planet any longer made me want to punch something. Or someone. I'd been wrong. This wasn't my fault. It was the human's. Screyu. If we were stranded here, I'd use that time to have a long, hard chat with her. That female was going to regret ever trying to trick us.

“While we were trapped, what did she say? What did she want?” I asked my crew.

Atina huffed with annoyance. “Our cargo. She wasn't more specific than that.”

“I doubt she took the time to research our ship. No, she's done this before. Lures well-meaning vessels to her, then blackmails them to hand over their cargo. What a way to make a living. Well, this stops today. I won't have her do this to anyone else. I will interrogate her now, but in the meantime, contact the Intergalactic Authorities. They can pick her up from here, or we can drop her off at their nearest patrol station.”

Lini turned to me, and I knew what he was going to say before he could open his mouths. “The virus has affected our

transmission equipment. We can't send messages at the moment."

I groaned. "How long until it's fixed?"

"Unknown."

Inil and Lini weren't a species that were known for their imagination. They wouldn't give me guesses, only hard facts. Some days, I valued that straight-talking ability, but today, I would have appreciated a bit of hope.

"Alright, let me know once you have an estimate. I want to contact the authorities as soon as possible. I'll be with our prisoner if you need me."

Satisfied that my crew were working their hardest to restore the ship's systems, I hurried to the cargo bay. Estaniu was standing guard outside a shipping container, which he and Katak must have fashioned into an impromptu prison cell. He straightened when he saw me approach.

"Has she said anything?" I asked before peering through the little hatch in the container. The female was sitting at the back of her metal prison, her legs crossed in a funny fashion, seemingly relaxed.

"Yes, but none of it made any sense. I was about to ask Atina's mate to come here and translate for me. She's the same species as this one, isn't she?"

Not a bad idea, but I knew that Screyu spoke enough Kyven to communicate with me. She likely had a translation implant fitted as well; barely anyone traveled through space nowadays without one. Maybe her broken Kyven earlier had all been an act, just like everything else. Anger filled me as I looked at how relaxed she was. She was costing me valuable time and credits by delaying us from our next stop. The least she could do was show some regret for her actions.

"Open the door," I commanded. "I'm going to have a chat with her."

Estaniu hesitated. "Are you sure? She might be dangerous."

I pulled my disembowelment stick from my belt. I didn't like to use it, but sometimes, I didn't have a choice. With this female, I might even enjoy it.

"I'll be fine. Open the door."

This time, he didn't object. I ducked into the container and waited for Estaniu to close the door behind me. He continued to watch us through the hatch. Unnecessary. I hadn't become a ship's captain by being nice and soft. I could handle myself, especially against a feeble human.

Screyu looked up at me but didn't change her posture. Her expression was blank and guarded. I stayed standing, looking down at her sternly.

"Are you going to torture me? It's not going to work."

I realized I still held the disembowelment stick in my left hand. I put it back in its holster and crossed my arms instead.

"I'm not going to torture you."

"Oh?" She seemed surprised. "Then why am I here?"

How stupid was this human? "You tried to steal my cargo. Did you think we'd just let you carry on? You're not a very smart thief."

"Pirate," she corrected automatically.

"What's the difference?"

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. How many limbs could she cross at once? "It's a lifestyle."

"That lifestyle ends today. We're handing you to the authorities. But first, you're going to answer my questions."

"You said you weren't going to torture me."

What was wrong with her? She seemed rather obsessed with torture. Maybe she was into it. I knew some species enjoyed experiencing pain and humiliation. I hadn't realized humans were one of them.

"I will ask questions and you will answer. Easy. What's so hard to understand about that?"

“What if I don’t want to answer?”

“Then...”

I tried to come up with a threat that didn’t include disembowelment. She wouldn’t survive that.

“Then I will destroy your ship. I’m sure you have things on there you don’t want to lose.”

Her expression stayed unreadable. She didn’t reply, but I could see her mind race behind her beautiful bright eyes. Their color reminded me of something, but I wasn’t quite sure what.

When she didn’t say anything, I leaned against the door. “First, why is your Kyven suddenly flawless?”

Screyu didn’t answer immediately; I assumed she was assessing whether I could use her response against her. Finally, she shrugged. “I’m using my implant. I didn’t know what species your crew are, so I didn’t want to rely on my language skills alone.”

“So you really do speak some Kyven?”

“Yes.”

“How many languages do you know?”

That wasn’t something I’d planned to ask, but I was curious. Kyven was a fairly small and unimportant planet on the galactic scale, so it was a strange coincidence that she happened to speak my language.

“Six more or less fluently. I understand at least five more.” She sounded both proud and defiant at once.

Against my better knowledge, I was fascinated. Most beings relied on implants to communicate; very few ever bothered to learn other languages. Some did it as a challenge, others to prove their intellect. I wondered what Screyu’s motivation had been.

“How did you learn that many?”

“By listening.” She spat out the words as if they tasted bad. “I want some food.”

“We’re not done yet.”

“Then ask proper questions.”

That she could have. “How long have you been robbing ships?”

“Define robbing.”

“You know what robbing is.”

“Do I?”

I pushed down the anger bubbling up in me. This woman was doing something to me. She knew exactly what levers to pull. She was manipulating me even now. I wouldn’t have that.

“Just answer my question,” I snapped.

“I want something to eat first.”

“You’ll get something to eat when you tell me how you infected Lini and Inil.”

She gave me a vacant look. “Ah, the green data twins? Well, that’s their fault for hacking into my ship’s system. That’s very rude, you know? And technically, against the laws of the Galactic Union. I could report you for that.”

Her comment made me bristle. She was annoyingly right about that. I felt the urge to poke her a little with the disembowelment stick, but she looked like she might enjoy it. Besides, it would be admitting that she was getting under my skin.

“I’ll be back,” I declared stiffly.

The human waved in a manner I’d seen Heather do and had the nerve to smile. “I’ll be here.”

Infuriating. Positively infuriating.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS impossible to tell how long I'd been in the cargo bay jail, but from my rumbling stomach, I had to guess close to half a day. It was chilly in here, but not nearly as cold as these bays could go. At some point, a guard had thrown both a bottle of water and an empty container into the cell, which I assumed was to be my toilet for my stay here.

The entrance swung open and the captain walked in again with a bowl. "I brought food."

I expected a bowl of vile ship guts or something, but she presented me with a plate that had actual recognizable chunks of meat and plants. A strange meal for a hostage. Then again, everything about this capture was strange. There'd been no poking or prodding, no slapping or cutting. No touching... Those captors were easily the worst.

The captain put the food down in front of me. "Here, eat."

"Is it poisoned?" I asked.

She gave me a weird look. "No, why would I bring you food to poison you? I want answers first."

I accepted the plate and gave it a tentative sniff. My stomach practically roared and it took everything I had in me not to devour it. I handed it back. "I'm not hungry."

"But you asked for food."

"I wanted to see if you would," I replied cheekily, feeling a rush when I could see the annoyance on the captain's face. For a Kyven, she was very expressive. That made this much easier for me.

The captain surprised me by sitting down on the other side of the bay. “You infected our data specialist.”

“They shouldn’t have hacked into my ship.”

“I want the anti-virus. I know you have it,” she said, her voice strained.

She must be mad that I infected her specialist, they always were. Most of these ships were useless without an operator, the downfall of their advanced technology. Nothing was manual anymore.

I looked away, something that was bound to infuriate her, but I wasn’t scared. And even if I was, I refused to show fear. I’d promised myself long ago that I’d never show weakness to these brutes. Besides, there wasn’t anything they could do to me that I hadn’t already endured.

“And what if I won’t give the anti-virus to you?” I taunted, studying my fingernails. I wasn’t sure if my disinterest translated properly, but it made me feel better.

She barely reacted, just raised her eyebrows with mild confusion. “Why wouldn’t you give it to me? I presume you want to trade the cure; otherwise, what’s the point of infecting him?”

Oh, she was a clever one.

“You’re right. Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to let me out of here, you’re going to give me your cargo, then I’ll fly away. When I’m far enough, I’ll give you the cure.”

“And why would we believe that?”

“You’ll just have to trust me,” I said with a smirk.

She shook her head. “That’s not an option. You’re going to give us the cure, and we’ll all go our separate ways without anyone losing their bowels.”

Did she really think she was in a position to bargain?

“I’m not giving you the cure first.”

The captain crossed her arms firmly across her chest. “You’re not in a position to negotiate.”

“No, you’re mistaken. *You*’re not in a position to negotiate. If you don’t let me go, you’ll never be able to start your ship, and you’ll be stranded here. Are you familiar with this planet? There’s not a lot of food around here. If you don’t do what I want, you and your entire crew will become nice little gravestones.”

I could tell from the clear frustration on her face that she knew I had a point. That was the beauty of my ruse, it never failed. They would soon understand that there was no way to cure their operator without my anti-virus and cave.

The captain ate some of the food from the plate she brought, chewing thoughtfully.

My stomach rumbled again, the traitorous thing. Part of me wished I’d accepted the food after all, but I refused to be bribed and tricked with food.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, offering the plate to me again.

I ignored it. “Because I’m out of supplies.”

“It would’ve been easier to go to the store,” she remarked dryly.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. I didn’t realize Kyvens had a sense of humor. Or maybe she was serious. I didn’t know, but it was funny. Then again, that could be from sitting in this cell. Being locked up always made my brain do funny things.

“What’s funny?” the captain asked.

“You.”

“Me?” She seemed genuinely confused.

I didn’t blame her. I was probably unlike anything or anyone she ever met. There weren’t many humans in space, if any. I certainly had never countered another, but then again, I tended to avoid humans. They were just as cruel and awful as the aliens, especially now that I was an outsider.

She seemed to realize that she was showing weakness by so openly displaying her confusion. Her expression hardened, closing off all emotion other than anger. Yes, she was angry at

me for refusing her food. Good. I knew how to deal with that. Anger, fury, aggression, threats. It was part of my routine. Kindness confused me. I'd not had to deal with kindness ever since I'd been abducted from Earth. The last kind smile...

I forced myself to focus. "Let me know when you're ready to accept the deal."

The captain glared at me. "I think a few days without food might change your mind. Tell the guard once you're willing to talk again."

She knocked on the door without sparing me another glance. For some reason, I smiled. They always did this. Threatened me with violence, starvation, whatever their twisted minds could conjure. But in the end, when they realized that there was no way to fix their operators without my anti-virus, they changed their tune. They always did, no matter how brutal and ruthless they were in the beginning. I could handle pain and a few days without food.

I watched the door close behind her and made myself comfortable, thinking of all the cargo I'd soon possess. I'd be able to go a few months without having to steal.

A whiff of something hit my nose and I realised she'd left the bowl of food. Intentional or not? I didn't care. I grabbed the bowl and ate as slowly as I could, savoring every bite.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CAPTIVE CONFUSED me to no end. I paced up and down my living quarters, occasionally glancing at the screen to my right to check on the female. She still sat cross-legged, the empty bowl next to her. She'd been hungry. For a moment, it pained me to think that I was planning to deprive her of food, but then I reminded myself of why she was in the makeshift cell. She was my enemy. She'd threatened not just my life, but also that of Ja'lal while we'd been on her crashed vessel, and now my entire crew and ship. I didn't know why I was even tempted to feel pity towards her. It was none of my business that she was painfully thin. Nor should the haunted look in her eyes affect me.

A gong announced someone outside my door.

"Come in!"

Heather hesitantly stepped into the room. Had she ever been in my quarters before? Unlikely. I saw the human every day, but her mate was always around. I could count the times we'd had a conversation without Atina on one hand. But today, I needed her expertise.

"She's human!" Heather exclaimed, her gaze fixed on my screen. "Where did she come from? How did she end up in space? This shouldn't be possible!"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I'm intending to find out. She is not being very cooperative, however. I need to know more about your species. She refuses to hand me the anti-virus we require to leave this planet. I have to find out her weak

spots. Her pressure points. What can I threaten her with that will have an effect?"

Heather didn't stop looking at the female. "How can she be here? She looks too young to be a professional astronaut and even if she was, NASA hasn't even sent people to Mars yet. We're far from anywhere our probes have reached. She must have been abducted by aliens."

"Does that happen often?" I asked curiously.

"There are a lot of people saying that they've been abducted, but until I met Atina, I always assumed they're just crackpots and lunatics. Or people wanting attention, so they make up a ridiculous story. Now, I could imagine that some of those stories were true. Still, I doubt it happens frequently. The authorities would notice."

I hadn't considered just how unusual it was for a human to have her own spaceship. Maybe I should investigate how she came to get it. If I discovered more about her past, I could use it to break this stalemate and find a peaceful solution.

"Since we don't have any live cargo on board just now, I will assign you a new task," I told Heather. "I will research this human and you will help me interpret our findings. I realize I don't know as much about your kind as I should."

"Can I talk to her?"

"No," I said automatically before I could even think about it. Why did I not want Heather to meet the human? What was I worried about? "Not yet," I said more slowly. "If our research is unsuccessful, you or I will talk to her. But first, we will dig into her past and find out everything there is to know about this pirate."

The bridge would be busy with activity, so I decided to work from my quarters instead. I had a spare console for Heather to use, although I let her get us some drinks and snacks first. My gaze was pulled to the screen again. Screyu had her eyes closed, looking more relaxed than she should.

"I will figure you out," I whispered, a promise to both her and me. It was unnerving how undisturbed she looked. It made

me wonder if she had something else up her sleeve, like the transmitted virus when we hacked into her ship's control. This was so frustrating.

A loud crash and raised voices came from outside and I got up to see what the ruckus was about. Two of my crew members arrived at my quarters carrying a large cage with the colorful bird that had accompanied the human earlier.

“We got the animal,” Griach said, slight smoke coming from the spouts on his head. “But he’s wily.”

As to prove his point, the bird let out a wild shriek and flapped his wings, making the blue feathers change into a fierce pink. He turned his four eyes to me and hissed from his bright orange beak.

If he was trying to intimidate me, I’d faced bigger and badder.

“Put him inside my cabin,” I told the crew, stepping aside so they could bring the bird in. I wasn’t sure yet what the significance of him was, but I’d seen before just how much these humans valued their animal companions. Even if I couldn’t get anything useful out of the bird, maybe I could use him as leverage.

The crew members pushed the cage inwards, and the bird let out desperate calls. I hated having to keep him locked up, but there was too much on the line to be kind.

I waited before they were gone before I directed my attention to the bird. He glared back at me with a fierceness that felt similar to Screyu. As far as I was aware, these kinds of birds weren’t sentient or particularly intelligent, but even from one look, there was something different about this one.

He let out a garble of gibberish sounds and threw himself against the cage. I winced at the sheer force and quickly tossed some ship biscuits at him, hoping that would settle him down. It only seemed to enrage him more and he trampled the biscuits with his talons, stomping them into smithereens.

“Guess you’re not hungry then,” I said to him.

He gave me a loathing look and spread his wings as far as the cage allowed.

“Wow! He’s big!” a voice said from behind me. It was Heather returning with snacks and drinks.

The bird echoed the sound and this time, I registered it as one of the Earth languages. My translator implant must not have been dialled in properly. Then again, why would it? It was an animal and as far as I knew, this variety wasn’t capable of communicating with the locals.

“Did he just repeat what you said?” I asked Heather, wanting to make sure I wasn’t going crazy.

The human dropped the snacks on the nearby table. “He did. That’s neat! It’s like a parrot.”

“Parrot, parrot!” the bird repeated.

“What’s a parrot?” I asked, the word foreign to me.

“It’s a specific type of bird that can repeat sounds and words, like this one.” Heather leaned in closer, and the bird visibly relaxed when she spoke.

Interesting. He must like the sound of her voice or find comfort in hearing a familiar language. Now I was extra glad that I’d sent the crew to catch him. If I could get him to talk, maybe he could tell me how to get a cure.

I leaned down to put myself at eye height with his dominant set of eyes. “Tell me about the virus.”

The bird just stared at me, a vacant look in his colorful eyes.

Heather let out a hum. “Do you really think he’ll know how to cure Lini and Inil?”

“Cure?” the bird echoed almost instantly.

“Yes, cure! Tell me how to cure them!” I shouted at the bird.

He remained quiet again, the little ma’ak.

“I think he can’t or won’t mimic Kyven. He seems to only be repeating my words,” Heather said. “Maybe he only speaks English. That must mean the pirate speaks English, too.”

“English! English! Fuck the English!” the bird cried out, proving her theory right, except that he hadn’t just repeated her, he’d said more.

“Maybe we can use him to get Screyu to talk,” I mused out loud.

“Screyu?” Heather repeated slowly.

“Yes, the pirate. She introduced herself as that.”

“Oh, I doubt that... ‘Screw you’ is kind of a curse.”

Great, so I didn’t even know the pirate’s name? That would make it even harder to establish trust, which we were going to need if we were going to resolve this.

I looked back at the monitor where she was sitting against the back of the container, gazing into the distance. She still looked unbothered and carefree, clearly not worried about being deprived of food or her freedom.

This whole thing was heavily bizarre. Not only were we stranded on a deserted planet, I had a human in captivity and a bird who could speak an Earth language. Or mimic. It wasn’t entirely clear.

Suddenly, I wasn’t so sure about our approach. Everything we’d done so far was exactly what she wanted, starting from responding to her emergency call to hacking into her ship. She’d planned this all out... And now she just had to wait.

A smarter, less stubborn Kyven would have given in already, but I’d refused to hand all my cargo over. Especially without a guarantee that she would give us the cure once we complied with her wishes. One of us was going to have to bend. The main question was... who?

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS hard to estimate how long I'd been in this jail cell, but from past experience, it wouldn't be long until the captain caved. The virus I'd programmed would keep their operator sick, and nobody wanted to be stranded on these planets. No cargo was worth that.

The door opened and it was not a surprise that the captain had returned, her white hair tied up in a typical Kyven braid. She was probably here to make more threats, but there was nothing she could say that could scare me.

She sat down on the other side of the cell. "Let's talk."

"Talk?" I frowned. That was an unusual approach. At this stage, I expected some poking and prodding, maybe a bit of whipping. These aliens liked brute force, but they'd never got close to breaking me. Maybe humans were just more resilient.

"What's your name?" the captain asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"My name doesn't matter."

"It does to me." She opened her mouth in a weird way and wrangled out a vaguely familiar sound. "Englick?"

It took me a moment to register what she meant. "English?"

She nodded. "Englick."

"Englishhh."

"Englisk," she said, the harsh clicking sounds of the Kyven language creeping into the way she pronounced the softer end

of the word.

“Close.” I only realized I was smiling when she smiled at me. I quickly forced my face back to a neutral expression, refusing to be sucked into whatever weird strategy this was. How did she even know what language I was speaking?

“Where are you from?” the captain asked, switching back to Kyven. “Where on Earth?”

She was probably the first alien I’d ever heard use the English name for my home planet rather than the official designation, #47283. I bet she’d done it on purpose to impress me. Maybe this was her strategy. Rather than violence, she’d try to squirrel the cure out of me by pretending to be nice. I wouldn’t fall for it.

“None of your business. How’s your navigator?”

For a second, her smile wavered, but then it returned. She was stunning when she smiled. At first, I’d thought her braided hair was white, but it was actually such a pale shade of blue that it shimmered like silver. Kyvens usually had dark blue hair, so she’d either dyed it, or she was an anomaly. People who were different from the norm usually became outcasts or leaders. In her case, she’d chosen the path to the top. It was hard to guess her age, but I doubted she was much older than me. A young captain, yet clearly in charge, judging from how her crew had followed her orders without hesitation. I almost admired her, but that would lead me down a sticky rabbit hole. I had to remember that she was my enemy. Glancing around my boring metal prison was an easy reminder.

“How did you come to be here?” Ellabee asked instead of answering my snarky question. “How long ago did you leave Earth?”

“Why do you care?”

“You’re strange. A mystery. I like to solve mysteries.”

I watched her closely for any sign of a lie, but she was purposely being as open as possible. And she was still smiling despite my hostility. It confused me to no end, even though I

wouldn't let her see that. Why had she decided to be nice to me?

"Maybe you should focus on curing your navigator," I quipped harshly. "Don't waste your energy on me."

"Are you not worth it?"

That question took me aback. What was I even supposed to say to that? I stayed quiet, glaring at her instead. I wished I had Aba with me. He would have cursed this Kyven in a hundred colorful ways already.

"Where is my bird?" I snapped, ignoring her question. "What did you do to him?"

"What kind of bird is he?"

"Is that all you do? Answering questions with more questions? I have enough of this."

I squiggled around so that my back faced her. It was a risky move, but I couldn't let her see just how much she was unsettling me. I'd lost count of how many ships I'd hijacked, at least two dozen, but their captains had never reacted like this strange woman.

"Now you're being childish," she scolded. "Our conversation isn't over yet."

"You're clearly not interested in answering my questions."

"Neither are you. How about we do a deal? An answer for an answer. We take turns. Honest answers only. I will know if you lie."

Were Kyvens among those dangerous species that could spot a lie? I was pretty sure they weren't, but since I'd had no contact with any Kyvens since my escape from Klen, I wasn't entirely certain. Remembering Ellabee's steel-blue eyes, I could easily imagine her seeing deep into my mind, my soul even. Not that I had a soul, not anymore. All that was left were black scraps of guilt and pain.

"Get us two glasses of honglui juice and some snacks," I heard the captain say to someone outside my cell. "And tell Atina to take control of the bridge. I'll be here for a while."

Footsteps hurried away. Were we left without a guard? Maybe this was an opportunity to escape. Ellabee was taller than me and looked in great shape, but I'd learned some nasty self-defense tricks in the past few years. I could probably take her down before she knew what was happening. But then what? I didn't know where they were holding Aba. I couldn't abandon him. There was no way of searching the ship without getting caught. Fuck. This may be my only opportunity to run, yet here I was, attached to a bloody alien parrot. The irony wasn't lost on me. I was in this situation because of aliens and couldn't get away because, yes, aliens. Aba may not have been particularly clever, but he counted as an alien to me.

"How about you turn around again?" Ellabee said softly. She sounded almost gentle. Without the sharp edge of command, her voice had a soothing quality that made me want to listen to her for hours.

As much as I wanted to resist, this was too good an offer. I'd get answers. And I hadn't agreed to telling the truth. Ellabee had said that, not me. I'd experiment with a few small, insubstantial lies first to see if she could spot them.

Slowly, I turned until I was facing her again. I crossed my arms in front of my chest and glared at the silver-haired woman. In return, she simply smiled. Her patience seemed endless. It made me want to scream with frustration. I preferred my enemies to be dumb, violent, ugly aliens, not beautiful females who smiled at me like nobody had in many, many years. Fuck. I could feel myself softening already by just looking at her. This was unfair.

"How about we start with something simple?" she said with that disarming smile. "What's your name? Your real name."

Did it really matter? It wasn't like she could do anything with that information. But just in case, I'd only give her my first name.

"Georgia."

"She-oor-sheee-aaaah."

She drew my name like those cheese strings I loved as a child. Did they still have cheese strings on Earth, or had they moved on? As so often before, I realized that my home planet was no longer my home. I'd be a stranger there if I ever found my way back.

“Almost. Geor-gi-a.”

Ellabee repeated it again, almost accurately.

“What does it mean?” she asked curiously.

“It's my turn first. Save your question for after. Where is my bird?” I asked, feeling nervous. There weren't many things I cared about, but Aba was one of them. I hoped they weren't mistreating him, or worse, turning him into dinner.

“In my cabin. Don't worry; he's well looked after. Maybe you should tell me what he likes to eat, but I won't waste a question on that.” She gave me a piercing stare that made her eyes sparkle in a frustratingly pretty way. “Do you do this often?”

I shrugged. “It's not my first time.”

“That's not a real answer.”

“You didn't ask the right question. My turn. How are you going to take off without your operator?” I returned, grinning when Ellabee's face fell.

The captain got up from the cell, frustration dancing on her brow, and left without another word. A surge of exhilaration rushed through me, and I basked in the triumph. I might be the one locked up, but I wasn't the one trapped on this planet, and we both knew it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ON CLOSER INSPECTION, the small Xcruiser174 wasn't very impressive. It had rust on the sides, which showed it was stationary for a lot of the time and didn't get cleaned or maintained nearly as much as it should. Some of the parts were mismatched, so Georgia clearly didn't visit official ports for repairs. Maybe she even did them herself. That was both dumb and impressive.

I disliked that I was having complimentary thoughts about Georgia, but I had to hand it to the pirate. She was smart and definitely had the attitude of a captain. If we'd met under different circumstances, maybe I'd even like her.

But we hadn't.

The bird croaked from inside his cage and flapped his four wings, hitting them against the metal ribs of his confinement. I felt bad for keeping him locked up like that, but I'd seen Georgia's response. She definitely cared about that animal, and I intended to use it to my advantage.

Two of my crew members came out of the ship and one held up his scanner. "All clear, no hidden traps, but all the systems are encrypted."

"That's okay, I just want to have a look around." I gestured to the bird. "Can you help me bring him inside? I want to see if he'll talk again."

The crew helped me carry the cage into the ship and they departed with a thoughtful nod, leaving me with Georgia's things. Hopefully, something about this would help me figure

out how to cure Lini and Inil without having to give in to her blackmail.

I wandered through the main living area of the ship, taking in the sight around me. There was a lot of clutter around that reminded me of something Atina once said about the sentients of Earth. They were a sentimental sort. That much was clear from all the trinkets everywhere, most of which I didn't even recognise.

The bird let out a shrill shriek. "All aboard, all aboard!"

"Yes, we're on board, tell me more," I encouraged him.

He stared at me like I was the one with four eyes.

Right, he didn't understand Kyven.

"Englisk?" I tried, twisting my tongue to make the soft sound at the end.

"English! English! Fuck the English!" he repeated happily.

"Yes, good!" I tried to remember how Georgia pronounced her name. "Georshia?"

The bird's reaction was instant. "Georgia! Georgia is the best!"

I chuckled, amused by him. I could see why she kept him around, especially in a one-man ship.

"Yes, Georshia. Georshiaaa," I drew out, trying to pronounce her name properly.

"Georgia! Georgia? Where are you? Where are you?"

That was a good question and one I wasn't going to answer. But it gave me more of their English words to mimic and hopefully, that could trigger more conversation with the bird. He was certainly more talkative than Georgia and since he could only echo and mimic, maybe I could get something useful out of him.

I picked up a nearby item, some sort of ball on a string, and held it out to the bird.

"Let's play some games! Let's play some games!"

“Gamesh? Plaj?” I echoed, doing my best to recreate the sounds as accurately as I could. It was hard to distinguish his original language while my translator spoke in my head, but I was managing just about.

The bird flapped his wings. “Play! I want to play, but there’s nobody to play with.”

“Nowboodie.”

“Nobody! All alone, all alone! Nobody cares for me!”

I felt my gut twist. These all had to be things that she said to him once, and it made me somehow feel sorry for the pirate holding me and my entire crew hostage. I had to wonder why she’d even resorted to a ruse like this. There had to be easier ways to get supplies and rations than stealing them from other ships. Maybe that was something I could ask her when we spoke next.

With a sigh, I picked up another item, some sort of ticking thing with dials, but I couldn’t make out what it was supposed to be either. None of this was going to help me out.

I moved to the control section of the ship and turned the power on, but it was all encrypted like the crew had said. And without Lini, there was definitely no way to break into it. When we got out of here, I was definitely going to hire another one just in case. Or maybe next time, I wouldn’t just mindlessly respond to an emergency call no matter what.

“Time to fly!” the bird cawed.

It sounded surprisingly enthusiastic. Was it mimicking Georgia’s love of flying, or was that the bird’s sentiment? It was hard to tell. I made a mental note to have the POTA-2’s AI compile a report on the animal’s species and just how intelligent they were. That would make interpreting its exclamations easier.

“Yes, flaaay,” I said in English, hoping to encourage it to say more. But this time, it only cocked its head, looking at the controls, then at the dark screens in front of us. If the ship hadn’t been encrypted, I may have been tempted to take it for a quick spin to see if that would make the bird talk. But as

things were, I didn't have a single ship capable of flying. I suppressed a curse. This had to be one of the lowest points of my career. What good was a captain without a functional ship?

"If you're not going to divulge anything else, let's head back."

The bird stared at me, then opened and closed its beak several times before semi-whispering, "Sorry. Sorry."

"Sorry?" I repeated in surprise. Again, I could hear the emotion in his quiet squawk.

"I have to, sorry. I'm sorry."

If I'd had my eyes closed and only heard the bird's voice, I would have sworn it was a sentient apologising for something terrible they'd done. If it was echoing Georgia, then did that mean that she wasn't a pirate out of passion but necessity? Or was it an apology for something else she'd done?

"You're giving me more questions than answers," I complained. "Can't you just tell me what I want to know?"

"Tell, tell, tell."

"Now you're just repeating me."

Its colours changed to bright red. "Me. Good parrot. Clever parrot. Verrrry good parrot."

"Ugh. I guess it's time to go. I will get more out of Georgia than you."

"Georrrrgia! Georgia is the best!"

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the bird's cage, carrying him carefully back out. If I'd been a crueller person, maybe I would have hurt him to get Georgia to do what I wanted, but that was against my nature. Besides, after hearing him say all these things, I couldn't help but feel sad for Georgia.

When I saw her tomorrow, I would try a different approach.

CHAPTER NINE

THE DOOR to the cell opened and I jolted from my light slumber. It wasn't easy to get good sleep in a place like this, but I'd had worse nights, most of which I owed to my own brain and the nightmares it created.

Captain Ellabee stepped inside with breakfast on a tray — or whatever meal of the day this was. I'd lost track a while ago. She kept threatening to withhold food, but she never did, which was very unusual. Most aliens had no qualms about depriving me of my basic necessities and adding some pain and torture on top. None of that had happened here; the only thing I was lacking was my freedom, but that was to be expected given the circumstances.

“Good morning,” she said, handing me the tray without asking questions or making demands.

I frowned, confused about the whole thing. “You're not going to make me work for it?”

“No, I thought we could just talk today.”

“Talk?” I almost let out a sneering laugh. She was mistaken if she thought she could take me off guard with a good-cop routine. I could see right through her.

Ellabee nodded and sat down on the other side of the cell. “Maybe I could tell you something about myself first?”

“Be my guest,” I returned sarcastically, not even sure if Kyvens even understood sarcasm. They were very direct, so maybe the finer passive-aggressiveness of life would go right over her head.

“I never wanted to be a captain,” she said, her voice calm and soft for a Kyven. “I had plans to be a manitara. Do you know what that is?”

“No,” I replied, rolling my eyes.

“It’s someone who works with credits and accounts.”

“An accountant?” I couldn’t hold back my surprise. The fierce silver-haired captain in front of me wanted to be an accountant?

Ellabee nodded, a sad look appearing in her eyes. “I’m good with numbers. I was right on track to get my qualifications when my parents astralised and my whole world fell apart.”

That word didn’t translate either, but I understood what she meant from the sad look in her eyes. There was a kind of pain in them that I recognized from my own look in the mirror, a type of loss that left a hole that could never be filled. I felt sorry for her until I remembered who she was and that she was my captor.

I crossed my arms. “I don’t see how any of that is relevant.”

“I know what it’s like to be lost and alone,” she said, her gaze locking with mine. “Just like you are.”

It felt strangely intimate, and I quickly looked away. “I’m not lost or alone. I have Aba and we’re just fine.”

“Aba. Is that the name of your bird?” Ellabee asked.

Shit, I shouldn’t have let that slip. The less they knew about me, the better.

Frustrated, I clenched my hands into tight fists. “I don’t care about your sad story. When are you going to realize that you won’t get off this planet without me giving you the anti-virus? Just hand over your cargo and we can each go our merry way.”

Ellabee gave me an indecipherable look. “That’s not going to happen. We will crack your system and figure out what you’ve done to Lini and Inil.”

“Good luck with that. Nobody has ever managed it before. Just know that the longer you take, the sicker your operator gets. You don’t want to be responsible for their death, do you?” I bluffed. The virus wasn’t meant to kill; I wouldn’t have any leverage if they died, but they didn’t have to know that. As long as they thought it was fatal, that was the main thing. Sooner or later, they all gave in to the pressure.

“Why are you doing this? For the money? Why don’t you just get an honest job instead?” She sounded both curious and exasperated.

I could have told her how it was impossible to be employed as an unregistered alien from an unknown planet. Earth wasn’t part of any of the intergalactic treaties that controlled laws, taxes, and other boring stuff, which meant I couldn’t legally work. I also couldn’t return home, because, money. There were no regular ships bound for Earth and my own little cruiser wasn’t powerful enough to make the journey. I once had the AI calculate the chances. It had told me that I had a two percent probability of reaching the planet alive — within twenty years. I’d decided to use that time to earn enough money to charter a bigger ship instead. Or steal one, if I ever got the chance. Ellabee’s ship was certainly big enough for that trip, but it couldn’t be flown by a single person. It needed a crew and operators able to link with the interface.

“Why are you smiling?” Ellabee demanded. I hadn’t even realized that a smirk had crept across my lips.

“Because you’re funny,” I said. Just because she didn’t get the joke didn’t mean it wasn’t funny.

“I am not,” she bit back.

“Now you sound like a child.”

“I... Ah, you’re impossible! Infuriating! I don’t know why I even bother,” she exclaimed.

“Neither do I. Why do you bother? Why do you keep bringing me food even though you threaten to starve me every time we talk?”

“Because it’s the decent thing to do,” she snapped, her steel-blue eyes blazing. “Just like it was the right thing to do to follow your distress call. That’s what makes this worse. The only people you trap are decent people wanting to help. They don’t deserve this. *I don’t deserve this.*”

My smile froze into something ugly and painful. She was right. I’d had that exact thought many, many times before. And yet I still did it. Because it was the fastest way to get credits, to get home.

Ellabee unceremoniously slammed the food tray on the floor. “I think it’s time I go. I’m wasting my time with you.”

She turned to leave. I didn’t know what made me call for her to stop.

“What?” she snapped.

“How’s my bird?”

“Talking too much. Just like you aren’t talking enough. I just wish anything he said made sense.”

I had to suppress a smile. That was exactly how I felt about Aba. Sometimes I just wanted him to shut up, but at the same time, I was desperate to know what went on in that scaled little head of his.

“Thank you for looking after him,” I forced myself to say.

“This is between you and me. He is innocent.”

She was so reasonable, so honorable, that for some reason, I felt like crying. Not that I ever cried. I’d stopped that a long time ago. I could fake tears if I felt it would give me an advantage during an interrogation or a torture session, but they weren’t real.

Captain Ellabee was confusing me yet again. I reacted to her so very differently from what I was used to. I just couldn’t predict what she was going to do next. It both scared and excited me.

“He really likes Avillian groundnuts,” I muttered when she once again turned to leave.

She made a choked sound, almost like a chuckle, then the door shut behind her, leaving only silence and my endlessly circling thoughts.

CHAPTER TEN

ATINA'S red-haired mate sat on my lounge, looking stiff and uncomfortable. Maybe I should offer for her to work in her own cabin if she didn't like being in mine.

I took a seat at the table, careful not to disturb the snoozing bird too much. It half opened one eye, blinked at me, then seemed to decide that I wasn't worth waking up for and continued sleeping.

"Have you found anything?" I asked Heather.

"Yes. How do I get this to show on the big screen?"

I took the tablet from her and sent the data to my viewscreen. A picture of a human girl caught my eye among all the alien text. Was that...?

"I managed to access a British database of missing people," Heather said, pride shimmering in her voice. "No idea how I can even get that information from space, but I'm glad I was able to. There are only five girls named Georgia that have gone missing in the past few decades, but going by age, ethnicity, and hair color, this one looks like the one. Georgia Stockwood disappeared without a trace the day after her fifteenth birthday. She disappeared from a village not far from mine, actually. They interviewed all sorts of suspects, but nobody was ever charged with her kidnapping."

"She looks about fifteen, so her abduction can't have been long ago," I mused.

Heather looked at me strangely, then chuckled. "For a moment I forgot that Kyven years are different from ours.

Earth years are shorter, so fifteen means she wasn't even an adult yet. I can't remember the exact calculation, but I think it was about times 1.8 to get from Kyven to Earth age. I'd have to ask my cousin; she will know."

"Oh. How old does she look to you?"

"Maybe mid-twenties? That would mean she's been away from Earth for ten years." Heather's eyes widened. "Wow, poor girl. I can't imagine what she must have been through..."

I couldn't help but peek at the small screen showing Georgia in her cell. She'd curled up on the floor, her face hidden under her unruly hair. She'd just become even more intriguing. To have been taken from a backwater planet like Earth and thrust into life in space... it was a miracle she was still alive.

I forced myself to focus back on Heather. "What else did you find?"

"Not much. I was about to look into her ship, where it came from and who it used to belong to when you came back. Want me to continue?"

"No, I'll take it from here. I need you and Atina to check the Xcruiser174 and see if you can figure out the encryption."

Heather gave me a worried look. "I'll try, but I can't make any promises. I know how to google, but I don't have a clue about spaceships."

"Yes, but if you're from the same area and speak English, maybe you'll find a way in," I reasoned, hoping that she would. If we couldn't get into the system, we'd have no choice but to give in to her demands before Lini and Inil perished.

She nodded. "Okay, I'll do that. If you need any more help, let me know."

"Need help, need help," the bird echoed sleepily. For some reason, I thought he sounded relieved.

Once Heather was gone, I got to work to retrace Georgia's steps. Every ship came with its own identification code and registration. While I couldn't access that, some of the parts she

used to make repairs had their own serial numbers, and those could be tracked.

I fed the digits into the database, one of the few servers we could still use. I didn't fully understand how the virus worked, but it seemed to block all outgoing communications but allowed some in. I didn't know if that was by accident or on purpose, but I was going to take advantage of it to find out as much as I could about Georgia.

I got a hit on one of the serial numbers that were from a batch that had gone missing a good while ago. The article claimed that they lost the parts in a fire during transit, but I knew that was code for saying they got stolen. No captain liked to admit they were robbed, and if I was forced to hand my cargo over to Georgia, I'd concoct my own story to explain it to our clients. It was hard enough to get return customers; I didn't need them thinking I was incompetent.

Curious, I checked the timestamp and calculated that this had happened shortly after she was abducted from her planet. That proved she'd been doing this for a long time. It made me wonder what exactly happened and why she hadn't tried returning to her home planet.

Or maybe she had. I tried to put myself in her situation. She had neither family nor friends nor crew to help her. She'd been taken from her home and thrust into a world she didn't understand. She would have had no money when she'd been abducted. And no one to turn to.

The thought made me angry. Whoever had taken her may still be out there. I should try and find out their name from Georgia. Maybe I could alert the authorities. As much as my throatfilters itched with the urge to take the abductors on myself, I couldn't endanger my crew for a personal vendetta.

Huh. Personal. For some reason, I felt like I had to protect Georgia. That made no sense at all. That female had broken my ship and my operators. Inil and Lini were still fighting the virus and had to be under constant medical and technical supervision. I should take Georgia to the authorities, not worry about whoever had abducted her.

I realized I was fiddling with my braids, a clear sign that I was agitated. I'd thought I'd shaken that annoying habit a while ago. Luckily, there was nobody to witness my momentary loss of composure. The bird had its head tucked underneath one wing. What had Georgia said? Aba liked Avillian groundnuts. I should see if we had any on board. That might get it to divulge some more useful information. But for now, I had to focus on the task at hand.

After entering another fifty or so serial numbers, I was convinced that Georgia's ship was only held together by luck and bravery. It seemed almost every part of it had been stolen, then used and reused in various ways. She'd even repurposed a food processor chip to keep the main engine running. It was both genius and an accident waiting to happen. How she'd not crashed for real was a miracle. And I didn't even believe in miracles.

I couldn't help but admire the female. She was clearly more intelligent than I'd given her credit for. She wouldn't have had any formal training in technology, not at the age she'd been abducted, so she must have taught herself how to operate her cruiser. I now saw both the ship and its owner with new eyes.

"Shoorshhhie," the bird suddenly muttered into its feathers, startling me. I stared at it, but it kept its head under its wing, clearly still asleep. It took me a moment to understand what it had said. Georgie. Aba missed its owner.

My hearts hurt a little as I watched the bird sleep. As much as I hated being caught by Georgia, I hated being her captor even more. Maybe it was time to accept that this stalemate had gone on long enough and cut her loose. I'd walk away without cargo and a serious dent in my pride, but at least I wouldn't be another bad guy in her story.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DOORS to the cargo bay opened wide and Ellabee came in with a determined expression. I'd seen that look before. That was usually when they decided they were done playing nice.

I fought against my body's reflexes to curl into a ball. I wasn't scared, and there was nothing she could take from me that hadn't been taken before.

She tossed me something and a bundle of metal landed in my lap. Cuffs.

I frowned, surprise flitting through me. "What's that for?"

"You've been in here for a while. I'm betting you miss the sun."

"I don't. The sun is too harsh for me," I replied casually, refusing to let her know just how desperate I was to be outside again.

"Fresh air then."

It was physically painful to keep my body still and not dash out like an eager puppy. I couldn't let my guard down, no matter how much the promise of fresh air was tempting me. This was all a game to make me compliant and grateful and break me.

"It's not that fresh," I countered, biting the inside of my cheek so I didn't forget that she was my enemy. They all were. Humans, aliens, all of them were capable of hurting me.

Ellabee rolled her eyes, a gesture I'd never seen any Kyven do. "Just get up so we can go for a walk? Unless you'd rather

stay here.”

This was definitely a trick, but I wouldn't say no to the opportunity to escape or stretch my legs. I put the cuffs on but didn't lock them properly. I couldn't leave the planet without Aba, but it would be preferable if I wasn't in their custody.

I crossed the cell to the entrance where Ellabee blocked my path. I gave her an innocent look. “What?”

She gestured to my arms. “I want to check the cuffs.”

Not surprising. I lifted my hands up and she took them in hers, her touch surprisingly gentle. Her blue fingers travelled up my wrist and a tingle ran up my arms from where she examined me. Her hands were strong and the six fingers didn't look nearly as odd as when I'd first seen them. The way they moved together was slightly mesmerising, and I forgot what she was doing until they reached the cuffs. She tugged on the metal and clicked them together properly when she realised they were only half on.

I gave her my best disarming smile. “Oops, I must not have put them on correctly. I don't go around cuffing myself.”

She just hummed and nodded towards the exit. “Let's go.”

It felt surreal that I was walking out of the cell without a single scratch or even a rumbling stomach. I had no doubt I'd be back here when she didn't get what she wanted from me but as far as captivity went, this had been the easiest few days ever.

Two crew members were waiting outside as well, but they ignored me, clearly just standing guard. I had a good look around and realised I was being kept in the cargo bay, which was kind of ironic given the nature of my request. Ellabee gestured for me to follow her to the open loading dock and on our way out, I marvelled at the vast quantities of holds and bays. I could only guess what they contained, but this was going to be a good haul for me.

I descended the ramp and held my hands up to shield my eyes from the sun. It was still early, but the weather seemed lovely. The soft breeze was even better; it played with my hair

and tickled my skin. If it wasn't for my cuffed hands, it would've felt like freedom.

Ellabee let out a little smug chuckle. "Knew you'd like the outside."

I felt like giving a clever retort, but I was enjoying the moment too much. I wasn't going to let her take that away from me. I was sure it wouldn't be long until I was soaring through the stars again and enjoying sunrises on my own time, but I never took the future for granted. This could be the last thing I saw before Ellabee did unspeakable things to me, although it seemed unlikely.

A caw drew my attention and I turned, my heart soaring when two crew members were pushing a large cage outside. Aba flapped his wings when he saw me and whistled a happy tune.

"Aba!" I hurried towards my bird and attempted to stick my hands through the bars, but my cuffs didn't let me.

"Aba! Aba! Aba!" he echoed happily.

"No, you dumb bird, I'm Georgia."

"Georgia! Georgia! My name is Georgia!" He pressed his head against the bars so I could tickle him with a finger. "That's the spot!"

I laughed at his silliness until I remembered where I was and why we were separated in the first place. Ellabee was watching me with a weird look on her face, and I suddenly felt weirdly vulnerable, more so than when she had me locked up in the cell. It dawned on me that she'd done this to catch me off guard. Now I'd shown her just how much I loved this stupid bird.

My mouth turned ashen at the realisation and I felt like crying, a sensation I hadn't had in years. I refused to show weakness, so I turned away from Aba, ignoring his happy cawing. For his safety, it was better to pretend I didn't care, although I wasn't sure if she would still believe that.

"You really care about that bird," Ellabee said. It wasn't a question. It was a statement.

“I’m raising him for slaughter,” I lied, although she clearly didn’t believe me.

She shook her head dismissively. “Everyone has something they care about. I’m tired of this stalemate. We’re going to negotiate and come to a solution before this gets even more out of hand, understood?”

A chill ran up my spine. I’d heard plenty of pleas, threats and curses, but this was different. This was a command, and from the steel look in her eyes, I knew this was the best offer I was going to get.

“What do you have to offer besides the cargo that I will get one way or another?” I challenged. The two or three times I had been in this situation previously, my captors would threaten me with taking my life or my limbs. I should have known that Ellabee was going to be different.

“Passage to your home planet.”

I didn’t understand at first. Her lips moved, but the words didn’t seem to enter my ears at the same time. Or maybe my brain just didn’t process them. It took me several seconds to get the message and even then, I wasn’t sure if I’d misheard.

“What?”

“I can take you to planet #47283, also known as Earth. That’s where you’re from, right?”

She was toying with me. She had to. She was dangling this beautiful, gorgeous carrot in front of me and as soon as I tried to take a bite, she’d jank it back. I knew I wouldn’t be able to deal with the disappointment.

“You’re bluffing. Nobody ever flies to Earth. It’s not on any of the trade routes. It would probably cost you more in fuel than your cargo is worth.”

Ellabee’s piercing blue gaze moved to something behind me. “Heather, would you join us?”

I swirled around only to be faced with the first human I’d seen in ten long, lonely years.

I'd have rubbed my eyes if my hands hadn't been cuffed. The woman in front of me was slightly older than me, freckles dotted all over a pale face that was framed by beautiful ginger hair. With her faded t-shirt revealing impressive arm muscles, she looked like someone who didn't shy away from physical work.

She smiled at me, a smile that reached all the way to her eyes.

I didn't return the smile. Instead, I faced Ellabee again, fuming.

"A hologram? You're trying to trick me. Nice try. But there's no way there's an actual human here."

"I'm real," the hologram said in a kind voice. "I know it will be hard to believe, but you're not the only woman who has met aliens and travelled through space."

I refused to look at her again. She was just an illusion. Ellabee wasn't playing fair, that meant I didn't have to, either. Negotiating my arse. She wasn't interested in it at all. She just wanted to explore my weaknesses and take advantage of them. But I wouldn't let her. She was going to regret this. I was going to make her pay.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THIS WASN'T GOING AS PLANNED. I'd imagined Georgia to be happy, grateful even when she met Heather. Instead, she stared at me as if I'd physically hurt her. I wasn't sure how to react. Whenever I tried to be nice to her, she misunderstood my intentions.

"Georgia," Heather said softly.

Maybe I should tell the human to leave. I didn't want her to get hurt in case our captive let go of the fury shimmering in her eyes. Georgia was in cuffs, but I'd learned not to underestimate her.

"I will show you that I'm not a hologram," Heather continued. Before I could stop her, she stepped closer to Georgia and hugged her.

Stars. This had been a bad idea. Atina would hold me personally responsible if something happened to her mate. I may have been the captain, but I wasn't immune to mutinies.

I was about to pull the two females apart when I heard the tiniest whisper from Georgia.

"You're real."

Looking over Georgia's shoulder, Heather gave me a meaningful look. I stepped back to let this unforeseen situation unfold, although my muscles were tense, ready to jump in if necessary. The redhead held my captive in a gentle but close embrace.

Something cold and bitter stirred in my belly, a feeling I'd never experienced. For a moment, I wanted to tear them apart,

making sure that Heather stopped touching Georgia. I crossed my arms in front of my chest to stop myself from doing anything stupid. Whatever this feeling was, I could conquer it. Besides, why would I even want to touch the captive? She was a pirate, a gorgeous pirate, yes, but in the end she was just a criminal.

“You’re real,” Georgia repeated slowly. “How?”

“I can tell you my full life story later, but for now, all you have to know is that I am human, that I’m here by my own free will, and that Captain Ellabee wants to help you.”

I mentally cursed her for saying the last bit. She’d revealed too much. It wouldn’t help in the negotiations, if we ever got to that stage.

“Where are you from?” Georgia asked.

Heather replied with an English word that sounded like gibberish to me, but it Georgia seemed to recognise it.

“Were you also taken by the Ska’av? Did they experi-”

“No,” Heather said quickly. “Long story, but I was taken by my cousin’s mate. It wasn’t against my will, not really. Well, I didn’t know we’d end up living on an alien planet, but Tamsia never really lied to us. She just didn’t give us the full truth.”

“The Ska’av?” I interrupted their chatter. “I thought they were a myth. Did they abduct you?”

Heather gently let go of Georgia, making that coldness in my belly abate a little. The pirate looked at me, her confused expression betraying a storm of emotions. She was vulnerable just now. I could have taken advantage of that, but I didn’t want to. If half of the things I’d heard about the Ska’av were true, this female had suffered more than anyone ever should.

“They did,” she replied, her voice flat but her eyes swimming with turmoil.

“How did you escape?”

“They sold me when I got too old for their personal taste to a rich but dumb alien that I killed on my way out.” The way

she relayed the facts was detached, like she was recalling someone else's story, not her own past.

Now I felt even worse for taking her captive, although she'd forced my hand in the way she'd orchestrated the whole situation. But hopefully, we'd be able to move forward now that I'd extended this offer. It would only work if she wanted to return to Earth but from the way she reacted, I would bet she did.

Georgia stared at me, her hands still clenched tightly. From what I'd learned about their species, this wasn't good.

Heather sensed it too, and reached out to Georgia, touching her shoulder in what seemed to be a soothing gesture. I grimaced seeing it but also committed it to memory. If I was going to get along with Georgia, I'd have to learn these things. I didn't know why it mattered to me, but the more I learned about the human female, the more I felt compelled to help her. Even if she was treating me like her enemy.

"If you have any more questions, I'd be happy to answer them later," Heather said in a tone she normally used to calm down the rashipis when they got too rowdy. It seemed to work on our pirate too. They exchanged a silent look of understanding before Heather returned inside.

I made a good call letting her join the crew.

Once she was gone, I turned my attention back to Georgia who seemed even more conflicted.

"How do I know you'll keep your word and not turn me in at the nearest Galactic station?" she asked.

A small, petty part of me that was upset about what she did to Lini and Inil. I wanted to throw her earlier words back in her face and tell her she'd just have to trust me, but that wasn't going to get us anywhere.

"What do I need to do so you'll trust me?" I returned the question.

Georgia stared back at me, her expressive eyebrows knitted together. "I'll never trust you."

I didn't know why that statement stung but it did, not that I could blame her if she'd been abducted by the Ska'av. Compared to them, Georgia was barely a pirate. She wasn't even a bad person, just a damaged individual that could do with some kindness and compassion.

And that started with me.

I reached for the key in my pocket. "Hold out your hands."

She did as I asked, remaining silent as I undid the cuffs and put them away. This was a big gamble, but it wasn't like I had another choice. Whether I liked it or not, Georgia was the one making the decisions here. If she didn't like my offer, I'd have to hand over my cargo if I wanted to get out of here.

Georgia stared at me, her eyes darkened. "What if I decline?"

"Then I'll hand over as much cargo as your ship can carry and you can go back to this... life, if that's what you want to call it. Robbing good people, travelling from abandoned planet to abandoned planet without anywhere to belong. Never returning to Earth and finding your family," I said. To show her I meant it, I opened Aba's cage.

The bird flew out instantly and collided with Georgia. She squealed and tried to perch him on her arm, something he didn't seem very good at. His claws dug into her arms, leaving red streaks, but she didn't seem to notice. Instead, she babbled sweet nothings in a high voice and Aba repeated them eagerly. Her face lit up with a real smile and it was wonderful to see her eyes sparkle. Watching them together, it was clear there was a soft side to the stoic Georgia, and I was eager to see more of it.

She turned to me, her face back to a neutral expression, but it didn't hold nearly the same mystery anymore. "What about my ship?"

"We can leave it here or take it with us. We have enough space in the cargo hold."

"And you won't turn me in to the authorities?"

"No, you have my word."

“Your word means nothing to me.”

I chuckled at her retort; that was exactly what I thought she'd say. “It doesn't have to mean anything to you. You just have to know how much my word means to me and that I'll honour it. It's your choice. If you give me the anti-virus, I will take you to your planet. If you don't, you can have my cargo and we'll never see each other again.”

The way she looked at me with her piercing eyes made it feel like she was staring right into my soul. I wondered if all humans liked eye contact so much or if it was just her.

“I get to take my ship and Aba?”

“Yes, you'll be a guest on my ship.”

“I'll need to access my ship to get the anti-virus. Alone,” she said.

I gestured to the cage. “You can, but Aba will stay with me.”

Georgia raised one eyebrow. “You don't trust me?”

“No, I'd be a fool to trust you.”

“Then why should I trust you?”

“Because I'm the person who responded to your call for aid. I haven't harmed you or your bird.”

She pressed her forehead against that of the bird. Some strange way of communicating? Maybe I'd done it all wrong, relying on the animal's random exclamations. With a deep sigh, Georgia wrangled Aba back into the cage that I was holding open. The bird stared at me with four angry eyes, clearly not happy to be separated from its owner again already.

“You won't have to wait for her for very long,” I told it soothingly.

A tickle at the tip of my ears made me look at Georgia. She was watching me strangely.

“You're talking to my bird.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, we’ve had some interesting discussions already. Isn’t that right, Aba?”

I didn’t really expect the bird to respond, but to my surprise, he cawed, not looking as angry anymore. “Georgia! Ella! Bee! Georgia! Aba!”

“He knows my name,” I cooed before I could stop myself. Aba pushed his chest out in pride. Or maybe I was just seeing what I wanted to see.

“He doesn’t usually talk to other people,” Georgia muttered. “I hope you didn’t teach him any naughty words. He knows way too many of them already.”

“You swashbuckling waste of galactic space!” Aba responded gleefully, as if to prove a point. “Rak, rak, rak!”

I ignored the bird and pointed at the pirate’s little cruiser. “If you want this deal, you better go and set up the anti-virus.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I FELT her piercing stare on my back all the way to the entrance of my ship. My steps were heavy with doubt. Was I really going to just hand over the anti-virus to the captain? I couldn't trust her. I couldn't trust anyone. I'd never met an alien who stuck to their word. Ellabee wasn't the first one who'd tried to charm me with pretty promises. In the end, they'd turn out to be empty. She was going to betray me, just like everyone I'd met since my abduction. Aba was the only reliable being and he was, well, a parrot. Not exactly a role model.

Everybody lies. It was my mantra. The first rule of my pirate handbook. They lied, so I lied in return. Honesty got you killed. And I didn't intend to die any time soon.

But there had been another human, Heather. Was she lying as well? Was she in on Ellabee's deception? Or...

I didn't dare to hope. Hope was just as deadly as honesty. I was so close to my goal. Only a few more ships to free of their cargo and I'd have enough credits to get home. I had to lie low after every robbery, so it would take me at least a year, maybe longer. And every time I ran the risk of my prey killing me out of anger for getting them caught in my trap. I had enough scars to prove that being a pirate was a dangerous business.

Maybe I should risk it. Maybe I could trust Ellabee and Heather. Passage home... it seemed too good to be true, but didn't everyone deserve some luck at least once in their life? I'd been through so much shit that I was owed some luck.

The inside of the ship was utter chaos. Ellabee or her crew had clearly searched every inch of it in the hope of finding the anti-virus. My belongings were strewn across the floor, drawers stood open, and several alarm lights were blinking frantically. I gritted my teeth. They could have at least cleaned up after themselves. Not that I was surprised in the slightest that they'd searched the ship. Everyone did. It's why I didn't keep any truly personal things on board. Not that I had many of them.

I sat on my chair and winced at the angle the back was now set to. Someone much taller must have been sitting here while I'd been in captivity. I hated other people using my stuff, especially my super-comfy pilot chair. I readjusted it until I was comfortable again, then turned off the security alarms one by one. Out of curiosity, I opened some of the computer logs to see what Ellabee's technicians had done to my ship. It was the usual; some scans, some attempted hacks, some physical attacks on the interfaces. Nothing new there. If I ended up accepting Ellabee's offer, I could bargain for something by training her crew to be better at this. It was always good to keep several aces in my hand, just in case.

Now that the lights had stopped blinking, I could focus on the next step. Option one was to take off, escape to freedom, leaving Aba behind. No way. He'd saved my life more than once. I wouldn't abandon him now.

Option two was to take Ellabee's offer. Give her the anti-virus in return for passage to Earth. I didn't even need her cargo if she got me home to my planet. Alien products would be more trouble than worth there. It would be hard enough to explain my absence. I wasn't quite sure how much time had passed there, as none of the alien calendars matched that of Earth, but it had to be at least ten years. I didn't even know if my dad was still alive. Was he still searching for me or had he given up hope long ago? And would he believe my crazy story? I'd imagined so many times how our reunion would go. In my nightmares, my dad didn't believe me and pushed me away. In my dreams, he welcomed me back with open arms, giving me the happy life I craved.

Option three. Deceive Captain Ellabee yet again. Pretend to accept her offer, then steal her cargo and run as fast as I could. Or take over her ship. If it was capable of travelling to Earth, I could force them to fly there without having to trust in her word.

The third option sounded the most reliable. It was something Georgia the pirate would do. But for a short moment today, when Heather had hugged me, I'd felt human again. The kind, gentle, nice girl I'd once been. Maybe it was worth a try.

I started typing, programming the anti-virus to be transmitted to Ellabee's ship. And if this failed and she betrayed me, there was always an alternative.

It didn't take too long for the anti-virus to reach Ellabee's ship. It would perk their operator up right away. Once that was done, I turned the encryption back on so nobody else could commandeer it. Some people would call me paranoid, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

Once Ellabee had full control of her ship, that was when I was at my most vulnerable. If she was going to lash out, it would be now. Weirdly enough, I kind of hoped she would. It would be reassuring and familiar, whereas this whole thing was just bizarre. Why would she want to help me when all I did was trick, threaten, and mock her?

I got up from the pilot chair and gathered things from around my ship that I didn't want to lose. I didn't know if I'd be able to keep them on my person so I figured I'd hide them in one of my usual spots and return for it, if Ellabee turned on me.

With a last look at my thrashed lounge, I heaved my backpack over my shoulder and got out from the side exit where nobody else could see me. There was a nearby hollow tree that I'd used before to keep some supplies, so I stuffed my belongings in it. There was a good chance I wouldn't be able to come back to retrieve them, but at least they couldn't be used against me.

Even though my ship was coming with me, I gave it a little pat on my way back, just in case this was all going pear-shaped. “Thanks, B3RR-Y. You’ve been a good home.”

Without the virus, I had a lot less power and control over the situation and that was terribly scary. Still, I also felt something I didn’t even know I was capable of anymore.

Hope.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I PRESSED my wrist against the scanner and the door to the cabin slid open with a hiss. It was a little dusty since nobody had lived here for a while, but it would do well for my new... guest.

“How’s this?” I asked, gesturing around.

Georgia observed the room with those sharp eyes of hers, swiping a finger over the shelf and letting out a little hum. She didn’t say anything and paused by the sleeping pod, examining it carefully.

“I updated it so it has a sleep setting,” I said quickly. “It’s what Heather uses.”

“You expect me to sleep in a coffin?”

“Coffin?” I echoed, not sure if I misunderstood the word or if it was translated badly.

“Yes, a coffin. For dead bodies,” she said as if that explained anything.

“You keep dead bodies in a sleeping pod?”

“We put dead bodies in a coffin and then put those in the ground. We sleep in beds. They’re flat.” She patted the top of the pod. “Not a claustrophobic nightmare.”

I wasn’t sure what exactly the issue was here, I hadn’t heard Heather complain, but I also didn’t know what her and Atina’s sleeping arrangements were like. That was none of my business, even if I had to admit to being curious about the compatibility of humans and Kyvens.

“Do I need to find you something else?” I asked.

She shook her head and carefully placed Aba’s cage on a low table. “Nope, I’ll be fine in the coffin. In some ways, it’s like I’m dead anyway.”

“Okay...?” I frowned. “Can we circle back to putting dead people in the ground? What’s that about?”

“It’s a whole thing; humans are clingy, they have trouble letting go,” she replied flippantly. “Anyway, so this is my cabin now, huh?”

I nodded. “Yes, I’ll set it so it’s controlled by your implant. Only you’ll be able to enter and exit.”

She gave me a sceptical look. “And I can leave and go as I please?”

“You can go anywhere you want, except the bridge. I’m not having you anywhere near the command centre in case you try to hijack my ship again,” I half-joked. As much as I wished I could trust Georgia, she’d already proven that she was wily and not above resorting to dirty tactics.

To my surprise, she gave me half a grin. “That’s fair. So how long until we’ll reach Earth?”

“I’m having my operators calculate the route now, but they’re slow booting up because they’ve just recovered from a bad virus,” I quipped.

Georgia’s shoulders dropped and she scratched the back of her neck. “Sorry?”

“You can apologise to them if you mean it.”

“I might. Have they fully recovered?” She actually sounded concerned.

I nodded. “We’ll be able to take off before sunset, I think. I need to talk to the pilots to get ready for take-off.”

“Ready for take-off,” Aba echoed. The bird had been snoozing, but now its four eyes were wide open.

“He will have to get used to his new home,” Georgia said thoughtfully. Somehow, I was sure she wasn’t just talking

about her pet. “Will your crew have an issue if I let him fly around freely? Will they know he’s not food?”

I wasn’t sure if she meant it as an insult, but it sure felt like one. “My crew know how to behave. They’re not savages.”

“Don’t eat me, please don’t eat me!” Aba screeched, his wings fluttering wildly. My implant translated his words before I could detect the language he’d spoken.

“It’s alright,” Georgia cooed, stroking his scaled cheek through the cage bars. She looked at him with such adoration, turning her permanent scowl into something soft. I couldn’t help but stare. The human was gorgeous when she didn’t look like she was about to skewer me. But as soon as she turned away from the bird, the magic dissipated as her mask slid back in place. “I think his species is raised for food. He didn’t know a lot of words when I first got him, but what he said made me think that his previous owners didn’t keep him as a pet.”

I observed the animal with new eyes. He didn’t look like something I’d want to eat, and not just because there wasn’t much meat on his lean body. No, he seemed way too sentient to be farmed. Not that sentience stopped some beings from keeping others for food. Travelling through space meant I’d seen some truly wonderful things, but also some that I’d rather forget.

I couldn’t help but shudder at the memory of the butcher halls on Kqwnt-2 where I’d once had to bring a load of cargo.

Shaking off the bad thoughts, I focused on the present. “I have a moment to show you around if you want. Unless you prefer to rest?”

She smirked wryly. “I rested for long enough in your cargo bay. So yes, give me the tour. I’ve not been on a ship this size in quite a while. Aba, want to come?”

“Georgia and Aba! Aba and Georgia!” The bird stretched its legs, showing off its sharp talons. As soon as Georgia opened the cage door, he flew onto her shoulder, playfully nipping the rounded top of her ear. For a moment, I had the overwhelming urge to touch her ear as well, to know what it

felt like. But that was silly. Only mates tickled each others' ears. It was an intimate gesture reserved for intimate moments, so I really shouldn't feel that urge just now.

I forced myself to turn away and hurried out of the room. Maybe I needed a break. The last few days had been taxing. Us Kyvens didn't need to sleep like other species, but we did need to recharge occasionally. Once we were en route to Earth, I might take a well-earned break. I hadn't caught up with my favourite Kyven vid-drams in ages.

"Can we start with the bathroom or whatever you call the place you wash? I've not had a shower in ages." Georgia was following me, but I hadn't quite regained my control enough to turn and look at her.

"Of course. There is a hidden water bowl in your cabin that you can use both to drink and to wash your hands and ears, but we have larger cleansing stations down this corridor."

I led her to the closest bathroom and let her look around. She seemed familiar with the technology and didn't ask any questions.

"I'll take a shower when you have to get back to the bridge," Georgia announced happily. "Shall we get some food?"

She was taking control of my tour. Instead of finding it annoying as I would have with some members of my crew, I actually found myself smiling with amusement. She wasn't part of my crew yet, so she didn't have to treat me as her captain. It was refreshing. We were almost equals now that she was no longer my captive. I was still the only person in charge of the ship, but when it came to other things, there was no more hierarchy between us. When did I last have an equal to talk to? I'd become a captain at a younger age than most. Ever since, there had been an unspoken barrier between me and everyone else on board.

"Food!" Aba cawed. He really shouldn't be hungry. I'd given him all the Avillian nuts we'd had on board. Luckily, they weren't super expensive, but Katak wasn't too pleased about the depleted stash.

“Yes, we’ll have some food,” Georgia said in that loving tone of hers. She looked at me, frowning. “I hope the food is better than what you were bringing me in the cell.”

I chuckled lightly. “It won’t be, your food came straight from the canteen.”

“That’s a shame. I regret my decision to come aboard already,” she said, turning away but not fast enough to hide the faint smile curling her lips up.

A warm sense of pride welled up in me that I’d managed to make her smile. I didn’t know why it mattered to me, but I liked the idea of melting Georgia’s icy exterior and finding out more about the person she was underneath all her snark and sass.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THERE WAS something surreal about hanging out in a lounge large enough for Aba to fly around. Everything about Ellabee's ship was amazing. There was a large ceiling window that allowed me to watch the stars soar by and all other nifty bits of technology that were far more advanced than what I had.

It almost made me forget why I was here and what was at stake. Part of me still thought this was all an elaborate ruse and Ellabee was going to go back on her promise, but after flying for weeks, we could've easily reached a Galactic patrol station, and yet we hadn't. Did that mean she was actually taking me to Earth? Home?

I stared out the window at the stars flying past, trying to identify the constellations or clusters. I prided myself on being good at navigating without the need for technology, but we were in unknown territory now.

"Time for naps! Time for naps!" Aba croaked in my ear, nuzzling his beak into my hair.

I patted his head. "It's not sleep time yet."

"Time for naps!" he repeated stubbornly.

Silly bird. He'd been my constant companion for years. I didn't know what I'd do without him. Nobody was better at cheering me up when I was down and making me feel less crazy when I talked to myself. He was the best bird I'd ever known and that was a tough spot to get considering all the birds my grandfather used to own. So what would I do with him when we reached Earth...?

I'd never had any reason to worry about that, but as we were rapidly hurtling through space towards my home planet, it was something that I couldn't ignore much longer.

"Ellabee! Ellabee!" Aba cried, flapping his wings happily as he flew towards hers. He landed on her shoulder and I felt a pang of jealousy. It had taken me years to teach him that and he missed more often than not, but not when it came to her.

She gave him a little tickle under his chin, and he puffed the scales on his chest. *Show off.*

Ellabee gently removed him from her shoulder and put him down next to me, much to his dismay. He let out a protesting shriek and the tips of his wings flashed green.

"So, how're you finding the POTA-2?"

I only had compliments for her ship, but I shrugged instead. "Ehhhh."

Her eyes widened and she put her hands on her hips in a way that showed off the muscles in her arms. "Ehh? This ship is so much better than your piece of crap. How does that thing even fly? It's basically glue and parts. You're lucky you haven't crashed."

"Who says I haven't?" I challenged.

"Have you?" There was genuine curiosity in her voice.

"Maybe. You?"

She leaned back against the hard material of the bench and stared up at space. "Once, when I was much younger and more reckless."

Despite pretending not to care, I felt intrigued. "What happened?"

"I don't want to go into the details, but there was a bad crash. I lost my ship, some of my crew, and learned a harsh lesson." She lifted her shirt slightly, exposing her hard abdomen and a long dark scar on her blue skin. "Got a memento in case I ever forget as well."

I caught myself staring and quickly drew my gaze up, making the mistake of looking into her eyes. I tried to avoid looking at aliens; it gave them too much power over me, but there was something different about Ellabee. She was so strong and yet, there was an underlying vulnerability to her that was just so human.

To distract myself, I tickled Aba's head. "You know, I've never said thank you for taking good care of him during the whole... thing."

She gave me an amused look. "He's fun. I like him. I've never known a bird to have so much personality."

"No, me neither. He's... family." It felt dangerous to admit how much he meant to me, but it was plain and obvious to anyone with eyes. Ellabee's were bright and sharp, with really beautiful irises. There was no way she didn't know how important he was to me.

Aba cawed softly and pressed himself into me. "Time for naps! Time for naps!"

A low chuckle came from Ellabee. "He said that a lot, but I don't know what a naps is. Maybe you could finally clear up the mystery."

"The word is actually 'nap'," I corrected her. "It's like a small sleep in the middle of the day."

"And it's different from your other sleeps?"

"Yes, it's shorter and there's nothing quite like it. But you don't sleep, right?"

Ellabee kicked her legs up. "Nope, and I don't know how you willingly put yourself in a state of unconsciousness like that. Isn't that scary?"

"Not more than being awake," I replied with a shrug.

"What's it like to dream?" Ellabee asked.

"What's up with you? Why are you so curious today?"

"I'm reading up on humans and Earth. There's a lot of demand for exotic products. The more I know about your

planet, the better it'll be for securing the right things for my clients," she answered easily.

Somehow, I felt disappointed that her curiosity wasn't about me, but I pushed that feeling away. I couldn't let my guard down, no matter how disarmingly charming she was. I had to remember who she was and what I'd done to her. People didn't just forgive so easily.

"How long until we reach Earth?" I asked, trying to shift the tone of the conversation.

"Not too long, a few centi-clicks."

"Oh, that's good. What navigation system do you use? Galactic Grid? Star System?" I asked, trying to be casual.

"Galactic Grid. Why? Are you trying to work out if you can use the ship if you hijack it?" There was a teasing tone in her voice, like she didn't actually think I would.

When did she decide I wasn't a threat?

"I just like to know where I am. It makes me feel safer." The explanation slipped out before I could stop myself. Maybe it wasn't just Ellabee who no longer saw me as a threat. The same seemed to be happening the other way round, too. I didn't want to trust her; I didn't want to trust anyone. It wasn't a good idea to rely on others. It usually ended in pain and disappointment. But it was hard to keep up the walls I'd built around myself. For the first time in ten years, I wasn't running from something. Instead, I was travelling home, surrounded by friendly people who didn't even once try to torture me. Life was strangely good. I'd almost be sorry to leave the POTA-2. Almost. My father was waiting for me. My friends, if any of them even remembered me.

Last night, I'd thought about what coming home would look like. Until now, it had been an abstract goal that seemed unattainable most of the time, but now that we were getting closer to Earth with every day, I was beginning to be brave enough to picture my return in more detail. I'd been abducted before I'd even sat my GCSEs, so I'd have to return to school. I'd always planned to go to university and become a

paramedic, but now I wasn't so sure of what I wanted. As much as I'd hated my life as a space pirate, there had been moments where I'd been almost happy. Mostly when I'd been messing with technology, fixing things, flying the ship. The thought of never being able to steer a spaceship again filled me with dread. Earth seemed strangely small after seeing dozens, if not hundreds of planets. What was I going to do there? Become an engineer? I didn't feel like years of studying. I wanted to earn my own living from the start, but all the jobs I thought of required at least some kind of training.

The one thing I didn't want to do was live with my father and be reliant on him. I wasn't the teenager who'd been abducted. I was an independent woman now.

"You've gone quiet. What are you thinking?" Ellabee asked gently. The way she smiled at me broke my heart. Soon, I'd have to say goodbye to her and never see that smile again.

"Home," was all I said.

Her smile wavered a little, but she quickly caught herself. "I've been meaning to give you this. I know technology on your planet is still very basic, so... here."

She handed me a silver ring with a massive black stone embedded on the top.

I took the ring with apprehension. "What is this? Are you proposing to me?"

"Proposing what?"

"Nothing. Sorry. It's a human custom; I should have known it was something else. So why are you giving me a ring?"

"It's an interstellar communicator. I thought it would be better to disguise it as something that can be found on your planet. It's primed to your biosignals, so only you can use it. Just hold the stone against your earlobe and the holo interface will appear. Just in case you want to contact me - I mean anyone who isn't on Earth."

"Why my ear?"

Ellabee looked a little sheepish. “First thing that came to my mind. Anyway, it looks like I will be travelling to Earth fairly regularly from now on. There are some Kyvens that have human mates and regularly want passage or goods. If I’m in your area, I could message you. If you want, of course. Do you?”

“Yes,” I blurted, surprising both Ellabee and myself.

“Phone home,” Aba cackled, before launching himself into the air, circling the lounge. I watched him with a grin as he did some daring manoeuvres only a feather’s width from the ceiling. Such a show-off.

It was a long time since I’d seen him this reckless, and maybe the first time I wasn’t worried. There were no predators here, nobody that would hurt him or me. I didn’t have to think about where my next meal was coming from or about my ship breaking down or having nobody to talk to.

I glanced to my left where Ellabee was watching me with that smirk of hers, and I felt a strange rush of gratitude. Even if things could change at a moment’s notice, right now, everything was perfect.

It was strange to admit, but for some reason, I wanted this moment to last forever.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE DAY HAD COME FAR TOO SOON. We were about to enter the solar system that Earth was part of. Only a few more planets to pass, then I'd have to say goodbye to Georgia. Strangely, she'd grown from an enemy into something almost like a friend. I doubted she'd want to call what we had a friendship, but I was certain that's what it was. I missed her before she'd even left the POTA-2. That surely meant we were friends?

I'd almost been tempted to ask Atina to slow the ship so that we had a few more days, but my sense of responsibility stopped me. Luckily. We had already lost so much time by being stranded on that miserable rock. Even though I wanted to be angry at Georgia for that, I couldn't. As much as she never spoke of what had happened to her, her silence told me more than she knew. I'd done some research into the Ska'av and every single thing I'd read about them was terrifying. They were monsters that hurt others for fun. It was a miracle Georgia had somehow survived with both her body and mind intact.

“Captain Ellabee?” Heather hurried towards me. Instead of being excited at returning to her home planet, the human appeared worried.

“What's wrong?” I asked more sharply than I'd intended.

She visibly looked around the room and I instantly knew what she meant. Even though everyone else on the bridge kept their focus on their workstations, I knew that they were all listening intently.

“Let’s talk in my quarters,” I suggested, noting her relief. I’d been right.

As soon as my cabin’s door closed behind us, Heather activated her controlband. A picture of a human male appeared on the holo screen between us.

“I did some more digging into Georgia’s family,” Heather said breathlessly. “And I don’t know how I didn’t find this before, but-”

“What?”

“Her father died two years ago. I knew her mother died when she was five, so that means both her parents are gone. No grandparents that I can find. And she didn’t have any siblings. That means...”

“She’s alone,” I muttered.

“Have you talked to her about what she plans to do when we arrive on Earth? Things are very different now than they were ten years ago. It’s going to be hard for her to fit back in.”

“No, we...”

I didn’t tell her that I’d been reluctant to talk about the future with Georgia. I’d been all too happy to just stay in the present and enjoy every moment. We’d only agreed that Aba would stay with me, since he looked too alien to live with her on Earth. My ears itched with annoyance at myself. She wasn’t prepared at all. I should have handled this in a much better way.

“Thank you, Heather. Can you send me the files?”

“Already done.”

I was glad when Heather left. I sank onto my chair, letting go of all composure. I had to think. Had to find a way to tell Georgia that there was nobody waiting for her on Earth. No matter how tough she presented herself, that had to be devastating. At least if I got to break the news, I could sit her down, get her a drink—

The door to my quarters slid open with a buzz and I was about to chide whoever had come in without knocking until I

realised it was Georgia, as if my thoughts had manifested her somehow.

I struggled to stand up, my knees weak with the news I had to deliver. “Georgia...”

“I saw it!” Her eyes shimmered in an unusual way and her voice held more emotion than I’d ever heard from her. “Earth! I saw it through the window. It’s actually Earth!”

“Yes, we’ll land when it’s night,” I said. “So there’s something—”

Georgia bridged the gap and took my hands in hers, an unprecedented gesture that made my fingers tingle. She let out a little squeak. “I can’t believe you took me here? You took me here? Why?”

“I told you I wouldn’t, didn’t I?” I replied weakly.

“Yes, but people never keep their promises. I’m so excited, I can’t wait until we land. Can I give your pilots the coordinates so we land close to my hometown? I want to go see my dad first.”

I stared at our joined hands, a painful lump in my throat. Did I really have to deliver the news? She was so happy and the childlike glee on her face was the most beautiful thing. I didn’t want to be the one to dash it. Maybe I could just let her discover it for herself. She would know the truth soon enough. If I didn’t say anything, she could have hope for a little longer.

Georgia did a little hop. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I can’t believe you took me here; you’re the first honest person I’ve met in space.”

Honest... The words echoed and restricted my three hearts in a painful way.

“Georgia... Before we land, I have to tell you something first.” I gathered a breath, trying to find the right words. “I did some research on your abduction and your family and...”

“And?” she prompted, her smile so wide I could see her pearly teeth.

“Your father, he’s... astralised.”

“Astralised? What’s that?”

I recalled the conversation we had earlier. “He’s in a coffin in the ground.”

Her smile faltered. “What? Why would you say that?”

“I’m sorry. I can show you the files Heather found, they have the record—”

Georgia pulled her hands out of mine and took a step back, the smile replaced by the same hostile look as when we first met. “I knew this was too good to be true. I don’t know what you’re trying to achieve, but I’m not falling for your trick.”

“It’s not a trick.”

“I don’t believe you. My dad isn’t dead, you’re making it up to hurt me.”

“Georgia...”

“Don’t you dare say my name like that,” she sneered, her eyes hard and cold. “You’re just saying this to keep me away from Earth, but I’m not going to fall for it. You will take me to Earth, to my hometown, or I will remote detonate my ship and sink yours in the process.”

Her words were like a slap in the face, but I felt more hurt than angry. I should’ve known she was never going to trust me and that she’d have a backup plan in case we didn’t do what she wanted. I didn’t think she’d resort to mutual destruction, but I shouldn’t be surprised.

I swallowed hard. “There’s no need to resort to threats. I said I would take you to Earth and I will. But you’re on your own after that.”

“Good, I don’t need you or anyone else. I can take care of myself, I always have!” She stormed out, growled at the sliding door because it didn’t slam, and stomped away.

I was a fool for thinking Georgia and I could ever be friends or equals.

A part of me wanted to chase after her, but what good would that do? It was obvious that she didn’t trust me. Soon,

she would be out of my life. I didn't know why that bothered me so much, but it didn't matter. She couldn't have been clearer about how she saw me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE TENSE SILENCE in the pod was overwhelmingly loud. I didn't know why Ellabee insisted on coming all the way down to Earth with me. Maybe it was part of her master plan to make me pay for what I did to her operator. I didn't know why she would bother with an elaborate ruse like this, but what she said about my dad had to be a lie.

It had to be.

Because if it wasn't...

A small shock travelled through the pod as it made contact with the ground, catapulting me into Ellabee. Her strong hands steadied me and for a moment, I forgot all about her lies and betrayal. It was just so nice to have someone look out for me.

"You okay?" she asked, her concern so believable I almost fell for it.

"Yeah, fine." I shrugged her away and fought the urge to hug myself. I wouldn't have to put up with these aliens for very long. Within a few hours, I would be back home and then all of this could be just like a bad dream. If only I could have taken Aba with me. He was back on the ship, now officially living in Ellabee's quarters. Despite our argument, she was the only person he trusted.

I undid my safety buckles and jumped up, away from Ellabee with her fake concern and fake sympathy. I should never have let my guard down. I should have known better.

The moment the doors slid open, I ran out of the pod. A blast of fresh air hit my face. Earth air. I breathed it in deep.

For a second, I felt dizzy.

When I'd visualised my return home, I'd seen myself fall onto my knees and kiss the ground. I did no such thing in reality. I knew Ellabee and the others were watching me. I didn't want to appear weak.

I blinked a few times and the dizziness passed. We'd landed in an abandoned parking lot on the outskirts of town. I knew this place, had been here as a kid. If things hadn't changed from back then, nobody would come here until nightfall, when the local teenagers arrived with six-packs of beer and the occasional joint. I'd only been a few times before aliens had stolen my youth. I'd never been drunk on Earth alcohol. Why did that make me sad? There were worse things.

"This is...nice."

I had to hide a grin at Ellabee's attempt to compliment the car park. I wasn't sure if she'd ever stepped foot on Earth before. I kind of hoped this wasn't her first impression of my planet.

"Thanks for the ride. I guess you can keep my ship. Don't worry, it's not actually going to explode. I was bluffing."

I turned away from her before my emotions betrayed me. Despite everything, I had enjoyed my time on the P0TA-2.

"Goodbye," I muttered while walking away. My legs felt heavy. Gravity was stronger here than on the last few planets I'd visited. Or maybe it was because my last memory of walking on Earth was as a teenager. I'd grown since then, in body and mind.

"Wait!" Ellabee shouted from behind me. "I'll come with you."

"No. Don't."

I didn't turn to look at her. Just walked away. And she didn't follow.

The streets looked both familiar and strange. Most shops I remembered were gone, replaced by new ones. A few houses had been pulled down completely, leaving ugly gaps in the

roads of my memory. In the distance, tall towers had been raised in my absence. They were ugly and didn't match the rest of the town.

I forced myself to search for the positive changes. New flowerbeds at the market square. A poster about a new youth centre. A few electric cars replacing the old-fashioned petrol guzzlers.

But it was hard to see the good when my memories were so much better, sparkling with happiness and joy, while this all looked bleak and disappointing. No. That was just a momentary illusion. As soon as I got home, everything would be back to normal. Just around this street... And there it was, my house. My dad and I had lived on the upper floor of a Victorian villa that had been converted into flats long before my birth. The house looked just like I remembered. The front garden was a little more tidy, with the first spring flowers starting to bloom.

An unfamiliar woman stood outside with a pram. New neighbours?

I slowly approached her, suddenly not sure of what I was supposed to do. Just knock on my dad's door? He was a decade older now. I didn't know what his health was like. I didn't want to give him a heart attack. Maybe I could ask that woman to prepare him for my arrival. We'd always had a good relationship with our neighbours. Auntie Clara downstairs had often babysat me as a child after my mum had passed away. Clearly, Clara had moved away. Hopefully. I didn't want to imagine the alternative.

"Hello," I called out to the woman. "Do you live here?"

She looked at me curiously but not unkindly. "I do. How can I help you?"

"Do you know Jack Stockwood from upstairs? Does he still live here?"

I knew it before she even opened her mouth. Saw it in her eyes. And I realised I'd known from the moment Ellabee had told me.

Dad was gone.

The woman rocked her pram slightly. “No, we live upstairs. We bought the place after the previous tenant died. He left quite a mess. He was one of those hoarders who believed in alien abductions and collected all sorts of junk. It took my husband weeks to clean it all up. Why? Was Jack a friend of yours?”

I balled my hands, needing the sting of my nails to keep my composure. “Something like that. Do you know if he... No, you know what, never mind. Sorry for bothering you.”

She gave me a friendly smile as she continued on her way, but I barely registered it. I just stared up at the windows of the flat that I used to call home. The curtains were different and if the woman was to be believed, everything inside too. Even though I was looking at it, it didn't feel real. This wasn't how I'd pictured it, how I imagined coming home. Even in my worst nightmares, where Dad had a new family and forgotten all about me, he was never not here.

Looking at the house was too painful and I set in motion. What was I supposed to do now? I'd dreamt of returning home for so long, it was what I imagined to endure the pain during my time with the Ska'av, what kept me sane in my lonely travels. What was the point of surviving when the thing I was living for was gone?

I fiddled with the new ring around my finger, twisting it while I considered my options. A small foolish part of me wanted to call Ellabee, but I doubted she'd reply after the way I'd acted. I'd lashed out like the teen that had been taken from Earth, not as the adult that I'd become, and I regretted the unceremonious way I'd left after everything she'd done for me.

I didn't know or care where my feet were taking me until I was standing in front of the diner across from my old school and realised I'd retraced the steps of my youth. To my surprise, it looked exactly the same, from the fake shrubberies in the planters to the old leather booths inside. Standing here, it felt like I'd been transported back in time but my reflection

in the window grounded me in reality. Gone was the bubbly teenager with braids and a wide smile. Instead, a joyless lean woman with hollow cheeks and dark eyes stared back at me. Was that happy-go-lucky teenager still somewhere within me? Most days, I wasn't so sure of it, but I hoped she was.

My gaze latched onto the menu and I saw they still did milkshakes. I went in without thinking. It wasn't like I had anywhere else to go.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

STANDING in front of the large window, my reflection was all wrong. The pigment-less colour of my skin made me look ill and my brown hair just looked wrong. While I admired the LightScreen technology, I couldn't say I loved the results. Unfortunately, this was what I had to put up with to avoid standing out.

I didn't know if Georgia had turned on the interstellar communicator on purpose or not, but I didn't want to take any chances and miss out on her call for help.

Despite my apprehension, I entered the shop and slid into the booth opposite her.

She looked up at me with a blank gaze. "What are you doing here?"

I pointed at the ring on her hand. "You sent me a signal."

"I didn't," she replied while twisting the ring around her finger. It was clearly an involuntary nervous tick.

"That turns it on," I said, trying to ignore the disappointment welling up in me. She hadn't wanted me here after all. It was just me that had grown irrationally attached.

Georgia slurped her drink through her straw, her expression neutral and impossible to read. "I was awful to you. Why did you come?"

That was a good question. Why did I?

"I don't know," I told her earnestly. "I'll go."

“Have you ever had a milkshake?” she asked before I could get up.

I took that to mean that she did want my company, so I remained seated. “No, I don’t think so. I’ve been to Earth a few times, but I don’t usually leave the ship.”

She pushed her glass towards me. “Try it.”

Part of me worried about having a bad reaction to the thick pink substance, but it had an appealing fragrance despite looking like poison. I took a sip, deciding it was worth the stomach ache if it was indigestible. The sweetness took me off guard and I savoured the fruitiness.

“That’s really good,” I said, licking my lips to get every last drop.

“Yeah, strawberry is my favourite because it reminds me of my childhood. I used to come here every Sunday with my dad. It became a ritual after my mother passed away. Guess that won’t happen again...” The sadness in her voice told me she was no longer in denial about the truth.

“I’m sorry, Georgia.”

She shrugged, but I saw through her. She was hurting.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked. “Maybe you’d like some distraction?”

“Your looks are distracting enough. You look weird.” There was almost a hint of a smile in her voice.

I played with the LightScreen ring. “It’s the first time I’ve used this camouflage technology. I don’t think I like how it makes me look.”

“And you didn’t have to turn your hair brown. Humans can have white hair.”

I reached up to touch my head. “They can?”

“Yes, it’s usually a sign of age, but it’s okay.”

“Oh, great. I’ll change it back then,” I said, reaching for my ring.

Georgia's hand flew on top of mine and she leaned in, her voice reduced to a low whisper. "Not in the middle of the diner."

I couldn't think of anything else than her warm hand on mine and how it made my stomach flutter in response. She noticed me staring and quickly pulled her hand back.

"How long are you going to stay here?" she asked after a while.

"A few of this planet's rotations. It depends on how fast I can procure all the cargo I need. I told Heather and Atina that they have four Earth days until I require them back on the POTA-2. The two of them wanted to spend some time alone in a country named after one of your ocean creatures. It sounded like a very pretty place."

"Ocean creatures? Oh, Wales! It's not quite spelt the same way, we add an extra letter for the animal, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I've only been to Wales once, on a school trip, and... Sorry, I'm rambling."

Georgia clearly wasn't her usual stoic self. I could sense her suffering just beneath the surface. I wished she'd let me help her. I wanted to take her into my arms and hold her for as long as she needed, but I knew she'd push me away. She was a very stubborn female, one of the things I liked about her.

"It is okay to ramble. I will listen." I smiled at Georgia, trying to put all my sympathy for her into my gaze.

"No, I better shut up. Do you want another milkshake? You should try the chocolate one. In other places, they use really cheap cocoa powder but here they use proper dark chocolate to make them. They even have one with a flake. Do you want one?"

I nodded, mostly because it seemed she needed something to do. She gave me a tense smile and headed to the counter. I watched her as she joined a queue of other humans. Even though they were all similar with their non-blue skin, rounded ears and colourful hair, Georgia stood out from the crowd. She held herself differently. She projected the confidence of

someone who had fought for her life and survived. She may be struggling now, but I knew she'd be alright in the end. And I'd help her through it. Whether she wanted me to or not.

“Here you go.”

Georgia put a glass of brown liquid on the table before me. I hadn't even realised she'd returned. She'd got herself another pink hay-berry drink.

“Just in case you don't like the chocolate milkshake, then we can swap,” she said when she noticed me looking at her glass.

That was so sweet of her. Thinking of my needs while mourning her father. I didn't know what to say to that.

Instead, I took a sip of the not very appetising brown drink. “Mhm. That's really good. You have a good tongue.”

“A good tongue?” Georgia echoed.

“Yes. Your tongue tastes well. Is that not how you say it in your language?”

She smiled, although no happiness touched her eyes. “No, we'd say that you have a good taste, not a good tongue. What you said might be misinterpreted as something physical.”

“Oh. Sorry. You have a good taste then, not a good tongue. Not that I'm judging your tongue. I know they're very important when humans do their mouth-kisses.”

Now I was the one who was babbling. And by the stars, what was I even saying?

“Ignore all that,” I said quickly. “This drink seems to be affecting me. Does it contain alcohol?”

“Just a lot of sugar. I didn't know Kyvens could get sugar rush.”

“Rush? I'm not rushing anywhere.”

“No, it's not literal. It's more like your body reacting to the hit of sugar, like a shock.”

I reached for my controlband and ran a quick diagnostic. “My vitals are normal. I’m not going into shock.”

This time, her eyes sparkled for a moment, just like they used to whenever she laughed. “Not that kind of shock. When children eat too much sugar, they get really hyperactive and loud. My mum never let me eat sweets after dinner because she said it would stop me from falling asleep. My dad did the opposite. He gave me a bedtime treat every night before he read me a story. It was our tradition, even when I became too old for stories. He-”

Her voice croaked with emotion.

“You don’t have to talk about him if it’s too hard. I’ll be here to listen when you’re ready.”

“You will be?”

She seemed surprised by that. Did she think I’d abandon her on this planet despite her having nobody to stay with? She really didn’t know me at all.

“If you want me to. You’re always welcome on my ship. As a passenger or part of the crew. Or if you want to stay on Earth for a while, you can join us the next time we stop here. It’s your choice. I remember how it felt when my parents were astralised. It’s hard to think, hard to focus. But I’m here for you.”

Georgia’s eyes seemed strangely wet. She looked at me, her voice slightly shaky. “I need to think.”

I nodded. That was to be expected and while I’d made the offer rather impulsively, it wasn’t until I said it out loud that I realised that it was what I wanted. “Well, you know where we are and when we leave.”

Georgia squeezed her eyes shut which somehow got rid of the water in her eyes. “I want to wander around a bit. Don’t follow me, okay?”

“I won’t,” I promised.

It was hard to watch her walk away again, not knowing if she was ever going to come back, but at least we parted on

good terms this time. If she wanted to stay on this planet and decided this was her home, I wished her nothing but the best. Even if it made all three of my hearts hurt.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MY HOMETOWN WAS nothing like I remembered it. After three days of bumbling around and living in a hotel room that I'd rented with a borrowed credit card, I had seen enough. It wasn't the new buildings or the changing technology that were jarring. It was the people. They looked at me differently, acted much colder and more indifferent. Nobody had time to talk, nobody wanted to help. I didn't really know how to get them to help. When I tried to initiate a conversation on the street or asked questions about my teenage self, they would scuttle away as soon as they could, clutching the hands of their belongings or children extra tightly.

I couldn't really blame them. My English was broken, my accent harsh, my words cold. I gave commands and made demands. That was all I knew.

As humiliating as it was, standing in the middle of the busy square, the first tears in years streamed down my face. They were hot and burned and I couldn't stop sobbing no matter how much I wanted to. I cried like there was no tomorrow and not a single soul cared. If anything, people seemed to be walking around me to avoid me.

Standing here surrounded by humans, I'd never felt more alone and it properly dawned on me how much I'd lost, what the Ska'av had stolen. It wasn't just my childhood, my innocence; it was my ability to connect and relate and feel. They'd taken everything human about me and turned me into this cold, detached monster that didn't know how to help or be helped. The only person who cared about me was dead and I was more alone now than when I was a captor or a captive.

Someone touched my shoulder and I turned, expecting Ellabee even though I'd told her not to follow me. I'd tell her off after I let her comfort me.

My hopes were dashed when I looked at an elderly man with a hesitant smile and kind eyes behind thick glasses.

"Are you okay? Do you need a tissue?" he asked.

I sniffled and desperately tried to wipe the evidence of my sadness away. "No, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" He dug a fabric handkerchief from his pocket. "Here, it's clean."

I almost pushed his hand away, but then I remembered how awful it felt to only ever rely on myself and I took the tissue. I even managed a grateful smile. "Thank you."

The stranger just smiled. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Why would you listen?" I asked after blowing my nose.

"Because you look like you need it," he said simply.

After years of looking out for myself and surviving in space, I'd developed a pretty good gut instinct for spotting threats. He wasn't one.

"I just found out my dad is dead," I said, surprising myself. I was used to bottling everything up and locking away my feelings so they couldn't hurt me or be used against me. But no matter how hardened my muscles were from training or how rough my hands had become from surviving on my own, nothing could shield me from this pain.

The man nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that. I lost my mother when I was about your age, mind you, that's a long time ago now, but there are days when I remember it like it was yesterday. I don't know your situation, but if you want a word of advice from an old man, let yourself cry and grieve and you will heal."

Heal... Healing had never been on my list of priorities. I'd fought, protected, dreamt, hurt, but never healed.

"How do I heal?" I asked.

“Time heals,” he said with a knowing smile. “Time, patience, and kindness.”

For some reason, his description conjured an image of Ellabee in my mind. During our time together, she’d been nothing but patient and kind. Even when I was her captor and her captive. She’d treated me with respect, helped me without asking anything in return, and when we parted ways, she’d given me the one thing I hadn’t had since the Ska’av had taken me. A choice.

It had overwhelmed me because I hadn’t had the freedom to choose anything in so long. I thought I did when I was travelling on my own, but even then, I’d been trapped by my dream of returning home. But now that I’d been here and seen what it really was like, I was free.

I grasped the man by his hands, the first human hands I’d held in so long. “Thank you.”

He chuckled lightly. “You’re welcome?”

“My name is Georgia Stockwood. Please remember me when I’m gone,” I told him.

“G-Gone?” he echoed, the worry clear in his voice.

“Not like that, don’t worry. I have a ship to catch!”

I had never run this fast, at least not when I hadn’t been running *from* something. Today, I was running *towards* something, my future. The tears dried on my cheeks as I hurried back to the abandoned car park where the POTA-2 was parked. Ellabee would be waiting for me. I knew it. I slowed down a little when I realised I didn’t know what to say to her. When we’d last talked at the diner, she’d offered that I could become part of her crew. Fly through space, but this time surrounded by friends, not all alone. It sounded like a dream. Or I could be a passenger, letting her take me somewhere far, far away. One of the nicer planets I’d visited on my travels. Maybe Ellabee could help me get a proper job, one that didn’t involve stealing. Aba and I could settle down. But that would mean saying goodbye to the Kyven captain. A sharp pain in my chest made me stop. It wasn’t just because I’d been

running non-stop. The thought of leaving Ellabee for good physically hurt. It wasn't the same pain as the grief for my father and for the life I'd never got to live. It was a different sort of ache, a longing for a future yet to be written.

Others had determined my destiny for the past ten years. They'd ripped me from my home and forced me to do things I regretted. Now, I had a chance to change everything. A new beginning. It would no longer be just Aba and me against the universe. I had friends now. And I would fight for my future, even if it meant breaking the walls I'd built around my fractured heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SHE WAS CURLED against my side, her eyes closed. I played with her hair, curling one lock around my fingers. She was so warm, so soft. I held the strand of hair to my nose and breathed in deeply. She smelled of home. Georgia sighed in her sleep, her lips opening just a fraction. I couldn't wait until she woke from her sleep and we could-

“Captain! Captain Ellabee!”

I woke from my recharge, the last flickers of the trance still running through my mind. My mouth was dry. I'd never had a trance this vivid before.

“Captain?”

Atina stood next to my pod, looking impatient.

I unplugged myself and got to my feet, straightening my uniform. “What's the matter?”

“Your human has returned. She's waiting outside. She says she wants to show you something before she comes in.”

I didn't miss her calling Georgia *my* human. To my surprise, I didn't take offence to it. In fact, I liked the sound of it. Especially after the trance I'd just had.

My uniform was wrinkled, but I didn't want to waste any time. I hurried to the closest airlock, ignoring Atina's amused grin. I supposed this was payback for how I'd teased her for falling for a human.

The planet's only sun was starting to set, painting the sky in shades of fiery orange. I liked Earth's sunsets, they were so much more colourful than those on Kyven.

A lone person was perched on the railing around the vehicle parking lot, staring into the distance. Her hair was illuminated in the same copper shades as the sky, making her appear even more beautiful. My hearts beat a little faster at the sight. She'd returned. My human, indeed.

I'd hoped that she would come back. I'd given her the space she needed, knowing that eventually, she would be drawn back to me. I just didn't think it would be this soon. She'd needed time to process her father's astralisation. As much as it hurt that I couldn't help her with it, I was glad that she seemed to cope well enough to return.

"It's a beautiful evening," I said softly, so as not to startle her.

"It really is." She turned around, her eyes reflecting the fiery light. "This might be my last sunset on Earth. I wanted you to be here for it."

I didn't know what to say. She was honouring me by letting me partake in this special moment.

"May I join you?"

She tapped the rusty railing. "It's not the most comfortable seat, but go ahead."

I climbed onto the metal bars, almost expecting them to crumble beneath our combined weight. This place had seen better days, but in this moment, it was the most beautiful spot on the planet.

A vertical post forced me to sit close to Georgia, so close our thighs touched ever so slightly. I could feel her warmth through my uniform. There had been more space to the other side of her, but I must have instinctively chosen this side where I'd have an excuse to be closer.

"It's so strange, I've been trying so hard to come back here, and now I'm about to leave after just a few days," she whispered. Her voice carried more emotion than she usually showed. Again, I was glad that she was feeling safe enough to share her feelings with me. Maybe that scene from my recharging could become reality, one day.

“We can stay a little longer if you want to. We’re almost done loading the cargo, but if you need more time, I will come up with a reason to stay.”

She smiled at me, making all three of my hearts jump a little. “No need. I’ve said my goodbyes. Now it’s time to start anew.”

“Then you’ve thought about my proposal?”

“I have. I-”

A caw announced Aba half a click before he settled on Georgia’s shoulder. The bird happily rubbed his beak against her cheek before turning to me. I expected him to ignore me or rant angrily at me as he had the last few days, but instead, he leaned towards me and offered me his beak as well. I carefully rubbed my cheek against it. I couldn’t shake the sensation that this was a special moment.

“He really likes you,” Georgia breathed. “I’ve missed him so much.”

“Ready for take-off!” the bird cried in response.

She laughed. “No, not yet. Let’s just enjoy the sunrise, Aba. After that, we’ll fly.”

“Fly to the stars! Georrrrrrgia and Aba!”

I chuckled at the bird. He was simply adorable.

“And Ellabee,” Georgia added with a grin.

“Georrrrgia and Aba and Ellabeeeee!”

“Clever parrot. Has everyone been nice to him?”

“The crew love him,” I reassured her. “He’s even managed to persuade Katak to part with his personal supply of Avillian nuts. I didn’t think that was possible. Aba has become part of the POTAT-2.”

“Do you think I can, too?” she asked quietly, suddenly sounding a little unsure. “Will they forgive me for what I did?”

“That’s a good question. I think they will, eventually. But you might have to make reparations.”

Georgia nodded thoughtfully. “That sounds like it would take a while. You sure you want me on the ship for that long?”

“You can stay as long as you like,” I replied honestly. It felt like a dangerous thing to admit, but Georgia had just taken a big step towards me by showing up. I needed to let her know she wasn’t just welcome. She was wanted.

I put an arm around her shoulders before realising what I’d done. I expected her to push me away, but after freezing for a fraction of a click, she leaned against me. I could barely breathe. I didn’t dare to speak. This was the closest we’d ever been and nerves settled in my stomach.

She let out a soft sigh that tickled my skin. “Ellabee...”

This was the first time she’d said my name and I loved the way it sounded with her accent. “Yes, Georgia?”

“Thank you for taking me to Earth.”

“I gave you my word, didn’t I?”

“But why? Why would you help a miserable, hostile, unreliable, awful person like me?”

It was a good question, but thinking back to our time together, the answer came easy. “That’s not how I saw you. I mean, you were hostile, but not the other parts. I thought you were savvy, resourceful, strong.”

She twisted in my arm but didn’t move away. “You thought all of that?”

“And more. As I got to know more about you, I admired your resilience and survival skills. *Beautiful*,” I admitted under my breath.

“You think I’m beautiful?” Georgia asked, her voice slightly strangled.

I just nodded. “I also thought it was sweet how much you loved Aba—”

“Aba! Aba’s the best!” he interrupted with a happy croak. That little bastard kept ruining our moments.

“Yes, Aba.” I gave the bird a little tickle and tossed some nuts towards the ship for him to chase so he’d give us a moment alone. I turned back to Georgia, finding her staring at me with a strange look in her beautiful eyes. I took the fact that she hadn’t run away as a good sign so I kept talking. “Don’t get me wrong, you were a knot in my bowels, but I’ve enjoyed getting to know you and I’d like to continue doing that.”

“I’d like that too,” she replied, shuffling a little closer. “You’re the first person I’ve met that’s made me feel... like myself.”

“What did you feel like before me then?”

“Angry, scared, sometimes I felt nothing at all. But with you, I feel alive. Seen. Valued.” She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, drawing my gaze to her pink mouth. “I don’t really understand how I feel, but I want to be close to you. I... Don’t laugh at me, but I think I kind of want to kiss you.”

My hearts skipped a beat. “A human mouth kiss?”

She let out a nervous chuckle that made her nose crinkle. “Yeah, but I’ve never... I don’t know how...”

“I’ve never mouth kissed before either,” I whispered, leaning closer in the way I’d seen Atina and Heather do. I’d wondered before about what it felt like but even though it wasn’t part of our culture, I always understood it was something intimate that wasn’t any of my business. But now I could find out for myself and that was even more exciting.

Our lips met, softly at first. Georgia’s mouth was warm and I could tell she was holding her breath. The friction of her lips against mine sent tingles down my body and I felt electrified in a way I had never felt before, not even from an ear tickle.

She pulled back just enough so she could look at me. She looked strangely vulnerable but not fragile like before. “That was nice.”

I touched my lips, chasing the echo of the mouth kiss. “I like that a lot. Maybe we can do more of that when we’re back

up in space? If you're ready to leave."

Georgia nodded firmly. "I am. This town isn't home, not anymore. The place that I wanted to return to only exists in my memories."

"I'm sorry." I wrapped my arm back around her. "I know I can never replace what you've lost, but we can build something new. Together."

She leaned back in to kiss me, and I savoured the warmth flooding through me. Behind us, Aba let out a loud caw that made it clear he finished his nuts.

Georgia snickered into our kiss. "You're going to need a lot more Avilian groundnuts."

"We better get going then," I said, gesturing to the ship.

Georgia nodded and with intertwined hands, we made our way back up the ramp. Once we were at the top, we both turned to watch a little bit more of the sun setting on her planet. The day was over and somehow, it felt like the end of something else too. But tomorrow, a whole new life was waiting for us far beyond the horizon, and I couldn't wait to soar through the stars with Georgia by my side.

EPILOGUE

SEVEN MONTHS *later*

Aba puffed up his scaled chest and trumpeted yet another awful noise that he thought was a song. As good as he was at mimicking voices, he sucked at singing.

“No, Aba, it’s not Christmas yet!” Georgia laughed. “If you need to sing, choose something different.”

She set a bowl of snacks on the low table in front of us, then snuggled back against me on the lounge. I’d got rid of my one-person podchair long ago, making space for furniture that would accommodate both of us.

“What’s Christmas?” I asked over the noise of Aba’s screeching.

“A human celebration that happens every December. Its roots lie in religion, but it’s basically a time when family and friends get together, have big meals, sing songs, give each other presents, and go to church if they’re religious. Wait, what month is it on Earth? It was spring when we left and that was quite a while ago. Let me check.”

While she browsed her tablet, I popped some crackers into my mouth. They melted as soon as they hit my tongue, coating it in sticky sweetness. Yummy. We’d only just left Pluto-2, home of some of the best sweet factories in this sector of the galaxy, and were now headed back to Kyven to offload cargo and take on new supplies. With no other stops scheduled until we got to my home planet, I was looking forward to a lot of time with Georgia. The crew had learned to accept that when I was in my cabin with my mate, I wasn’t to be disturbed unless

it was for emergencies. Katak had stepped up a lot, as had Atina, although she was frequently distracted by her own mate, Heather. I was glad I'd never set any rules against working with your mate on board the POTA-2. I would have sorely regretted those now.

"It's two months until Christmas," Georgia muttered, suddenly no longer cheerful.

"What's wrong?"

"The last time I celebrated was with my dad. We made a gingerbread house together, like we always did, but I was a silly teenager and kept complaining that it was childish. If I'd known that it was our last ever Christmas together..."

I pulled her closer and pressed a kiss onto her forehead. "I will celebrate with you if you want. We can even travel to Earth. I have a few clients who've requested items from there and I keep putting them off because we have other things to do. What do you think about that?"

Before she could reply, my controlband vibrated. Rak. Bad moment. I was about to dismiss the notification when I saw the name.

"This is an old friend calling me. I've not heard from her in ages. I wonder if there's something wrong. Do you mind if I take this?"

"Go ahead." Georgia pointed at the snacks. "Just be quick or there may be nothing left."

I started the holo call, making sure I was the only one visible.

"Khrista."

The curly-haired Kyven waved at me happily. She didn't look like she had bad news to share. "Hey. Have you ever been to Earth?"

I suppressed a laugh. If only she knew. I tapped my chin as if I was thinking hard. "Earth... That's the non-Galactic Union planet with the five-fingered kyvenoids, isn't it? I've been a few times on requests."

Next to me, Georgia snorted with laughter.

“You think you could collect something for me? I don’t have a lot of credits to finance the trip, but I can get you tickets to the next Rotark20 Rally.”

Khrista knew me so well. Back when we’d been students together on Kyven, we’d gone to every single Rotark rally we could afford. I hadn’t been to one in ages, but maybe it was time to introduce Georgia to my hobby.

“Really? I thought that was all sold out.”

She grinned. “I know a Lilypian. What do you think?”

She’d already hooked me, but I pretended to hesitate. “I have a client who regularly needs things from Earth. I could see if he wants to place a request and pick up your goods at the same time. Which is what exactly?”

“A reindeer.”

Georgia sucked in a sharp breath. She clearly knew what Khrista was talking about, even if I didn’t have a clue.

“It’s an animal,” Khrista explained.

“Ah, I see. I’d need a special permit for transporting live goods from a non-GU planet. I’ve been meaning to get one, though...” I ran my hand through my hair. “How many Rotark20 tickets can you get your hands on?”

“Two?”

“I want four. And you’re financing the special crew member I need for your... reindeer.”

“I might be able to do three. And instead of financing, what if I came instead? You know I can handle myself on a ship and I have some knowledge of the planet, so I know what I’m looking for. I also might be able to secure you another order, I have some friends who regularly need things from Earth.”

I didn’t really need any more orders just now, but it might come in handy in the future.

“That deal is acceptable to me.”

As soon as I ended the call, Georgia shimmied closer to me again. “Do you know what a reindeer is?”

“No idea.”

“That’s what I thought. You know how I told you about Christmas? Well, reindeer are associated with that. In some of the stories, they pull the sledge of Father Christmas.”

“What do they look like?”

She showed me her tablet. A hideous animal with strange bony growths on its forehead looked at me.

“That looks weird. Why would you celebrate with such ugly animals?”

Georgia laughed. “They’re not ugly, they’re cute. I can’t believe we’re going to have a reindeer on board! It’ll be like Christmas has come early. Do you think I’ll get to stroke it?”

“You’re my mate. You can do whatever you want on this ship.”

She cupped my face and pulled me closer. “I love hearing you say that word.”

“What word?”

“Two words,” she whispered, her breath hot against my skin. “My mate.”

Our lips were closing in on each other. Just before I finally kissed her, I said it again. “My mate.”

I could taste her happiness in our kiss. I hoped, no, I *knew* it was the same for her.

Just to make sure she knew how important she was to me, I ran my finger over the rounded shell of her ear. She let out a sort of giggle, a sound that would’ve been unfathomable to imagine her making when we first met. She returned the gesture with loving care, her finger teasing the tip of my pointed ear. Sparks danced along my skin and I somehow fell even more in love with her.

Georgia’s eyes shimmered as she nuzzled into me. “If we’re picking up a reindeer, can we also get a tree? And

lights? And gingerbread, mince pies, crackers, and—”

“We can pick up everything you want,” I told her, fully serious. What was the point of having a cargo ship if I wasn’t going to use it to make my mate happy?

She let out a sigh full of longing. “Thank you. It’s going to be the first Christmas I celebrate since I was taken from Earth.”

“I’m sorry you can’t celebrate with your dad.” I wrapped my arms tightly around her, hoping to convey how much I ached for her.

“It’s okay. At least I get to spend it with family and that’s really what Christmas is about.”

“Family?” I croaked. That was a loaded word, not just for her, but for me as well. My crew was like family but it wasn’t quite the same.

She nodded. “Yes, I mean Aba.”

“Oh...”

Her laugh clattered through the cabin. “And you, you silly. You’re so cute when you pout. I kind of like seeing the great Captain Ellabee pouty.”

“You also like it when I’m stern,” I remarked, raising an eyebrow and giving her my best withering stare.

“Yes, I do,” she murmured, pulling me in for another kiss.

Life had never been sweeter. I had my own ship, an infinite amount of stars to travel through, and a beautiful mate who thought of me as family. I could never have predicted this outcome when I picked up her emergency signal way back, but now I was very happy that she’d tricked me into coming to planet Torrap. Neither of us was each other’s captive anymore, but we were stuck together and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Skye MacKinnon is a USA Today & International Bestselling Author whose books are filled with strong heroines who don't have to choose. She embraces her Scottishness with fantastical Scottish settings and a dash of mythology, no matter if she's writing about aliens in kilts, Celtic gods, cat shifters, or the streets of Edinburgh. When she's not typing away at her favourite cafe, Skye loves dried mango, as much exotic tea as she can squeeze into her cupboards, and being covered in pet hair by her demon cat. [Sign up for her newsletter.](#)

Arizona Tape lives her dream life hanging out with her dog and writing stories all day. Her favourite books to write are urban fantasy and paranormal romances with queer leads, stories that she wished were around when she was younger. When she's not writing, she can be found cooking up a storm in the kitchen, watching shows that make her cry, or trying her hand at her new hobby of the week. [Sign up for her newsletter.](#)

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STELLAR DRIFT

CENTRAL GALACTIC CONCORDANCE
BY CAROL VAN NATTA

DESCRIPTION

After a deep-space disaster, military pilot Sairy Sarvand hides in her starship in the continent-sized protected rainforest on Qal Corona. She's in a holding pattern until she saves the life of a dedicated nature reserve ranger. Even though her secrets might be exposed, she's drawn to the kind and honorable man.

Houyen Albasrey is determined to investigate a recurring disease, one that would have killed him but for the elusive Sairy. His agency is skeptical, but he's convinced that she and her exotic genetically engineered pet are key to tracking the source. His attraction to her makes him want to both keep her near him and send her away to keep her safe.

Unfortunately, their quest draws the attention of a criminal boss who believes they're hunting for treasure. With the gang hot on their trail, Sairy and Hoyen must ignore their growing passion and fight to stay alive. When they discover the source might be even deadlier than the disease, can they survive long enough to do what must be done? Or will they be caught in a web of secrets, lies, and betrayal?

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER 1

Makaan Nature Reserve, Qal Corona • GDAT 3235.001

The morning's misty rain had left everything in the rainforest dripping, including Sairy. Sweat ran streams down her neck as she leaned the shovel against the gnarled, moss-covered tree trunk. The fine white net she wore under her hat tickled her face, but it needed to stay under her collar or she'd be a walking feast for the mosquitoes.

She retraced her steps through the rough-cut path she'd made through the thin-leaved shrubs to where Kyala waited. At one meter tall and densely muscled, the genetically engineered gargoyle looked like a terrifyingly efficient killer. Which was a shame, because she'd really like to be a pampered lap pet.

Singing always pleased Kyala, so Sairy hummed a nonsense tune as she checked that the harness was tight and the rope carabiners were securely hooked in place. Kyala responded by licking the air near Sairy's nose.

"Thank you," said Sairy. It had taken her two years to convince the gargoyle not to use her wide, blood-red tongue to slather Sairy's face with slobber.

When Sairy had found Kyala injured and abandoned in the rainforest, the gargoyle's sharp teeth and oversized claws had made her wary. Gargoyles were hideously expensive hybrids that blended whatever mammalian lines the genetic designers could get away with. Rich people enjoyed owning dangerous creatures that looked ready to eat the faces of their enemies. But Sairy couldn't ignore the waves of need and hope coming from her. Helping her, healing her, was the best decision Sairy had ever made. She couldn't ask for a better companion.

She turned to slide the loops of rope onto her arms and just below her elbows. Stomping her feet to set her booted feet in

place, she flexed her knees.

“Now, Kyala.”

Sairy pulled, using her leg and core muscles. The gargoyle’s claws dug into the ground and her broad shoulders bulged with effort. Sairy clenched her jaw and strained with all her might.

The three-meter-long chunk of incalloy stubbornly refused to budge.

Her treaded boots slipped, landing her on her butt. Again.

“Enough,” said Sairy. She sent Kyala a mental request to relax.

Dropping her arms, she let the rope fall, then stood and picked her way carefully over the flood-tumbled rocks to where Kyala sat.

A noisy bell bird somewhere in the canopy trees above let out a piercing two-tone call that always reminded Sairy of a starship’s airlock alarm. In the distance, two more birds answered. Since living in the rainforest the last three and a half years, Sairy had noticed her hearing had improved. She didn’t always know what she was listening to, but she heard it. Even the tech equipment in her home sounded noticeably louder than it used to. Funny what isolation did to people.

She looked skyward, through the uneven break in the canopy, eyeing the clouds. They looked too thin to be bringing rain, but that could change fast in this part of the planet. The kilometer-long gash in the tree line owed its existence to a flash flood about fifty days before. It had tumbled boulders like they weighed nothing, tearing out shrubs and toppling trees in its wake. That same flood had uncovered the piece of incalloy she was trying to recover now.

Damnit. All she and Kyala had to show for the previous two hours of digging an outline channel around it were sore muscles, rivers of sweat, and many coats of mud.

The jagged piece of starship debris wasn’t going anywhere. It was as stuck in place as she was. But the jungle had likely hidden more pieces that she needed to find.

She stroked the panting gargoyle's broad dark head and unhooked the harness. "Let's take a break."

Kyala leaned her body into Sairy's thighs and sent a hopeful thought, making her laugh. "Yes, treats and petting, too." Kyala's projected thoughts rarely came in words, but those were two of her favorites. For all that her previous owner had treated her abominably, Kyala adored interacting with humans who could rub her ears and open food containers.

Sairy tapped the earwire adhered to her jaw and hooked into her ear canal. "Elkano, do another scan, would you? Maybe there's a deeper section that's acting like an anchor. Otherwise, I'd have thought the flood would have picked it up." Thanks to her self-assigned project of extracting the metal pieces, she had detailed maps of a large area near her home. The location of this piece suggested she might need to expand the search perimeter again. It gave her something better to do than wonder why she and Elkano ended up burrowed deep in a nature reserve on a civilized planet. Exploration starships were supposed to, well, explore.

Elkano's warm and pleasant midrange male voice sounded in her ear. "*Sure. Give me five minutes.*" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one of the three cameras lift off from the tree branch and swoop down toward the recalcitrant hunk of starship metal.

She could have used her enhanced implanted skulljack to communicate with Elkano, but she made a habit of talking out loud. It helped her think better and feel less alone. Kyala was a joy, but did not carry on conversations.

From what Elkano had found out from stealthy queries of the planetary net, pet trade designers had genetically engineered gargoyles as part of a fantasy creature trend from decades ago. Kyala stood about a meter tall and looked like a cross between a lethal clouded leopard and a massive war dog. She couldn't help her terrifying appearance, with mottled gray and green fur and a wide, square jaw that held plenty of teeth. Sairy had come across her in a clearing nearly three years ago, hurt, sad, and deeply lonely.

Sairy had been stunned to discover she also could sense Kyala's emotions and thoughts. Animals weren't supposed to have abilities like human telepathic and empathic minders. At the time, she'd put it down to a fluke of pet-trade breeding. That shady industry never let pesky laws or ethics stand in the way of profits.

Since then, Sairy had begun to suspect that she herself might have made the connection. Somehow, she seemed to have developed an animal affinity minder talent since landing on Qal Corona. Before, she'd only had a fixer talent that gave her advantages in understanding and working with mechanical things and organized systems. She'd never known anyone who developed more minder talents after puberty, much less at age forty-three. However, the Citizen Protection Service, the galactic military agency that was supposed to understand and monitor such things, had many secrets. And even fewer ethics than the pet trade.

She patted the gargoyle's damp shoulders. "You're a good friend..."

Kyala suddenly stood and looked up, her pointed ears widened.

Sairy heard it, too. A small flitter — a modified military aircar, really — flying low enough that it couldn't miss seeing her and the gargoyle if anyone was looking. Moments later, it appeared, just skimming the top of the tallest trees.

Even as she recognized the aircar, it wobbled as if blown by a nonexistent wind, then descended to a graceless landing in the widest part of the flood-channel clearing. The vehicle slid to a halt a scant two meters in front of a volcanic rock outcropping that could have seriously compromised the distinctive bubble-shaped canopy. The large letters on the side confirmed that it belonged to the Makaan Nature Reserve Ranger Service.

Unless someone had stolen the aircar for a joyride, Ranger Houyen Albasrey was at the controls. The RRS had other rangers, but he was the only one that anyone had reported seeing in the last four years. Before that, according to the

locals, ranger visits were rarer than triple blue moons. Albasrey had made regular appearances every twenty or thirty days ever since he arrived. And he was more than just a handsome face and a ready smile. He was a good listener and put his plant-affinity minder talent and botanist training to good use in helping the locals with permaculture projects to create symbiotic relationships with the ever-challenging environment. He seemed to get along with the more colorful personalities in the local towns, too. Better than Sairy did, who found quick reasons to be elsewhere when people pushed her boundaries.

As much as she liked the man, which was truthfully too much for her own peace of mind, she didn't want to talk to him now. The clearing was too close to her hidden home. Nor did she want to answer any questions about what she was doing. It was a lot easier evading personal questions when running into him in the town of Irakat's regular trade day than one-on-one in the middle of the rainforest.

Sairy kicked the bright blue rope into the mud, then started walking toward the trees. "Come on, Kyala, let's get a drink and see what's in the cold box."

Doubts snuck up on her as she retraced her path back to her airsled. Houyen's rough landing was unusual. He wasn't reckless, at least as far as she'd seen. If his military aircar had mechanical trouble, she could probably tell him what needed fixing. In one of her previous life chapters, she'd been part of an air and ground vehicle maintenance unit.

On the other hand, maybe he was tired and just needed a rest. In which case, he didn't need any help from her and she should leave him alone.

People sometimes forgot that the ranger service was actually a partnership between the planetary government and the Citizen Protection Service, the galactic government's military division that had many missions, all related to minders. But Sairy couldn't forget. For all of Houyen Albasrey's many virtues, he was first and foremost a CPS employee. If the CPS ever found her or Elkano, their atoms would become one with the universe as soon as the CPS could

make it happen. Whatever had gone horribly wrong with their last mission, the CPS disliked admitting mistakes. They'd do whatever was necessary to keep the public from learning anything about the ultra-secret black-box project she and Elkano had been a part of.

More doubts reminded her that if Houyen really was in trouble, the rainforest had a dozen ways to make it worse. Toxic plants, biting insects, hungry snakes, deceptive terrain... and that was just in the immediate half-kilometer radius.

She sighed and tapped her earwire again. "Elkano, please send a camera to check out the aircar and the pilot. Tell me if there's anything unusual." At least one of the cameras would have registered the rough landing. But Elkano relied on her to judge the significance.

"Will do."

Meanwhile, both her stomach and Kyala's wanted food, and stopping to rehydrate and eat lunch would take care of that. Plus, it would give the Houyen problem time to resolve itself without her having to do anything. She ignored the twinge of guilt that she wasn't being more neighborly, and the recognition that if she'd been in trouble, he wouldn't have hesitated to help. Then again, he likely didn't have secrets that could get him killed.

Considering how muddy everything was at the moment, she was glad she'd parked the airsled on the relatively flat rock and protected it with a tarp. The wet season had come early and stayed late this year.

After removing her gloves, she opened the box and fished out the container of gargoyle food, chuckling at Kyala's intensely focused interest in each movement of her hands as she removed the lid and set the large, flat bowl on the ground.

Kyala's wide mouth helped her practically inhale the custom blend of proteins and supplements that Sairy and Elkano had developed through trial and error. Kyala could and would eat anything if she was hungry, but prepackaged human mealpacks or processed dog food gave her eye-wateringly

stinky flatulence. The custom-blend food was self-preservation on Sairy's part.

She filled a second bowl with water from the large tank on her airsled. "Glad you approve," Sairy teased as she watched Kyala's flat tongue chase the last morsels.

Outside of scars on her neck and left haunch, the gargoyle looked sleek, healthy, and in peak condition. A marked improvement from when they first met. Sairy liked most people once she got to know them, but she'd make an instant and violent exception for the abusive asshole who still lingered in Kyala's memory.

After pulling out her own water pouch and lunch container, she made sure to close and seal the cold box. Ubiquitous rainforest insects never passed up the chance for a free meal.

She was just about to take a bite of mixed vegetable salad when Elkano's voice sounded in her earwire.

"The CPS flitter is powered and appears undamaged. The right side door is open. The pilot looks like Ranger Houyen Albasrey. He is not awake. He has no visible injuries."

Sairy ate two forkfuls of salad as she considered plausible scenarios. It was possible he'd been flying the aircar while gliding high, but she doubted it. The locals in Irakat Collective who made homemade chems and alterants teased Houyen for refusing anything more stimulating than real coffee. He said it interfered with his minder talent. Exhaustion or illness was much more likely.

She ate a couple more bites, but worry soured her stomach. Her medical training would probably be enough to determine if he needed emergency care. And if he just needed to sleep, she and Kyala could leave quickly and come back some other day with better equipment for prying out the piece of ship debris.

She swallowed several swigs of water, then stowed the pouch and food containers back in the cold box. Then she pulled on her gloves and unhooked her toolkit and first-aid bags to sling crossbody over her shoulder.

“Come on, Kyala, let’s go see about the ranger.”

“I’ll keep the second camera on you.” Elkano’s tone had a thread of concern.

“Thank you.” Gratitude warmed her. Between Kyala and Elkano, she was never truly alone.

After picking their path through the muddy track left by the skidding aircar, she found the door open just as Elkano had described.

“Hello?”

No response.

She pulled a knife out of its thigh sheath and used its hilt to tap on the exterior side panel. “Ranger?”

Unexpectedly, Kyala jumped up and into the aircar, leaving muddy paw prints.

“Kyala, no.” She leaned to poke her head through the open door. “Sorry about...”

Houyen’s pilot chair was swiveled to face the opening, but he was still webbed in. His head lolled back and to the side and his limbs sprawled bonelessly. His light brown face was ashen, but the sweat-damp skin of his neck under his tunic was mottled with a cherry-red rash.

She spat a vile curse.

Houyen was very sick, and she’d seen it before. Within the last ten-day, in fact.

Infinity fever.

It came on hard and fast with some people, sometimes within fifteen minutes or less, which explained Houyen’s erratic landing. If she opened his tunic, she’d probably see the characteristic red half-circles all over his torso. She even had the means in her first-aid kit to confirm her diagnosis.

The survival part of her brain told her to leave him alone, but she ignored it. Walking away wasn’t an option. Without treatment, he could die. Hell, even with conventional treatment for his symptoms, he could die.

Muttering more curses, she climbed into the aircar and dropped the bags to the deck.

Kyala whined and looked anxiously at the unconscious man. Sairy didn't need to connect mentally with the gargoyle to know she didn't like the smell. The acetone scent was strong enough for even Sairy's human nose to detect.

He was even sicker than she thought. She'd test him just to be sure, but another signature symptom of infinity fever was ketones in the bloodstream. As was his wheezy breathing. The disease was resurging in the towns again, as if it had drifted in with the wet-season mists. It was his bad luck that he'd caught it.

From her first aid kit, she pulled out the mixed pack of hypojets and injets. She also pulled out gloves and a face shield. As far as she knew, she was immune, but why push her luck?

She selected the black injet and knelt to touch it to the back of Houyen's hand. He didn't even twitch when the multiple microneedles pierced his skin to draw tissue and blood samples. The readout blinked yellow once, then turned a steady red.

She stowed the injet in the decontamination pocket of her bag. Houyen needed treatment, and soon.

Calling for emergency medical assistance via the planetary net for help would put her personal pingref in CPS records and bring strangers entirely too close to her proverbial front door. And that assumed EMA would respond quickly, which wasn't a safe bet deep in the middle of the nature reserve.

Even if his aircar would let her fly it, she couldn't in good conscience take him to Irakat Collective, the closest town. They only had two autodocs and maybe five people who knew more than just how to press the power button.

The best option for her own safety would be to bring the treatment to him and let him sleep it off in his aircar. Unfortunately, he wasn't awake to get his consent to administer an experimental drug. Guilt needled her with the

reminder that she hadn't let consent stop her from secretly treating townspeople, either. So far, she and the others had suffered no aftereffects from the treatment she and Elkano had developed. Each dose was a gamble, but the alternative was watching more people die.

The best chance for curing him would be to take him to her home and treat him there so she could deal with any adverse reactions. No one else had been allergic, but he could be the first.

If he'd been one of the locals, she'd ping the Irakat administrator to come get him. If he had been any of the other rangers, or the pain-in-the-ass enforcers from Falco Joro's so-called construction project, she'd have administered the hypojet and left them to fend for themselves.

But this was Houyen. Dedicated, kind, and sexy Houyen, who fluxed her engines on a bone-deep level despite her pretending otherwise. He didn't deserve to die.

She tapped her earwire. "Elkano. The ranger has infinity fever. If I bring him to our home for treatment, what are the chances we'll regret it?"

After a long moment, he responded. "*Sorry, but there are too many unknowns.*" He sounded more relieved than apologetic. Making nuanced, no-right-answers choices wasn't his strong suit. "*That's a pilot decision.*"

She was the only pilot, or at least the only conscious pilot, so that meant her. "Alright, then, he's coming with us. I'm not going to waste time trying to breach the aircar's security so I can fly it. I'll strap him to the airsled's cart."

"*Okay. Want me to get the autodoc ready?*"

"Yes. And he's going to need electrolyte fluid replacements."

"*I'll check our stock and synthesize more if needed.*"

"Thanks." She scooped up her bags. "Come on, Kyala. Let's get the sled as close as we can. The ranger is too heavy to carry very far."

In the small, darkened room that housed her still-pristine white, military-grade autodoc, the soft interior glow on Houyen's body was the only light. The blended harmonics of the autodoc's systems hummed quietly.

Sairy leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed. Kyala, her muzzle still wet from lapping at the fountain, pressed her shoulders gently against Sairy's thigh. Through their mental link, Sairy knew Kyala didn't care for the medicinal smells from the autodoc and was still distressed by Houyen's illness. The gargoyle had taken a liking to Houyen, as if he were one of her long-lost pups.

He looked vulnerable and helpless. Sairy felt an unexpected wave of protectiveness. She would have spared him the last four days of fever spikes, chills, and delirium if she could have. Now that he was on the mend and showing signs of regaining consciousness, she had a choice to make.

Seeing him up close — and wrestling his body and uncooperative limbs into the autodoc's shell-shaped chamber — confirmed her opinion that he was beautiful. He wore his thick dark hair short with no styling, which suited his angular features and light brown skin tone. He was strong and fit, and looked to be in his mid-40s. But she really had no idea how old he was. Simple maintenance could shave ten or fifteen years off anyone. A couple of days in the care of a decent bodyshop in the megacity to the north could make him look anywhere from twenty to a hundred and seventy, and whatever shape, ethnicity, or gender he liked.

At least she hadn't needed to remove more than his gauntlet-style percomp and his pocketed work vest to let the autodoc's probes and nano-needles do their jobs. Stripping off his clothes would have felt like taking advantage of him. Which made no sense, considering she'd already given him an experimental treatment without his consent, but there it was.

She was pretty sure they'd done the right thing by giving him the treatment, but doubts kept creeping into her thoughts like weaver ants scouting for juicy beetles. Three-plus years of necessary isolation had likely reduced her relationship checklist to "can fog a mirror," and her hormones couldn't be trusted alone with the man.

Even if she was suddenly free of obligations and secrets, she didn't want to fall desperately headlong into anything... or anyone. Making that mistake twice in her life was enough.

But she wasn't free, and at the end of the day, he was still with the Citizen Protection Service. She wasn't making that mistake again, either. The CPS was supposed to help minders, but as far as she was concerned, that was the biggest lie in the galaxy. They employed thousands of telepaths who could pry into her thoughts or sifters who could mess with her brain chemicals to make her eager to babble her innermost secrets. Or even worse, cleaners who specialized in gouging out memories or twisters who permanently distorted them. Those she had personal experience with, and the CPS had treated Elkano the same way.

The locals wouldn't thank her for bringing the CPS down on their heads, either. None of them cared that the CPS staff were all minders. A high percentage of the locals were, too. They cared much more about the reserve and preserving the close-to-the-land lifestyle. Endemic prejudice against minders in the big cities — and the galaxy at large — made creating isolated cooperatives in the wilderness an attractive alternative.

But the CPS loved rules, especially the ones about forcing children ages twelve and seventeen to be tested for minder talents. Avoiding that was another incentive for locals with kids to stay beneath the CPS's notice.

All things considered, she couldn't let him awaken in her autodoc, much less see the rest of her home. So her choice was to take him back to his aircar to wake up there, or take him to Irakat Collective and let them deal with him.

Except it was trade-day in Irakat, which drew people from up and down the river and enforcers from Joro's compound looking for kicks. She'd have to answer far too many questions about how and when she found the ranger in the first place. And Houyen might not appreciate waking up with strangers.

Really, her only option was to take him back to his aircar and let him wake up on his own. She'd ask Elkano to send cameras to monitor him and the aircar to make sure he woke up and was able to leave on his own.

She patted Kyala's shoulder. "Come on, my friend, let's get the airsled."

He'd likely have headaches for a few more days and feel like he got pushed off a skyskimmer, but he would probably live.

Which was good, since the infinity fever was likely her and Elkano's fault in the first place.

CHAPTER TWO

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CPS Base, Ryaksha City, Qal Corona • GDAT 3235.004

Houyen waited for the doors blazoned with the Makaan Nature Reserve Ranger Service logo to slowly iris open. They seemed as tired and achy as he was.

The attached hangar behind him where he'd parked the surplus military aircar smelled like someone spilled a dekaliter of overheated lubricant, then doused the area with astringent antifungal to mask the odor. As he trudged into the base's main building that held staff living quarters on one side and the working offices and command suite on the other, a lesser version of the oily antifungal smell followed him down the hallway. The duffle bag's strap cut into his shoulder like he was carrying rocks instead of the usual extra clothes, wilderness gear, and kits. The ringing in his ears nearly drowned out the echoes of his footsteps.

His quarters were too close to the hangar entrance for his liking, but he was grateful for it now. Once inside, he sealed the door behind him and dropped the bag, then headed for his private fresher. It was a much-preferred alternative to the aircar's dropseat compost toilet or the great outdoors, where mosquitos zeroed in on exposed tender flesh in a heartbeat.

A glimpse of himself in the mirror wall startled him. Based on the way he felt, he should look like an animated corpse, but he didn't look any different other than exhausted and muddy. Ever since awakening in his aircar, he felt untethered, as if he'd been drifting in some interstellar void and was just coming back to civilization.

Four hours ago, he'd woken up hot, groggy, and disoriented. Ringing in his ears swelled and ebbed with each breath. His upper center chest ached like he'd been punched.

The ripe, sour-sweat scent from his clothing nearly set his nose hairs on fire.

Once enough of his brain cells were firing, myriad mysteries presented themselves. He was webbed into the pilot seat, but it was swiveled to face the back. The aircar door was open, but covered by a stiff and sturdy tarp he recognized as having been made of tough jungle plants by a clever weaver in Axolotl Bend. His head was covered with a colorful town-crafted bug net, rather than the standard-issue version that he had a dozen of in the aircar and his bag. A generic water pouch was in his vest pocket, where he never put them because he didn't like condensation wet spots on his chest. His gauntlet was on the wrong arm. His boots, pants, and his lower tunic were caked with dried mud. His scalp itched and his hair felt stiff and greasy.

More critically, four days had passed that he couldn't account for.

He confirmed the galactic date and time from the planetary net and the local time from his wrist comp and aircar console before admitting no multi-tech failure or coworker prank could explain it. He really had lost four days.

He wrestled with that conundrum as he ran diagnostics on the aircar's systems, twice just in case, then took off and let the planetary traffic control system guide him back to the Makaan Ranger Service base. Thank the gods of technology for a working autopilot system. He needed the ninety minutes it gave him to think.

Technically, his first order of business should have been contacting Base Command, but he didn't know what to tell them. The last clear memory he had was lifting off in his aircar from Irakat Collective's flitter pad. He'd been in an intense meeting with the administrators for three river towns about their recent surge of fever cases and his idea on the possible cause and tracking it. After that, his memory was a shattered mess, like the one disastrous time he'd tried a hallucinogenic chem.

For example, he was reasonably sure he hadn't teleported back and forth between the polar ice cap and a volcanic lava flow. Teleportation only happened in science fiction serials. And his dreams, apparently.

For another, he couldn't fathom why he'd dreamed about multiple conversations between an unknown male and the local woman named Sairy, or why her pet gargoyle was licking his face. Sure, Sairy had caught his attention from the first day they'd met, and they'd seemed comfortably compatible in later interactions, but she remained elusive. No one in the three little towns along the Kalkajalka River knew where she lived, but she visited all of them sporadically. He didn't even know her full name, so why she'd turned up in his dreams was another mystery. Well, maybe not that much of a mystery, since he'd dreamed about her before because she was sexy and made him laugh. Unlike those flimsy phantasies, these dreams stuck with him.

He remembered fragments of singing and nonsensical conversations. Something about mapmaking and siphoning milliseconds from the planetary communications net. The male voice wanted to add compounded electrolyte powders to a shopping list. Sairy wished that whatever drew Falco Joro and her dumb-as-dirt enforcers to build a compound in the Makaan Nature Reserve would draw her away again soon.

As specific as those memories were, even sharper memories all seemed to center around smells, like something had cleared his sinuses. Antiseptics. Persian roses in full bloom. A salty and fruity liquid. Moist dog breath.

The dream visuals made the least sense of all. Wide doors that his dream-self interpreted as a starship airlock. Drifting in the void in an all-white emergency escape capsule through an indifferent universe. A basalt cave with hundreds of rainforest and riverine plants growing all along the horizontally striated walls, like an abandoned hydroponic farm gone wild. Plants were usually like sparks and flashes to his plant affinity talent, but in his dream, each spark was actually a collection of tiny lights, with unique color combinations for different plant species. Very confusing.

In his fresher basin, he splashed cool water on his face and head, then pushed his hair back, trying to smooth down the unruly spikes. A wave of exhaustion washed through him. His future self would be grateful if he took a shower before sleeping, but he wasn't sure he had the stamina.

He wished he knew what he'd been doing in the missing four days. Maybe he'd become drowsy, landed the aircar to take a nap, and inadvertently joined a wilderness exploration marathon. He hadn't sleepwalked since he was six years old, but he didn't have any better theories just then.

Both the shower and the bed in the back room were singing their siren songs, but he needed to check in first. He took a deep breath, then blew it out quickly because he still stank. Maybe he really had been in a marathon. In a moldy swamp.

Trudging back to the front room, he woke the deskcomp and pinged Barken, the Command Administrator.

“Hey, Albasrey, I was just about... is your display acting up again? I'm not getting a visual.” Barken sounded peeved, but he often did these days. His position was supposed to be administration and logistics, but the Ranger Service had an ever-increasing number of unfilled positions. Barken kept accumulating additional duties without increased rank or pay. The Citizen Protection Service kept cutting their budget contribution. The Qal Corona planetary government had no incentive to make up the difference.

“My display is green go. I'm using just audio because I'm just filthy. Was anyone looking for me?”

“No, why?”

Houyen frowned. “I've been gone for four days.”

Barken's silence stung. No one had noticed his absence.

He started to make the point about basic personnel safety procedures, then hesitated. They'd want to know what happened, and he had no satisfactory explanation to offer. The CPS, for all it like to pretend otherwise, was still a military

branch of the galactic government. The military didn't like mysteries.

"Huh," said Barken finally. *"You didn't miss much, except the finsec system went chaotic again and froze our accounts for a day. At least it wasn't thirty-three days, like last time. Besides, Delacallo said you were liaising with the locals."*

Houyen rolled his eyes at the in-house code for having casual hot-connect sex with a local civilian. From what he'd seen, it was Delacallo's primary hobby, so she likely assumed everyone did it.

Houyen closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Regulations in writing and in practice were two different things, at least as far as this command went. Why waste his time bringing up the protocols for keeping track of their field staff? It wouldn't change anything.

"Well, anyway," said Barken, *"Matsurgan is headed north this evening and wants to see you before he leaves. Can you get here in five minutes?"*

"Better make that fifteen minutes, unless the Chief wants mud all over his new carpet." Houyen and the other rangers rarely saw their boss in person because he covered two ranger stations, and preferred the base in the high plains part of the reserve, a thousand kilometers to the north. The locals there managed horses, which suited Matsurgan's mammal-focused animal-affinity minder talent far better than the plant-, reptile-, and bird-infested rainforest.

"I'll tell him." Two brief tones ended the conversation.

Cleaner and better smelling, but no less tired, Houyen sat upright and forward in the guest chair that Matsurgan had indicated.

The new padded carpet in soothing waves of blue, green, and tan highlighted how mismatched and utilitarian the rest of the furnishings were. The bare, windowless walls and the

subtle odor of construction adhesive didn't improve the office's ambiance. Matsurgan wisely held any important meetings in the base's well-appointed conference room with wide windows that offered a view of a neighboring well-tended, naturalized waterfall garden.

Matsurgan opened a transparent display that showed several flat graphs. His large and expressive facial features made all his reactions seem exaggerated. His current frown put ancient Kabuki theater masks to shame. "Why don't I have your ten-day reports?"

"Which ones are you missing?" Houyen asked politely, stalling for time as he tried to remember if one had been due while he'd been visiting dreamland. No, luckily, he'd submitted the last one nine days ago. It was disheartening to realize his boss would notice a missing report sooner than he'd notice a missing employee.

"All of them." He stabbed a control. "Barken, send me Albasray's ten-days for the last standard year."

"They're in your meeting dataspace, where you told me to put them." Barken's tone came perilously close to snappish.

"Copy," Matsurgan replied sourly, ending the comm.

He made surly growling sounds as he displayed the reports as a row of cubes, then opened the last one. "What have you been working on?"

Houyen hid his exasperation. Chaos forbid his boss might make use of the top summary section helpfully labeled as such. "I planned and scheduled the quarterly botanical surveys. I did upkeep visits to two of the remote ranger stations in my sector. I met with the local towns in the upper rainforest area about tracking the source for the disease that's been reappearing—"

Matsurgan interrupted. "What?" His frown returned. "Not your 'infinity fever' nonsense again." His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Did you put that in your report?"

"No, sir. It's not due until tomorrow."

Matsurgan's hand curled into a fist. "I'm not having those farkin' CPS researchers crawling up our collective asses looking for imaginary diseases. They don't know shit about our mission and don't care. They'll pull the 'keep the galactic peace' card and destroy our rapport with the locals." He blew out a noisy breath. "And it'll come out of my budget."

That last was the real reason, Houyen suspected. The incident had been a decade before he'd transferred in, and before Matsurgan had been saddled with the additional rainforest district to manage. The CPS had brought in pharma company researchers to investigate rare plants for a promising new drug.

Houyen struggled to keep a tight rein on his temper. A drug to benefit a tiny percentage of minders was not even in the same solar system as a serious, possibly contagious fever that killed people, but Matsurgan didn't see a difference.

"Not one word of that 'fever' horseshit goes in your report. You're a botanist with a minder talent for plants, not a registered medic. Or an epidemiologist, or anything else. You need to be doing your job, not helping a few crackpots spread ridiculous rumors and getting the rest of the locals riled up. That's the problem with letting civilians live in the Reserve. Sure, they can be useful at the ground level, but practicing ancient pre-flight Earth indigenous ways of life makes them superstitious. 'Cooperative agreements,' my ass. The locals are self-dealing parasites who only cooperate when it suits them. But they scream like wild peacocks if their cooperator payments are late."

Houyen suppressed a sigh. Apparently, Matsurgan was in a mood to swing at everything he disliked about his life, and Houyen was the unlucky punching bag. Without locals and their willingness to monitor the ecosystems and manage resources responsibly, the CPS would have to hire millions of employees across the galaxy. Or answer to the galactic High Council as to why the nature reserves were failing. Houyen agreed with the Central Galactic Concordance foundation laws that established and maintained the nature reserves and preserves on each of the five-hundred-plus member planets.

He wouldn't have a career, otherwise. And allowing biodiversity to flourish in the semi-controlled environment of terraformed planets made good sense, since it was key to future successful terraforming when they discovered new suitable planets. But he'd never understood why responsibility for them ended up with the Citizen Protection Service.

“Find something better to do with your time.” Matsurgan glared pointedly. “Obsessions are dangerous. They'd be grounds for a mandatory evaluation by the CPS mind shop.”

“Yes, sir.” He pasted a chastened look on his face. Houyen had been recruited by the CPS at age seventeen, so he had nearly thirty years of experience placating instructors and commanders with a seemingly respectful and compliant body demeanor. It tanked that he'd needed to hone that skill to keep his career, but life was full of tradeoffs. Like having a meaningful job even though it precluded anything more than fleeting relationships, let alone a family. Even though he dreamed of leaving the service, and even planned how to just disappear if he got in trouble, the CPS would never let him go. He'd tested too high in his minder talent, even though an affinity for plants was about as benign a talent as there was.

Besides, Matsurgan wouldn't follow through with the threat unless Houyen openly flaunted his defiance. As far as he could tell, Matsurgan had jetted past burnout into cynically numb a couple of decades ago. The man either didn't notice or care that ranger morale was setting new lows with each passing quarter-year of understaffing and underfunding. As a consequence, rangers in the Makaan Nature Reserve could pretty much do — or not do — as they pleased.

If Houyen's intuition was right, several of them were engaging in self-enrichment and self-indulgence at the expense of the Reserve's resources and residents. At Ryaksha base, Ranger Melekir was so close to retirement that she was counting down the hours. Ranger Torishi was probably harvesting and selling rare plants to unregulated pharma startups for profit. Delacallo liked pursuing her hot-connect hobby far better than she liked patrolling the reserve. Polar glaciers moved faster than Ranger Brannezzo's audit of Falco

Joro's construction plans, though that could be malicious compliance to protest a task that wasn't supposed to be his job. The permits said Joro was building a resort for the ultra-wealthy, but satellite images made it look more like a fortress. Brannezzo, who made no secret of detesting field work, practically lived in the megacity where the planet's regional planning office was located. Half the ranger station's budget probably went to Matsurgan's trips up north and Brannezzo's hotel bills.

Houyen wished that whatever part of him noticed these things and drew these usually accurate conclusions would just leave him alone. He had a few scars from learning the hard way that unless he acted to protect himself, miscreants who got caught would drag everyone into their maelstrom.

Houyen gave himself a mental shake and tried to catch up with what Matsurgan was saying.

“...and I want to see your report before—”

Two tones sounded, and Barken's voice came through the deskcomp. *“It's seventeen-thirty hours, sir.”*

Matsurgan all but pounded the control. “Yes, Admin Barken, I know what goddamn time it is.” He turned his glare on Houyen. “Dismissed. If you need a project, fix whatever is wrong with the hydroponics demonstration room. Whatever you did before didn't last. Now it looks like it got frost-bit or something.”

“Yes, sir.” Houyen rose and nodded respectfully, then pivoted on one foot to make a smart, military-style turn and headed toward the doors, which irised open quietly. With an equally respectful nod at Barken as he strode past the man's desk, he kept up his purposeful march until he got back to his quarters.

He waited until the doors closed to release his control. Exhaustion slammed like a bucket of cold water, making his shoulders sag and his eyelids droop. He barely had enough energy to set the do-not-disturb seal, kick off his boots, and tumble onto the bed.

He awoke to the gentle sound of birdsong and a coppery taste in his mouth. As he rolled onto his back, he draped an arm over his head to protect his sticky eyes from the bright overhead lights.

The chirping became louder and more insistent.

“Okay, okay,” he mumbled. “I’m awake.” That was a lie, but it got the bedroom’s wallcomp to fade out the morning wake-up sequence.

It felt like breaking out of a cocoon just to fight free of the light blanket so he could swing his legs off the bed and sit up. Every joint in his body felt like he hadn’t used it for a month. He fumbled in his bedside drawer for the pack of pain patches and slapped one on his neck, hoping it would kick his headache’s ass and take names.

According to the clock display, he’d lost another twelve hours of his life. At least this interlude was explainable and hadn’t brought more dreams.

Being a ranger had its benefits, and one of them was the freedom to arrange his day however he liked, especially with Matsurgan gone again. His only deadline was the ten-day report. It would take him all of ten minutes to clone a previous report, change the dates, add a boring throwaway sentence about the meeting four... no, five days ago, and send it off as usual.

For his own personal records, he would describe everything he could remember about the meeting. It would torque Matsurgan’s jets if he knew Houyen recorded detailed data and observations about all his projects. And he’d go supernova if he discovered the hypercube of data Houyen had collected on infinity fever. Houyen was convinced that the source was a periodic insect infestation. He wasn’t a finder, able to pull patterns out of thin air, but this one he could almost feel once he’d put the data together.

Thanks to Matsurgan, the station's entomologist wouldn't help, but Houyen knew one of the locals had a similar, if lower-level, talent. He'd proposed an expedition to the three river towns to look for the breeding ground, since they knew the terrain better than he did. They'd agreed in principle but strongly advised him to invite Sairy along. According to them, she had better maps than anyone, including satellites or ranger surveillance bots.

That had been the last discussion topic before he'd left the meeting in Irakat. Maybe that was why he'd dreamed of her.

Because his full bladder insisted, he stood up and tested his balance, then walked out of the bedroom and into the fresher. According to the mirror, he looked better than yesterday, but according to his nose, he didn't smell any better. Though that was likely because he'd left his muddy clothes in a heap on the floor next to the solar-dry unit instead of loading them in the sanitizer to work its magic. Roughing it in the field for days and weeks at a time as part of his job had given him an abiding appreciation of civilization's modern conveniences. Nothing like a diet of military mealpacks to bring home the luxury of a high-end restaurant. Maybe if he ever left the ranger service, he could start a career nurturing plants for the food-service industry. At least he'd eat well.

After a shower and a successful raid of the community kitchen, he took his mixed bounty back to his quarters. Once he'd mollified his stomach, he set himself up for a deep dive into the ranger service records.

His first question was easily answered. No one named Sairy had ever signed a cooperative agreement with the Makaan Nature Reserve in the last ninety years. Furthermore, no new agreements had been signed by anyone at all in Irakat Collective or the nearest eight towns in the last decade.

That wasn't entirely surprising. Agreements weren't required for locals who weren't taking and profiting from the natural resources, and families often didn't list individuals so they wouldn't have to keep updating the agreement every time they had a child or a cousin left for school. The few government entities that might have cared had lost track of

those citizens long ago. Trade and barter systems were exempt from taxes because they were impossible to track.

Answers to his second question took every bit of stubbornness he possessed. Outside of the financial and logistics areas, the ranger service records made a twisted tangle of parasitic plant roots seem neat and orderly. An alarming percentage of them were misfiled, mis-tagged, or missing altogether. If they'd ever been cross-referenced, the keys were long gone. The only good news was that he'd already been collecting data on infinity fever whenever he ran across it. Unlike the ranger records, his own were well organized and thoroughly indexed. That habit had saved his career more than once.

The sweet, clean taste of orange during breakfast had given him an unexpected feeling of *déjà vu*, followed by a sudden intuition that maybe his missing four days had been lost to infinity fever. He didn't know why, but it felt right.

To prove it, he needed to know what the symptoms were. That had been a good enough reason to delve in the depths of the ranger records, but he had to admit Matsurgan's determined denial was added incentive.

Houyen certainly wasn't a medic, but he was a scientist and could apply logic to the problem. He started by documenting what he remembered of the meeting in Irakat Collective, because after a good night's sleep, his memory had improved. While his minder talents didn't include being a filer, with perfect recall of everything the person experienced, he'd taught himself to keep memories organized in his head until he could write them down.

The fog of the missing days made it seem like it had been at least a ten-day since that meeting, so he just recorded his thoughts in random order. His proposed expedition to track the source and the recommendation to ask Sairy Sarvand for help topped the list. He hadn't known her family name until the Irakat administrator mentioned it. Not that it mattered, but he liked the sound of it.

He remembered he'd brought chems and reusable sample collectors for Irakat's biologic test kit. It wasn't against regulations to donate CPS supplies for goodwill purposes, but would probably send Matsurgan on another tirade about the local leeches. He'd asked the three town administrators about any patterns they'd noticed about the illness and told them his theory that a periodic insect infestation might be the source. They hadn't noticed a predictable schedule, but they acknowledged the insect infestation was confusingly unpredictable, too. In the last four or five years, the northwestern-most town got hit before Irakat Collective and Axolotl Bend. They hadn't seen any deaths in the last three years, and as far as they knew, no one had caught the fever twice, but a mild case might not have been noticed. That gave him hope that immune-response tests could help researchers find the path to a cure.

The administrators disagreed about how communicable the disease was or wasn't, but then something had interrupted their debate. Oh, yes. Four idiots from Falco Joro's so-called construction crew had landed their flitters in Irakat's public landing pad. When they realized they'd missed the regular trading day, they'd started going door to door, noisily looking to buy fun-time chems the locals sometimes traded. If Joro's swaggering, well-armed crew even knew what an earth-mover or a glass-welder looked like, Houyen would personally fly them to the biggest chems and alterants shop on the continent.

Irakat Collective, one of the oldest towns in the rainforest, had long experience in dealing with troublemakers and soon convinced the idiots to find their bliss somewhere else. Houyen helped by standing with Garamont, Irakat's administrator, making sure his ranger uniform was visible as he tracked the visitors with a steady gaze. Joro's crew had childishly over-torqued their flitter's engines to make as much noise as possible on their way out of town.

He couldn't remember if he'd told the meeting participants which insect he suspected as the cause. It would have helped if Ranger Brannezzo, a trained entomologist with a minder talent that gave him an instinctive understanding of insect life, had been willing to consult. Prickly Brannezzo seemed to think

hoarding knowledge was job security. Houyen couldn't press the matter without Matsurgan finding out, so Houyen had stumbled along on his own.

After Joro's crew left, the other administrators had decided to make themselves scarce in case of further drama.

From there, Houyen's memory grew hazy. He seemed to recall he'd turned down a lunch invitation, and maybe promised somebody something as he was leaving. His last clear memory was lifting off in his aircar. After that, nightmare-land.

Based on his research, he was pretty sure he'd had infinity fever. Delirium, high fever, exhaustion, headaches, and flaky dry skin that should have been impossible in the ambient humidity were all consistent with the records. He even had the less common sensory hypersensitivity that some people reported. In his case, he was constantly being assaulted by the smell of pretty much everything, from the chemicals in the clothes sanitizer to the discordant waft of odors from the cold box in the base's community kitchen.

After an unexpected nap on his uncomfortably flat desk, he awoke with two startling conclusions. One, that his memories of spending time with Sairy Sarvand were likely somewhat accurate.

Two, that she had treated him for infinity fever. That was an altogether outlandish hypothesis, but his intuition was insistent. According to the record, people with rapid-onset symptoms as virulent as his usually died.

Why, how, and where she'd treated him were mysteries he couldn't solve right then. But he would. And he had the perfect excuse to see her again when he asked for her helping in tracking the insect source.

Before he did that, though, he needed to deal with his disappointment to realize Sairy had a partner. Apparently, he'd been holding onto a secret hope that she might be as interested in him as he was in her. He should have known better. Nothing in his career had ever been compatible with a steady relationship. Especially if he succeeded in tracking the source

of infinity fever and proving its existence. Matsurgan would make sure Houyen's next assignment would be on in cryosleep on an exploration expedition to the Andromeda galaxy.

CHAPTER THREE

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Irakat Collective, Qal Corona • GDAT 3235.015

Sairy sat on her airsled and watched as Houyen Albasrey, Phendari Fordas, and Kodetia Bristi checked their own airsleds one last time. Administrator Garamont flitted between them like an agitated hummingbird.

It had been fifteen days since she'd left Houyen in his aircar. He'd obviously thrived and hadn't tracked her down, so she assumed — or at least hoped — he didn't remember her role in his recovery.

She wished they'd quit fiddling and just go. Yes, the three-day hike would take them into the challenging terrain of the high cloud forest to the northwest, but they had plenty of gear and working comms. The last-minute delays gave her too damn much time to regret agreeing to participate in the town's research expedition.

Oh, right, the “botanical survey.” Apparently, the less Houyen's boss knew about the actual purpose, the better. That was okay by Sairy. She didn't want the CPS in her business any more than the townspeople did.

Sairy stroked Kyala's head. The gargoyle had been ready to leave thirty minutes ago. Airsled trips usually brought new places to explore, which suited Kyala's adventurous nature. “Soon,” Sairy murmured, wishing it was true. She regretted the decision not to communicate with Elkano unless it became necessary. At the time, she'd wanted to keep one of her secrets, but now she had no one to talk to.

If they'd asked her ten days ago, she'd have sent them a map or two and made herself scarce for a while until they forgot about it.

But since then, she'd learned that infinity fever was spreading. It used to just affect the three towns along the Kalkajalka River, but now it had gotten as far as Falco Joro's construction site, over thirty kilometers to the west. They only knew about it because three Joro crew who wore mercenary-style gear had stomped into Irakat Collective's last trade day, demanding answers and a cure. Sairy had only gone to trading day to get a glimpse at her erstwhile patient Houyen. He seemed none the worse for wear. When the trouble started, she and Kyala had slipped away into the trees, but watched the interaction via two of Elkano's cameras.

The townspeople had rebuffed Joro's crew, telling them that the cure was a myth, just like the supposed treasure of Jalkapanga that they'd been questioning everyone about for months. Then the lead enforcer, Brezhkeli, said they'd noticed that no one in the towns had died, and yet two of the construction crew had. After a fairly heated argument, the townspeople managed to send the interlopers packing, but Sairy felt guilty that her secret treatments had left the towns vulnerable to future scrutiny. People like Brezhkeli and his boss Falco Joro weren't the type to take "no" for an answer when they wanted something.

Then, townspeople came right out and asked her for help. They were proud of their self-reliance, so it took a lot for them to do that. She appreciated more than they'd ever know that they'd not asked questions when she'd first showed up and mostly respected her privacy ever since.

Garamont, Irakat Collective's elected administrator, had introduced the topic, then let Houyen explain. After that, Phen and her partner Koda gently but firmly cajoled Sairy into going on the expedition.

But the primary reason she'd agreed to go was that Houyen had unwittingly dropped a bombshell in her lap. He made a convincing case that a periodic maturity flight of cicada-like insects, not the ship debris from her unorthodox landing in the rainforest, was the transmission vector of the infinity fever.

That had left Sairy stunned. It was a good thing she'd been seated in the corner of the Irakat community room, waiting to hear why they'd invited her to the meeting in the first place.

It could change everything. If her leaking ship's laboratory hadn't contaminated the ablating pieces of incalloy, then her self-imposed cleanup task was done. It meant she hadn't caused the illness, she'd merely been unlucky enough to catch it, and thanks to the state-of-the-art xenobiology lab on board her ship and help from Elkano, been lucky enough to develop a treatment for it. If she wanted, she and Elkano could take their hold full of incalloy scrap and move on, and maybe figure out what to do with themselves.

Or it could change nothing. The ejection event that had sent them tumbling out of transit space and burrowing into the side of a remote volcanic mountain was still an unfathomable mystery. They knew too much and not nearly enough about what had happened. Why had the mothership ejected them? Why had it sent them to Qal Corona, of all five hundred member planets in the Concordance? What had awakened her once they'd arrived? What task had they left unfinished?

At best, she was missing in action, and the CPS black-box project command wanted her back. At worst, they considered her a dangerous loose end and would destroy her and Elkano on sight to keep their secrets. The only thing she knew for sure was that she didn't trust the CPS to have her best interests at heart.

By the time Houyen and the administrator had introduced the idea of tracking the breeding ground of the "wuzzy bugs," as the locals had named them, and leaving the very next day, Sairy had set aside her tumultuous thoughts for later.

Which was now. She used to be better at waiting, a skill she'd cultivated in the military because getting antsy didn't make the time go faster. But now that she had options, maybe, she wanted the expedition over so she could consider her life's next chapter.

Houyen and Koda finally crossed the town parking area to where she and Kyala sat in the shelter of a tall, wide tree.

Koda pointed a thumb back behind her, where Phen and Garamont were discussing something that made Garamont wave his hands and Phen cross her arms resolutely. Sairy hadn't noticed the family resemblance before, but she did now.

“Sorry about that,” said Koda. “Garamont is having an anxiety attack. He’s been trying to convince us we need three times the people and equipment, or that we should call in the planetary health department and let them deal with it. He’s worked himself into accusing Phen of secretly after the cursed treasure, like she cares anything about money, instead of the chance to hike and study insects, like she loves.” She tossed a dark glance at the wildly gesticulating Garamont. “There’s a good reason we moved our business to Axolotl Bend.”

Houyen’s expression didn’t give him away, but Sairy had the impression his patience was wearing thin. He cast a quick look at Sairy and Koda. “What’s with the treasure? Joro’s crew seems to actually believe it, but I didn’t think the locals did.”

Koda took a breath to speak, but got distracted and turned to look at Garamont, who was now shouting.

Sairy shrugged. “It’s supposed to be hidden at the top of Jalkapanga Mountain. No one agrees what it is — loot from a theft, rare metals deposit, or maybe an alien tower that miraculously survived the whole planetary terraform process. Probably kept alive by kids who like a good ghost story.”

Koda laughed and turned back around. “Says the Ghost of Jalkapanga.”

Sairy rolled her eyes. “Don’t start with that again.”

“Why not? You know this part of the rainforest better than locals who have been here fifty years, and none of them knows where you live.” Koda’s face took on an impish look. “My favorite rumor is that you’re a fire spirit who lives in the dormant volcano core. Piss you off enough and you’ll reignite it.”

Houyen shook his head. “From what I’ve seen, you should call her the good neighbor of Jalkapanga. Didn’t she fix your comms gateway when it went down and the fastest repair

service was thirty days out? And she helped you cleanup after the flood a couple of ten-days ago.

“Well, sure,” said Koda, waiving off Houyen’s words, “but who wants to be called something so boring? It’s not nearly as much fun as ‘the Ghost.’”

Houyen’s unexpected defense touched her. She resisted sending him a grateful glance that Koda would see and undoubtedly remark on.

Koda was a skilled weaver of plant-based fibers and a savvy entrepreneur, but sometimes annoyed people with her teasing. Sairy had heard a rumor that Koda was an emph. She would have thought a minder talent like that would have made her less inclined to irritate people. Phen, her wife of at least a decade, had the patience of a saint. Houyen wanted Phen along particularly because she was a minder with a low-level affinity for insects. That meant Koda was coming, too.

Phen broke away from Garamont and walked toward them under the tree. Phen was built like a tank, all powerful muscle mixed with elegant grace. Sairy gathered she’d done two tours of duty as a gunnin in the galactic military’s Ground Div before returning to Qal Corona and her extended family. The thunderous look on her face was as perturbed as Sairy had ever seen her.

“Let’s go,” said Phen, her consonants clipped.

For once, Koda simply nodded and crossed to her airsled.

To Sairy’s great relief, within ten minutes, they checked comms, strapped in, and were airborne.

At the trailhead they’d chosen for their launch point, they landed the airsleds long enough to deploy a temporary comms relay point while Houyen used his ranger access to download realtime weather satellite data.

Sairy used the time to check on Kyala. She liked flying, and didn’t mind the custom eye goggles that Sairy had

designed and printed for her. The gargoyle's thoughts were starting to trend longingly toward lunch. Truth be told, so were Sairy's. The human mealpacks she'd brought would never win culinary prizes, but they were compact and self-contained. And universe knew she had enough of the damned things. She noticed Houyen had similar provisions.

Phen's airsled, on the other hand, had a large, heavy coldbox that her parent had insisted they bring. Sairy guessed it had been a matter of picking her battles, considering how unhappy Garamont had been when they left. He'd advocated for the expedition himself. Why he'd imagined Phen and Koda would stay home was perplexing.

"The images are good, but I wouldn't trust the 'no rain' part of the forecast," said Houyen as he shared the information across their temporary private network. "Uninhabited areas like the Reserve have low priority as far as assigning AI resources or analysts."

"So what else is new?" muttered Koda. "Let's hope the images match our maps."

Houyen ignored the interruption. "Anyway, I think that, like Sairy recommended, the top of the rift valley is still the best place to park the sleds and continue on foot."

After the meeting where she'd agreed to the expedition, she and Elkano had reviewed all the camera recordings of the target area. Once they'd known what to look for, evidence of the insect outflux was plain to see. They only ate one species of puffy-leafed shrub that was poisonous to most other would-be munchers. The downslope trails of denuded shrubs all converged at the top of the rift. Higher in the cloud forest, she'd remembered noting a curious scattering of silvery leaves that she now knew were wuzzy-bug carapaces. When she'd sent her compiled information to the team, Phen and Houyen had agreed it was a promising sign. Apparently, wuzzy bug adult wings cracked the nymph outer shell, but not all the pieces fell off until flight and feeding. Or something like that. Sairy really didn't want to learn any more about creepy insects than she had to.

While the expedition could fly all the way to the top of the mountain, the dense canopy and jumbled topography offered no place to land, meaning they couldn't look for the signs of the wuzzy bugs. Both Houyen and Phen were convinced the breeding ground would be high in the cloud forest, away from natural predators that would ordinarily keep them in check. They were looking for the flightless nymph form, not the adult winged version that came in sporadic waves and made a mess.

As far as Sairy knew, she was the only member of the group who had ventured into the cloud forest at all. And she wouldn't have, either, except she'd found a sizeable chunk of incalloy that had taken her four days to cut into pieces small enough to haul away in her airsled's trailer. She wasn't a fanciful person, but she considered it an eerie place. She'd made the mistake of saying so.

"I thought ghosts weren't afraid of anything." Koda's smirk made Sairy roll her eyes.

"Ice it, Koda," said Phen, without rancor.

"Oh, fine. This is going to be a long three days if we can't have any fun."

Sairy couldn't agree more.

On the flight to the rift, Sairy opened a private channel to Elkano to give him updates. The cameras she'd brought would soon be out of Elkano's range, so the experimental comms implant in her head and chest would be the relay.

"Have I lost my sense of humor?" she subvocalized to Elkano. "I don't remember being so ready to snap at someone trying to get a rise out of me."

"I see no way to answer your question," said Elkano unhelpfully. *"However, I am interested in the resurgence of the cursed treasure meme. According to the records I have collected, it tends to coincide with the periodic wuzzy-bug infestation."*

"Hmmm." She wasn't going down that ant trail with Elkano. He was brilliant in his way, but he found memes fascinating and saw patterns everywhere. His favorite was the

Ayorinn Legacy and the supposedly coded messages that would change the galaxy and set all minders free. Like the Citizen Protection Service would ever let that happen. There was nothing they wouldn't do to keep the galactic peace, or at least their vision of it. "Maybe you could work on the problem of whether or not anyone has been looking for us."

Since their arrival three and a half years ago, they'd been extremely wary of tapping any local or planetary comms for more than a few stolen milliseconds at a time. Their interpersonal comms were an unbreachable closed system, but the signature was unavoidably unique. Neither of them dared ping anything with open channels to the galaxy at large. The security precaution was still valid, but Sairy found herself chafing at the inactivity. It was all Houyen's fault that they no longer had a good reason to stay.

Never mind that one of her secret reasons for agreeing to the trip was for the chance to get to know Houyen better. She was a pool of contradictory chaos and would be the first to admit it.

The top of the rift valley turned out to be a better place than they'd imagined to leave their airsleds. The floods that had threatened the towns must have started higher on the mountain. Flattened trees and tumbled rubble created a half-decent landing pad, as long as they avoided the mud. Kyala waited patiently for Sairy to remove the goggles and release the harness, then bounded into the first mud slick she came to and rolled in delight.

Sairy chuckled and let her have her fun. For one, they'd all be muddy sooner or later. And for another, the mud was excellent protection against the biting flies and hungry mosquitoes. Humans could deploy nets under their hats, but gargoyles would just as soon eat them as wear them.

Houyen pointed toward a smaller group of trees that had escaped the flood damage. "If we move the sleds under there and tarp them, they'll probably be here when we get back."

Phen laughed. "Good thinking, Ranger," she drawled. "Mean megacity streets ain't no place to leave transports lyin'

around in the open.”

“Huh,” said Houyen with an admirable straight face. “I was more worried about the dropbears.”

“Nah.” Phen eyed the tops of trees. “It’s the jaguars you really gotta worry about. Sneaky little buggers will eat your toes off.”

Koda laughed. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Nope,” Phen agreed.

At Houyen’s questioning look, Koda gave him a rueful smile. “Phen and I met in the military and she kindly brought me home with her. I grew up in a megacity and knew jack-all about nature, but I said I’d read some books. Phen and her cousins warned me about all the big predators that live in the rainforest. They strung me along for hundreds of days. I wouldn’t go out at night, and I insisted on bringing guns to bed. They finally relented when Phen realized I really meant it when I’d said I loved her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.”

“Well, who could blame me? Koda is gorgeous. She could have anyone she wanted. I’m... not.”

Koda stepped over a branch to close the distance between her and Phen. “You are to me.”

The tender kiss they shared had Sairy looking away. Moments like that deserved all the privacy she could give them.

A distinctive ping tone pattern jarred her back to the real world.

Houyen looked almost startled as he brought up his forearm and tapped the gauntlet-style percomp he wore. “Ranger Brannezzo. What can I do for you?”

Sairy noted that he didn’t use a holo image and let them all hear the call. “*It’s what I can do for you,*” said a mid-baritone voice. “*The Irakat Administrator says you and some civilians are doing an entomological survey in an unmapped area and*

need my help. I am the official bug guy in this station, after all."

"Thanks for the offer, but he's mistaken. It's just a botanical survey, like I do every quarter." Houyen frowned. "I thought you were in Eolium."

"I was." The voice sounded aggrieved. *"Matsurgan told me to get my ass back to base via fast shuttle and join your group before the Administrator made a stink with CPS HQ. I'm just following orders. Where are you, anyway?"*

Houyen cast an assessing glance upward, where clouds clung to the mountaintop like a drift of fluffy seed pods. "About twenty-seven kilometers northwest of Irakat Collective, at the lower edge of Jalkapanga Mountain's cloud forest."

"Where? Never mind. Send me the coordinates and I'll be there as soon as I get my gear together and pull a flitter from the garage."

Houyen shook his head. "No place to land a flitter. We parked our airsleds along with a ping geolocator and are hiking up the rest of the way on foot."

"What? Why?" His tone implied he thought the idea was insane.

To be fair, thought Sairy, he wasn't entirely wrong.

Houyen pinched the bridge of his nose. "Because plant samples won't obligingly collect themselves. According to Ranger records, Jalkapanga Mountain's cloud forest has never been ground-surveyed. Not once. Not even by the original settlement company when they turned the Nature Reserve over to the planetary government one hundred and eighty years ago."

"Hey, Ranger," yelled Phen, as if she wasn't less than three meters away from Houyen's percomp. "Tell my asshole father we're going after the treasure, just like he thought, and there's nothing he can do about it!"

"Treasure? You mean it's real? I thought Brezhkeli was just mad about what the villagers said."

“No, it’s not real.” Houyen’s exasperation was plain on his face, though he kept it out of his tone.

“Yes, it is!” shouted Phen. “Real as rain! And it’ll all be ours!”

Koda tried to pull her away. “Not helping, Phen.”

Houyen turned his back on the struggling pair and caught Sairy’s eye as he tapped his gauntlet. “I just send you the coords for this spot and the geo-locator relay, but I’m not the leader here, I’m just tagging along to do my survey. If our cooperating partners want to start up the mountain while the weather holds, I’m going with them.”

“Who is the leader?” Brannezzo’s tone seemed sharper.

“Me and the Ghost of Jalkapanga!” shouted Phen as Koda half-dragged her toward the biggest airsled. “We’re gonna be rich! We’ll buy our own starship! Tell my parent to suck flux!”

“Who’s making all that racket?”

“The leader.” His mouth twitched in momentary smile. “I think she’s miffed.”

Sairy snorted. Easy-going Phen was usually slow to anger, but once she blew, she rivaled a volcanic eruption. Her meddling parent was probably in for a rough few ten-days after they got back.

“She sounds like she’s gliding high on the local exotic chems. Better wait until I get there.”

“Like I said, not my decision. Ping me when you’re in the area and I’ll send you an updated location and route advisory.”

Houyen tapped the percomp controls and dropped his arm. He started to speak, then seemed to think better of it. With tightened lips and jerky movements, he set about guiding his airsled under the stand of trees.

Kyala, who now wore enough mud that it was dripping off her, sidled up to Sairy. She didn’t need the mental connection to know that the gargoyle was wanting to be off having adventures, not being perplexed by human conversations.

“You and me, both. Come on, let’s get the sled stowed and covered.”

She’d managed three and a half years of waiting and wondering. Now she just needed to survive three more days.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER 4

Jalkapanga Mountain, Qal Corona • GDAT 3235.016

Houyen thought he'd been in pretty good physical shape until this expedition. He had the feeling that Phen and Koda were finding it as challenging as he did, though so far, they hadn't complained. Still, he was glad to see they were experienced hikers who knew when to call a brief rest.

Sairy, on the other hand, seemed indefatigable. Well, maybe determined was a better word. She shared her experience and her maps and deftly avoided Koda's attempts to draw her into personal conversations. Mostly, she climbed and talked to Kyala.

He'd had reservations about Kyala's presence, but the gargoyle had turned out to have an uncanny knack for discovering usable paths and avoiding the shallow thickets that hid wickedly sharp thorns. Sairy's and Kyala's partnership reminded him of when his brother's animal affinity talent had blossomed, and he'd made friends with every stray cat in the neighborhood. He didn't know why it surprised him that Sairy was good with systems and animals, but it did. She continued to intrigue him.

He also had to admit that Sairy's description of the cloud forest as being eerie was on target. Mosses covered everything. Unexpected mists wafted in between the dense stands of trees. Unleashing his minder talent gave him the sense that the plants lived a more precarious existence than he'd imagined. A lot less diversity than he'd imagined, too. No parasitic figs, no nano-needle shrubs, and too-few epiphytes on the stunted-looking trees. Just a couple of species of birch and skinny firs.

The topsoil was rich with organics, but volcanic soils below were acidic and friable. And sharp, where they jutted

out of the steep slope, waiting to tear any fabric that brushed by too close.

At least the bare-branched shrubs proved they were on the right track as far as tracking the wuzzy-bug trail. Houyen's talent said the plants weren't as dead as they looked, which suggested they'd adapted to periodic insect swarms. Once again, the serious lack of environmental records made him shake his head in disgust. How had the rangers missed that for well over a century?

By tacit agreement, as dusk approached, they selected and set up their sleeping spot for the night, then sat in a circle to eat from self-heating mealpacks. Houyen was glad that Phen and Koda had left the amateur camper's cold box on the big airsled. Sairy unfolded a collapsible stool and joined the group with her own mealpack after she'd put down food and water for Kyala.

Phen seemed to have gotten past her towering anger at her meddling parent. "Thank the universe I didn't have to eat many of these tasteless things in Ground Div or I'd have cashed out after my first tour."

"At least these are fresh," said Koda. "I think Axolotl Bend's emergency stores were old when the Central League was still ruling the galaxy. That's no way to run a town."

"Truth," agreed Phen. "I'll vote for you if you want to run for Administrator."

Koda laughed. "Thank you, love."

Phen cast a dubious glance upward at the tree canopy that shaded everything. "We need to avoid lights tonight as much as possible. I don't want to wake up covered in wuzzy bugs because we confused them." Phen waved her fork. "I think I'm sensing a bigger mass of them right where Sairy's map—"

The gauntlet on his arm vibrated and sounded the ping tones for an incoming call from Brannezzo. Contrariness made him again answer with audio only and let the group hear it. "Hello, Ranger."

"Where are you now?"

Houyen let the peremptory tone slide on by. “On the mountain.”

“Did you come across the treasure yet?” After an awkward pause, he added, *“Just kidding. It’s too late to find you tonight. You’ll have to wait for us in the morning.”*

“Who is ‘us’?” Houyen glanced at Phen. From her stormy look, she shared his suspicion that her parent was still meddling.

“A couple of locals who know the area better than I do. Don’t know their names. The Chief made the arrangements. I’m meeting them in the morning. Do you need me to bring anything?”

Houyen wanted more details, but his intuition warned him not to ask. “No, I’m set. Ping me when you’re on your way up.”

“Yeah. Send me the coordinates for where you parked your airsleds. We can meet there.”

“Okay.” Houyen disconnected the comm.

His intuition was sending him a hailstorm of alerts. Trouble was, he’d rarely been able to articulate the reasons until events proved him right. He just knew that it had kept him out of harm’s way more than once.

Koda raised her hand. “Show of hands. Who else thought that call was weird?”

Phen raised her hand immediately. After a long moment, Sairy tentatively raised her hand, too.

How was he going to explain this and not look like a conspiracy-addled fool? But if he turned out to be right, he’d feel worse if he kept it to himself.

“I think Ranger Brannezzo thinks we’re after the treasure, and he wants in.”

He took it as a positive sign that no one laughed.

“Interesting,” said Koda. “What’s your logic chain?”

With a deep breath, he took the plunge, marshaling his thoughts as he spoke. “Brannezzo avoids field work like he’s allergic. He’s convinced our boss that the audit of Joro’s construction plans can only be done effectively if it’s done in person at the Planning and Records office in Eolium. So far he’s strung out that assignment to keep him in room service for two-thirds of a year. So why the sudden willingness to join us in the wilderness?” Another question popped. “And when did he talk to Brezhkeli to hear what the townspeople said?”

Koda swallowed her forkful of food. “Like we used to say back when I was in Forward Intelligence, you can never rule out simple greed. Two income sources are better than one.”

On point, said his intuition. Getting paid by Falco Joro for the permit delays and enjoying a luxury megacity lifestyle courtesy of the CPS would be a double win for Brannezzo.

“Okay, I can see that.” He blew out a noisy breath. “But why this sudden obsession with a non-existent treasure, of all things?”

Koda shrugged.

“Maybe it’s a meme,” said Sairy. “My friend says some people are really susceptible to them, especially if it feels like the best secret ever. Logic won’t win when someone wants to believe. His current theory is that the treasure meme is somehow connected to infinity fever outbreaks.”

“What’s his name?” asked Koda, giving Sairy a winning smile. “Why haven’t I met him? I know everyone.”

Houyen thought Sairy was going to ignore Koda’s probe, but instead, she sighed. “His name is Elkano. He’s a homebody.”

“Is that who you’ve been talking to when you aren’t talking to Kyala?” Koda pointed to Sairy’s left ear, where a glint of metal hinted at the presence of an earwire. Now that he thought about it, he realized she’d worn the team comms earwire in her right ear.

Houyen eyed Koda covertly. She was far more observant than he’d given her credit for.

“Yes. He worries.” Sairy uncapped her water pouch and drank deeply. “So, Ranger, what do you want to do if your fellow Ranger shows up? If Koda is right about his second paymaster, his ‘locals who know the area’ might be Joro’s enforcers. And not to be insulting or anything, but are you sure your boss doesn’t have his hand out?”

Houyen queried his intuition, but it was stubbornly silent. “I can’t rule it out.”

“Worst-case scenario,” said Koda, “they all believe in the amazing treasure so much that they’re willing to torch their careers — and you — to get it. What’s a few accidental deaths on a dangerous mountain if we’re the only obstacles?”

“On the other hand,” said Phen, “the best-case scenario is that your idiot boss is sending Brannezzo to discredit your infinity fever research. My paranoid dad, knowing Brannezzo would never find us without help, got a couple of my cousins to go with him.”

Sairy was silent, her expression unreadable as she watched him.

Houyen took a deep breath, trying to quell his roiling regrets. “I apologize for getting you all involved in this. The only solution I see is if we get back down to our airsleds before Brannezzo can find them, we can avoid either scenario.”

Koda put her fork in her chest pocket and collapsed the empty mealpack container. “I doubt it. In my scenario, running away will confirm that we have something to hide and they’ll hunt us down for the treasure. In Phen’s scenario, if we run away, your ranger career is a total flameout unless you can get the samples to prove otherwise, and our people will keep getting sick.” Koda shot a glance at Sairy. “We’ve been lucky in the last three years that no one has died, but not if the fever keeps spreading.”

Houyen couldn’t stop himself from glancing at Sairy, too. Did the townspeople suspect she might have been helping them the way he was convinced she’d helped him? He shook his head, making himself focus on the immediate problem.

“What do you suggest?” he asked.

Koda exchanged a look with Phen, then gave him an assessing look. “Do you have any weapons?” She waved a hand between herself and Phen. “We’re carrying hand-beamers, and we have rifles on our airsleds. It’s a military habit we never grew out of. Joro and her crew are a pain in the ass, but she’s not the first wannabe crime boss trying to exploit our resources.”

Phen fingered the neckline of her tunic. “And we’re wearing Koda’s flex-weave because it’s good skin protection. Almost as good as military flexin armor.”

Houyen knew it to be true because he’d helped Koda file the patent applications for it.

He waved a thumb toward his pack and sleep cocoon. “I have a forceblade, plus the phaseknife I’ve been using on the trail.” He’d never seen a ranger carry energy weapons. They weren’t trained to use them and rarely ran into situations where they’d be useful. Shrugging apologetically, he added, “Plants don’t usually try to shoot me.”

“I have the same as the Ranger.” Sairy’s expression was hard to read in the twilight. After a moment, she continued. “I have three flying cameras that are good for surveillance.” There was a reluctance in her tone, like when she’d been answering a couple of Koda’s insinuating questions instead of dodging them. “Plus, we have Kyala. She’s not a fighter, but her senses are better than a scanbot and tech suppressors can’t stop her.”

Koda flipped the folded mealpack container between her hands. “The way I see it, we have two objectives. One, divert Brannezzo, and two, find the wuzzy-bug breeding ground and test it.”

“Getting off the mountain safely with our airsleds would be good,” said Sairy dryly.

“Okay,” Koda replied with a brief smile, “three objectives. I think we need to split up. At first light, Phen and I will go back and handle Brannezzo and his pals while you and the

ranger finish the climb and get those samples. If you lend us your cameras, we'll be able to see Brannezzo before he sees us."

Sairy's shoulders tightened. "Sorry, the cameras only work for me."

Koda frowned and looked like she was about to argue. Phen nudged her with an elbow. "Skulljack, Koda. Controller's in her head."

Under the pressure of Koda's unspoken request for confirmation, Sairy let out her breath and nodded.

Koda waved a hand. "Okay, we'll take a lesson from the elder teaching tales and use what nature provides. If it's Joro's mercs, they'll trust their tech too much. And if I get close enough, I can use my talents to see what kinds of things Brannezzo is lying about."

Houyen blinked. "You're a sifter?" Good thing he hadn't been lying about anything. Good sifters could not only detect lies, they could mess with brain chemicals to make people want to trust them with secrets.

"Yep. I'm a late bloomer and low-level, or the military would have caught me and force-transferred me to the CPS. And I tank at detecting minder talents in others. But I'm a trained interrogator. Phen's lucky. She just didn't tell them about her talent, and they never bothered to ask." Another brief smile crossed her face. "And if it's Phen's cousins who kept me awake nights with their howling, me and the jaguars will get finally get our revenge."

Houyen turned to Sairy. "I'm seriously out of my starlane here. To be brutally honest, the Ranger Service on Qal Corona is a hollow shell of what it's supposed to be, worse than any other outfit I've been assigned to. My coworkers are strangers who are out for themselves, and I'd sooner trust a busted airlock than the CPS. What do you want to do?"

Sairy's eyes had rounded in surprise at his words, but her expression smoothed into neutral as she looked at him, then turned her gaze on Koda and Phen. "I know the rainforest way

is self-reliance, but could you ask friends for help? Or maybe civilian law enforcement officers?"

Phen shook her head. "The CLEOs don't have jurisdiction. They'd just call the CPS, who might send a military cruiser around in a ten-day or so." She turned to Koda. "We do have friends, though. Charuuk and Dmytro could bring their dogs."

"Or they could also bring flitters and extract us all at daybreak." Koda's tone said she didn't like that option much.

Houyen didn't either, but Sairy had a vote, too. "What do you think?"

Sairy's lips thinned. "I'd like to prove one way or the other if the wuzzy bugs are spreading the fever. Who knows if we'll ever get the chance again. Kyala and I are green-go for the rest of the climb if Houyen wants to go."

He nodded. "I do."

"Copy," said Koda as she and Phen rose to their feet. "You plan your route up to the top and we'll call friends and plan our interception. Let's debrief at first light."

"Sync that." Sairy's response was very military. He'd more than once wondered about her background.

Phen and Koda both turned and headed toward the rock where they'd set up their sleep area.

Houyen picked up his empty mealpack and scooped up his collapsible camp stool. He still felt guilty that he'd dragged them along on a chaos bender of his own making, but they were all competent adults. He'd been as honest as he could with them. For the first time in years, he felt like part of a team. He wanted to do right by them.

Unexpectedly, Sairy stood and stepped close enough that her scent tickled his nose. "They'll be fine. So will we." She gave him a soft, teasing smile that bypassed his defenses like they weren't even there. "After all, I'm the Ghost of Jalkapanga."

He fought the sudden need to fold her into an embrace. She already had a partner. The best he could do was smile

back. “They won’t know what hit them.”

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER 5

Jalkapanga Mountain, Qal Corona • GDAT 3235.017

Sairy sent one of her cameras up, trying to get a better look at their destination. They were close to the top of Jalkapanga. They still kept finding insect body parts and chewed-up shrubs, but no flightless nymphs. She kept a close eye on the camera's status feedback. At this altitude, winds were capricious and dangerous to little flying cameras. She didn't have very many to begin with, and none of the specialized parts needed to repair them. A serious oversight on the part of whatever supplymaster had selected stock for experimental exploration starships.

Houyen sat on a moss-covered outcrop. The formerly pristine white bug net on his face had plant bits and several smears of mud. She envied the thin, durable, and undoubtedly expensive gloves he wore as he deftly sealed a sample collector and quietly added verbal notes with his observations. From what she could tell, he still liked that part of his job.

Kyala sat next to his feet, looking up hopefully at him. When he noticed her, he burst out laughing. "Share one bit of cheese... I'm doomed, aren't I?"

Sairy couldn't help but smile. "Probably. She's very patient."

His relaxed ease around the fearsome-looking Kyala was another point in the "yes" column for the handsome ranger. So far, she hadn't found anything to add to the "no" column. Which disturbed her, because it meant she was losing her objectivity about him.

True, they'd crossed paths fairly often in past three years, but she'd avoided spending more than an hour or two with him, and never alone. At first because he worked for the CPS. Then, when he proved no more impressed by his own agency

than the locals were, she avoided him because he was too damn easy on the eyes and even easier to talk to. His lively curiosity and sense of humor were already in the “yes” column.

She called the camera back and stored it in the bellows pocket on her thigh, copying its images to her controller as she did so. “If we vector left from here, there’s a ring of trees with a shallow spot in the middle. It looks sort of like big bowl with mucky water in the bottom. Going right will take us to a wide ridge above it with a lot of jungle growth.”

“The bowl might be a pseudocrater.” He opened the sling bag on his shoulder and stowed his sample. At her questioning look, he added, “Hot lava hits a wetland and makes a splat.”

It was interesting to learn the names of geologic features, but that wasn’t what she wanted to know. “Do the wuzzy-bug nymph things swim?”

“Not that we know of.” He frowned. “Unless it’s a new species.”

“I ask because we’re running out of mountain.” She crouched to make sure the water pouches for her and Kyala were sealed tight before closing her backpack. “We’d make better time if we skip the lake and head straight for the ridge.”

“Yeah.” His frown deepened. “I don’t like that it’s past noon and I still haven’t heard from Brannezzo. Or that Phen and Koda haven’t seen anyone.”

Their companions had made good time down the slope and moved all their airsleds a kilometer to the east. They’d even had time to set up what Phen would only describe as an “anti-theft measure” at the geomarker, which they’d left where it was. The couple was now settled into a makeshift blind while they waited for their friends with the dogs.

Sairy wondered if Houyen was still feeling guilty about exposing them to danger. He’d seemed so alone the night before that she’d felt a strong urge to comfort him. She at least had Kyala and Elkano, and he... didn’t.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, but you seem to be taking it pretty well that your coworker might want to hurt you.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” He lifted his bug net enough so he could rub his eyes. “Mysteries are my catnip. I just can’t let them alone, which means I find out things people don’t want me to know. I also believe in the purpose of the reserves and preserves. We need to nurture nature because we need it. Hell, we even take it with us in starship hydroponics sections instead of just using atmosphere exchangers.” He made a frustrated sound. “I’m too idealistic for my own good.”

“Considering what the CPS does with inconvenient employees, I’ll bet you’ve had more than your fair share of new duty-station assignments. And not many friends.”

He gave her a wry smile. “I did get smarter about protecting myself after a coworker stunned me unconscious and left me in the middle of a swamp.” He glanced away, then toward her again. “You don’t have to tell me, but did you ever work for the CPS?”

Her knee-jerk reaction was to lie as usual, but frelling hell, she was tired of so many secrets. “Yes. My home life tanked. I had no prospects other than a systems aptitude and a fondness for engines, so I joined the military the day I turned seventeen. They put me in Joint Div Maintenance as a mech tech, but we all did a bit of everything — water, ground, air, comms, you name it. A random minder test discovered I have a patterner talent they didn’t have a name for, which was my immediate one-way transfer to the CPS. My contract still had a lot of years, so I couldn’t afford to buy it out. The CPS sent me to a space station, but at least they kept me working in systems.”

He nodded. “That explains the skulljack.”

“Sure,” she agreed, glad that Koda, with her sifter talent, wasn’t around to notice the half-truth of that answer. The interface and controller had come years later, in the last blacker-than-black secret project.

She stood and pulled her backpack onto her shoulders. “Speaking of which, I’m going to check in with Elkano.” At

least she didn't have to hide his existence anymore. She tapped her earwire and subvocalized into it.

"Hello, Sairy. Are you well?" Elkano sounded more formal than usual.

"I am, thank you. I just sent you new visual data. Any news?"

"No perimeter breaches. No alerts. No messages." The slight edge to his tone hinted at boredom. She could almost imagine him tapping a foot. He did sometimes rely on her to keep him entertained.

"Okay. I'm guessing we're ninety minutes from the wide, overgrown ridge you can see in the recording I just sent. You could check our initial landing records to see if they compare."

"Will do." The end-of-comms tone sounded.

That would keep him busy for a while. The initial landing had been a barely controlled tumble through the planet's atmosphere and a hard landing that embedded the ship in what turned out to be a hidden columnar basalt cave. The flight images were fragmented and missing both time and spatial orientation data. In the three and a half years since touchdown, they'd only managed to pair up about twenty percent of their images with the maps they'd made.

"Everything okay at home?" Houyen asked.

"Green-go." She turned to look at him. "Left to the lake or right to the ridge?"

"The ridge, while we still have dry weather." He cast a resentful look at the thick tree canopy. Though stunted, the trees were still a dozen meters tall. "I miss the sunlight."

"Come on, Kyala. Let's go find the ranger some sun."

The ridge turned out to be more of a challenge than any of her cameras had shown. From the angle where she now stood, she could see the ridge was actually a lower, thicker section of

rock, with a thinner, higher formation above it. Vines and strangler roots trailed over and down from the top like a curtain. The topography reminded her of her home-sweet-cave, but it wouldn't have fit a whole starship. A high-low freight flitter, maybe.

Unfortunately, they'd lost more than an hour of hiking because the right-hand path toward the ridge had run into a sheer cliff face. The rocks there looked old and weathered, like they'd been shoved upward when the volcano had formed. They'd had to retrace their steps and go around the lake to get access to the ridge.

The overgrown, shallow lake would never feature in any wilderness tourist guides. It was a haven for mosquitos and midges, and it left an unpleasant moldy aftertaste in her mouth. According to both Houyen and Kyala, the stench was nearly unbearable. However, that didn't stop the ranger from holding his nose and wading in cautiously to collect samples.

He stomped to get some of the mud off his boots and waterproof pants, then headed toward the tree where she waited. The area seemed to be a microclimate transition point, where jungle below gave way to dry rocks and windy upper reaches.

Once he got close enough to show her his prize, she could smell what had Kyala rubbing her nose with her paw. Luckily, Sairy was usually able to ignore most bad odors after a few minutes.

"This is what we're looking for. The lake has hundreds of them, all dead. I sent a flat image to Phen and she confirmed it." He held up a clear vial holding murky water and a grayish, bulbous-bodied insect about nine centimeters long. It looked a miniature armored ground transport with fat legs and big, ugly mouth parts where a front engine would be. Living in the middle of a rainforest had given her a better appreciation of nature, but she didn't have to like all of it.

"I can sort of see the resemblance," she said, "but it's so pale." Adult wuzzy bugs were a coppery green with long, lacy black wings.

“Phen said they live underground near deep roots for years and only come up when they’re ready to reproduce. No need for brilliant colors in the dark.” He slid the sample vial into his sling bag. “Since they’re mostly a periodic nuisance and don’t destroy valuable crops, they haven’t been studied much.” His tone said he was still salty about the lazy negligence of the rangers who came before him.

Not that she blamed him. A high number of systems failures she’d run across could have been prevented by regular maintenance. But as she knew all too well, pointing that out too often was a quick way to get reassigned to a new command.

She considered the curtain of roots that draped over the rocks, then thought back to the first days on planet after the rough landing. “Could we be looking for a cave?”

“Maybe? To be honest, I’ve only ever paid attention to insects that harm or help plants.” He plucked the bug net away from his face to dislodge several black flies. “Or that want to eat me.”

“Or the aggressive, territorial kind. Poor Kyala got swarmed once when she dug into a fallen tree trunk. Took two days to get all the bee stingers out of her muzzle.”

As if excited at hearing her name, the gargoyle shook herself to get rid of excess dampness, spraying both her and Houyen with fine droplets of lake muck.

Sairy laughed. “Thank you, darling, but humans prefer clean water.” Her sneaky imagination produced an image of Houyen in a shower, naked.

She’d given up trying to suppress her increasingly inappropriate thoughts. Her long-neglected hormones didn’t care about the impossibility of any future between them, all they cared about was how well his pants defined his muscular thighs. She was totally out of practice trying to sense if he was interested in her.

Kyala leaned against Sairy’s thigh, reminding her to get her head back in charge. “Do you need more samples?”

“No, I have plenty.” His gaze followed the bottom ledge, then flicked to the sky. “The weather-sat images show rain clouds are forming to the north and probably headed our way. I don’t want to be up this high in a storm.”

He took the lead and started toward the route they’d determined based on what her cameras could see. Sairy connected mentally with Kyala to ask her to help the man pick the best footing, then followed behind them.

As she walked, she rubbed her jaw muscles, trying to get them to relax. The constant sense of unseen danger was making her crazy. Although she was risking giving the gods of chaos an irresistible challenge, she wished that the Brannezzo situation would hurry up and happen.

The hike to the ridge was work, but the plentiful thick roots offered decent support for the steepest parts. Stepping onto the ledge required pushing through the curtain, plunging them into deep shadows.

Houyen touched controls on his gauntlet to provide a light.

Sairy had been afraid the ledge would be too shallow to go more than a few meters, but she was wrong.

“Amazing,” said Houyen.

A cave yawned in front of them like the open mouth of a gargantuan viper. Cracked vertical columns of basalt on the sides looked like a long teeth, adding to the illusion.

Sairy turned on her own wrist light and played its beam across the cave floor. It was surprisingly wet and smooth, and covered with the hard, pale shells of hundreds of dead wuzzy-bug corpses. At least she hoped they were dead.

“Well, now we know where the nymphs in the lake came from.” He aimed his light toward the back of the cave and turned it to full brightness. The dead bugs made a river pattern that appeared to continue into the darkness. “They washed through here and into the lake below.”

“Yes, but I don’t think they lived here. Phen said they feed on roots, and there aren’t enough here for that many mouths.” She tried not to think about what that would look like.

Unexpectedly, Kyala made a low whine and stared intently at the back of the cave. When Sairy connected with her, she saw what had caught her eye. “Houyen, let’s kill our lights a moment. Kyala saw something blinking.”

In the semi-darkness, Sairy shut her eyes and connected deeper with Kyala’s senses. “She’s still seeing it. Plus, unless you know of something natural that emits three-tone stutter beeps at ten-second intervals, there’s human tech back there.”

She turned her light back on, and so did he.

“Like I said, this is out of my starlane.” He blew out a noisy breath. “Far, far out of my starlane.”

His gauntlet chimed with the tones she’d come to recognize as signaling contact from Brannezzo.

She jumped a little when Elkano’s tone sounded in her earwire a second later. She turned and moved several steps away so she wouldn’t be distracted by Houyen’s conversation.

“Go,” she subvocalized.

“I found a match for your location and our records.” His voice sounded unhappy. *“But not in the entry images.”*

“Where, then?”

“In the exodus instruction set, under a subtitle named ‘Target.’”

She stilled as her mind raced. They’d been over those records a hundred times and never found any images. “Why haven’t we seen it before?”

“I don’t know. Because you needed it fast and I wasn’t busy, I did a comprehensive image-compare across all the records.”

Ordinarily, he’d never have devoted full resources for one task, but as he’d said, he’d had nothing else better to do. “Anything else under that subtitle?”

“One other image and a thirty-character string, and a partial ref-key that I’m tracing now.”

Behind her, Brannezzo's baritone voice sounded increasingly querulous.

Sairy slid away one more step. "Send me what you've got."

Behind her eyelid, a momentary flash of a blue symbol signaled that her controller had received the records. As much as the implants made her as experimental as her ship, she was grateful for their superior capabilities. "We're near the top of the mountain in a small cave. I'll keep you posted. In the meantime, see if the new image pattern-matches to any other untagged images, or that ref-key fragment."

"Will do."

She used her percomp to display the image, which was a one-angle still holograph of a large, shiny-smooth metal door. It reminded her of an old-style airlock with fanciful design references to ancient submarine hatches. The glowing keypad embedded in the smooth wall next to it was boringly utilitarian by comparison. The code string looked like random numbers and letters to her, but ferreting out possible meanings was more Elkano's specialty than hers.

She flicked off the display, then turned to listen to Houyen.

"...still not following, Brannezzo. You lost some dogs?"

"No, damnit, they're not mine. The team that came with me got lost following them and I don't know where they are. Why weren't you here at the geomarker to meet us? Where are your airsleds?"

"I told you before, it's not my expedition. The locals just let me tag along on theirs. You didn't call this morning, so we split up for the day and planned to meet tonight at sunset. I don't know where the airsleds are, and we haven't seen any dogs. You said you came up by flitter?"

"Yes, the small one. Hang on, I'm getting another comm."

Houyen muted his comms, then caught her eye. "Can you check in with Koda and Phen? I'll listen, but I have to answer Brannezzo when he comes back."

She nodded, then tapped the team earwire and subvocalized after the alert tone. “Having fun, subcaptains?”

“A blast.” Koda’s prompt response suggested she’d been expecting the call. *“Ranger Brannezzo detests the outdoors. The spider webs at the geomarker warped his calm so bad that he shut himself in that flying deathtrap of a flitter. Whoever had their bets on his two pals being Joro mercs gets to split the pot. They’re rigged up for urban warfare, so we decided to give the rainforest goddess a little help.”* She chuckled. *“One of Charuuk’s woolly dogs knocked one merc into a mudhole. The other one fell in during the rescue. Once they got out, the dogs played runaway lambs and got them so turned around they don’t know which way is up. Charuuk says they’re three kilometers from the geomarker and don’t know how to calibrate a compass.”*

Sairy pictured the area in her mind. “There weren’t any mudholes when we hiked up.”

Koda laughed. *“There are now.”*

“So they’re after the treasure?”

“Yeah, we think so. This might be a side-gig instead of being sanctioned by Joro. One of the mercs was talking about buying a joy palace with her share. Enforcers don’t get bonuses like that. The flitter has an empty crate strapped to its ass, presumably in case the treasure is portable. And fits inside. And it’s not too heavy for the flitter to lift.” She made a rude noise. *“Slick slice-and-haul specialists, they ain’t.”*

“We’re near the top of Jalkapanga, in a cave with a river of rotting wuzzy-bug nymph corpses. Houyen took plenty of samples for Phen. It’s not the breeding ground, though. Should we come back down?”

“Nope. Keep looking. You’re safer up there for now. Let us know if anything changes, and we’ll do the same.” A tone ended the comm.

Sairy didn’t mind the implication that she and Houyen would be a liability in a skirmish because it was true. He was a watcher and a thinker, and her best skill was slipping out the

back by the time bellowing drunk fathers started kicking in the front door.

Moments later, Brannezzo came back online. *“That was Matsurgan. He wants to know where are you and how soon you can get here.”* The man sounded noticeably more stressed than before. *“I’m not supposed to leave without you.”*

Houyen rolled his eyes. “Okay, but I’m twelve hours away from the geomarker, and I’m not hiking at night. You should probably go back down to Irikat to wait. I think I can be there by noon or so. I left my aircar on Irikat’s landing pad.” A sharp smile flashed across his face. “Or you and the two locals you brought — I didn’t catch their names — could camp tonight where you are at Spider Rift and help me find my airsled in the morning.”

“We, uh, didn’t bring any camping gear. We’ll meet you in Irakat.” Two tones signaled the end of the conversation.

Sairy let out her suppressed laughter. “Spider Rift?”

Houyen grinned. “It needed a name.”

“How long has he been a ranger? I don’t think I’ve ever met someone so unsuited for his job.”

“Me, either.” Houyen shrugged. “He’s a greedy ass who thinks the universe owes him, but he might not have started out that way. From what I’ve seen, the CPS’s policy is to keep control of all high-level talents, even if they have no use for them. Terraform companies and agricultural corps would start a salary bidding war to get his insect-affinity talent.” He looked down as he scuffed one boot in the gravel. “The only upside to the CPS having forgotten we exist is that even top-level talented rangers don’t have to go on the so-called ‘enhancement’ drugs. They’re killers, no matter what the CPS says.”

“Yeah, they are. Lucky for me, patterners don’t get the drugs, either. My uncle retired from the CPS and hovered around death’s door for nine miserable years.”

Kyala made a whining sound and crowded next to Sairy’s thigh. The gargoyle had picked up on Sairy’s sadness and was

trying to comfort her. She contained her emotions as she stroked the sweet creature's broad head and fondled one dusty ear. "Sorry."

Houyen took out a deep breath, then let it out forcefully. "How about we check the back of the cave, see what Koda and Phen say, then find a place to camp for the night? Not here, though." He wrinkled his nose. "And nowhere near the lake. The stench would kill me do me in."

"Kyala agrees with you about the smell. You're light is brighter, so I'll follow you."

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER 6

Jalkapanga Mountain, Qal Corona • GDAT 3235.017

Houyen's first reaction when he saw the door to an actual cryogenex vivo-vault was wonder. Their locations were kept secret because the priceless contents were vulnerable to thieves, and more critically, to contamination.

His next thought was to wonder why someone thought it was a good idea to install a deep-freeze unit at the top of a frickin' *volcano* in a terrain full of them. In the middle of a frickin' tropical *rainforest* that had more insidiously invasive plants and insects per square kilometer than any other known habitat. In a region with a recent history of frickin' *earthquakes* that might have cracked open an incalloy box like an adult wuzzy bug cracked open its silvery nymph carapace before flying away.

Oh, and in a mountainous area known for stalled storms that produced days of torrential rains. Enough to fill a cracked vault with so much water that the lock of the two-meter-thick door failed under the pressure, forcing the door open just enough to allow a steady flood to escape that took the contaminated vault contents — and thousands of drowned wuzzy-bug nymphs — with it.

The three-tone beeping that Kyala had heard came from the glowing access panel to the right of the door. It reminded him of the alarm in the base's kitchen cold box when someone left the door open. The access panel and the smooth rock wall it was embedded in were the only things in the vault not ruined.

“You recognize this,” Sairy said. It wasn't a question.

“I do. It's a seed vault.” He gave her the colloquial name for it. “After the defeated Central League tried to poison hundreds of rebel planets as a final fuck-you, the new Central

Galactic Concordance government established the banks on random member planets throughout the galaxy. They've got DNA and actual samples of every keystone plant and animal species we need to make a viable terraform. Or recover a colonized planet that's been poisoned."

"Oh."

Something in her tone made her turn and look at her. It was hard to see with only the light from his gauntlet and the blinking door frame, but she looked troubled. Maybe even afraid. "Their existence wasn't secret, exactly, but I only learned about them while studying for my D-level botany degree. Before this, I've only seen pictures of them."

She raised her left arm to expose the percomp on her wrist. "Like this?"

A hologram image appeared of a pristine and intact seed-vault door.

He studied it, then glanced back to the vault entrance. "Yeah. But now that I look at this one and your image, I don't recognize that big, red-and-black serpentine symbol above the seed vault logo. Maybe it came later?"

Wordlessly, she pushed back her right sleeve. Tattooed on the inside swell of her forearm was that same symbol.

"What is it?"

She pulled her sleeve back down. "It's the logo of the last secret CPS black-box project I was on before I came here. All the pilots were given one."

He blinked in surprise at her revelation. Maybe he was in fever dream again.

She tilted her head toward the entrance. "Can you see the text above the biometric reader on that access panel?"

Perplexed, he took a couple of steps closer, trying not to step on more wuzzy-bug shells than he had to because the horrible smell in the cave got worse when he did. "Looks like a serial number or something." When he brushed off

accumulated dust, he accidentally awakened the biometric reader, but its light made the text easier to see. “Starts with-”

She interrupted to recite the long string of characters perfectly, as if reading them off of something only she could see.

“That’s...” He stopped himself and shook his head. “Okay, I’m lost.”

Whatever she was going to say was drowned out by the piercing shriek of metal-on-metal as the vault door slowly creaked open. He crossed back to stand beside her as the massive door continued its journey. At the halfway point, lights flickered on sporadically in the vault interior. The smell wasn’t as bad as he’d feared, but the condition was worse than he’d imagined.

Thick, rope-like roots hung down from multiple cracks in the incalloy ceiling and clogged the room in a dense tangle. Smaller roots of all sizes intertwined them as if they’d been woven by demented spiders. He couldn’t tell where the roots were getting their nutrients, but it had to be from the vault. Now he wished he’d paid more attention in school about how the vaults maintained their contents. Maybe even samples kept well below sub-zero temperatures needed a viable environment? Or maybe the nutrients were being preserved as well? No matter. They were all thawed now.

“Do vaults store the seeds in incalloy spheres?”

He looked down to where Sairy pointed. In amongst the roots and the dead insects were thousands of spheres of varying sizes. Several had spilled out when the vault door opened. Crouching, he looked more closely.

Sairy did the same and gently rolled a larger one with the tip of her field knife. “I think that etching was once a circuit.” She from her vest pocket, she produced an empty water pouch and used it to scoop up that sphere and several others. She sealed the pouch and put it back in her pocket.

He pointed his chin toward a larger jumble of them in the room. “Some of the spheres look corroded and cracked. I

guess even incalloy can be compromised by acids from volcanic soils if you soak them long enough.”

“So the question of the century is, could this vault be the source of the infinity fever?”

“I’d bet high that it’s the breeding ground. As to the source? With all this chaotic mess, it wouldn’t surprise me. We probably shouldn’t even be here without self-contained exosuits, even though it’s been washed out by the flood. I’ll take as many nymph samples as I can, but we don’t have a way to prove they’re the carriers.”

She cleared her throat. “I can test for the presence of infinity fever right now if it’s infected a living animal. Maybe even dead wuzzy bug nymphs.”

He stood and stepped back so he could see her better. “Do it.”

He watched as she opened her bag and pulled out a black injet. She isolated a large, still-damp wuzzy bug corpse and let the microneedles plunge into it. After a moment, the readout blinked yellow, then turned a steady red.

From the look on her face, the wuzzy bug had whatever caused the fever.

Wariness battled with curiosity in him. “Is that how you knew I had it when you found me in my aircar?” Would uncovering her secrets drag him into the dangerous world of black-box projects? He wished he had time to think about all this.

She stood and stowed the injet, but stayed where she was, close to the threshold, her eyes evading his. “You already had the symptoms — the rash, the fever, the wheezing. The test just confirmed it.”

“I think you owe me an explanation. If I’ve pieced together enough accurate memories, you took me somewhere and gave me a drug to treat the fever, let me sleep it off for three days, then left me in my aircar afterward.”

She sighed, then turned to meet his gaze. “Close enough. You were so very sick. I panicked. I’m sorry.”

“Your treatment saved my life. Why are you sorry?”

“Because it’s experimental. Untested. You couldn’t consent.”

“From what I researched, the fever very likely could have killed me.” Intuition struck him. “And it’s not exactly untested, is it? You’ve used it in Irakat the other river towns for the past three years. They went from dozens of deaths a year to none. Do they know?”

“I didn’t tell them. Every time they had an outbreak, I volunteered to help care for the sick. If they noticed an extra slap patch, no one said anything.” She shoved her hands under armpits and dropped her head. “It could have gone disastrously wrong, but I couldn’t let people just die.”

Another intuition spark flared. “You caught the fever and developed the treatment for yourself.” He knew she had an eclectic background, including medic experience.

She looked up at him in surprise, then nodded. “Elkano insisted. I think he was terrified I was going to die. I was never as sick as you were, just felt like crap for weeks. We had the right equipment and training. And incredible luck. That would have been the end of it, but then we realized the ship’s lab had leaked during our atmosphere entry. We left pieces of ablated incalloy shielding scattered across the rainforest during our landing.” A bleak look crossed her face. “I thought we were the source of the infinity fever, so I’ve been collecting them.”

“You’re weren’t. Ranger station records, shitty though they may be, are pretty clear that it’s been around for at least thirty years.”

“I know that now. That’s why I agreed to help. I wanted proof. I thought you’d get the CPS involved and they’d do it the right way — bring in their pharma partners to fully test my treatment and distribute it.” She glanced toward the red-and-black logo on the wall. “But I’ve always been naïve like that.”

“Why did your military ship have a research lab?”

“It’s not a warship, it’s an experimental exploration starship. It has everything the CPS designers could think of to

make it self-reliant for at least a decade.”

“Has? It’s still intact?” Everything he learned about her kept surprising him.

“Yes, it’s where I live. I was still woozy from cryosleep at the time, so Elkano found a cave big enough to hide us.” The corner of her mouth twitched with humor. “The jungle plants kept invading, so I made a naturalized hydroponic garden with them to disguise the entrance.”

“I think I remember seeing that.”

“Probably. Your fever was going supernova, and you kept trying to get up to fix the hydroponics nutrient flow. I had to put you in the autodoc to get you to settle down.”

“Yeah, I think I remember that, too. I dreamed I was an all-white emergency escape capsule, floating in transit space.” Fever fluctuations would explain his bizarre trips to the arctic circle, too.

“I’ve seen spheres like these.” She patted her vest pocket. “The ship has a hold full of them, but they’re just solid incalloy. No exterior circuits. As far as I knew, they were supplies for the hull repair-bots. Now I’m just confused.”

He snorted. “Welcome to the club.”

She twitched, then pointed to her left ear. “Elkano.” She sidestepped away from the vault door, putting her close to the still beeping, still lit-up access control panel.

After a moment, he pulled out a large sample bag and tweezers to collect wuzzy bug carcasses. He chose a variety of sizes and what he hoped might be stages of development. He’d always been secretly grateful not to have an affinity talent for insects, but now he wished he’d at least studied them a little more.

Since he was there, he took the opportunity to expand his talent to get a feel for the plant life in the vault and above it. The roots came from a wider variety of trees than he would have guessed. But the vault itself was a hotbed of millions of tiny sparks, the kind he associated with seedlings. That made sense if enough of the frozen contents survived the thaw-

Sairy's words broke his focus. "Houyen, meet Elkano." She tapped the percomp on her wrist. "Elkano, repeat what you just told me so Houyen can hear."

"Hello, Ranger Albasrey. As I told Sairy, a previously undetected instruction set in our systems has been triggered by a comm from your location. We are on a countdown to liftoff, and I am unable to stop it."

Sairy pointed toward the blinking access panel. "I think when I spoke the character string out loud, it triggered a coded message to my ship. I think it used my comms implant without me knowing. Which tanks, because who knows what other little secret bypasses are in my experimental systems. Elkano, tell him the rest," said Sairy.

"Please confirm disclosure of confidential information." Elkano's pleasant mid-range voice sounded suddenly formal and by-the-book.

"Confirmed. He deserves to know what's happening."

"Our previously incomplete mission instructions now have five new entries. We have already completed the tasks of exiting transit in the Qal Corona system and landing as close as possible to specific coordinates within the south continent's nature reserve. We have now completed the task that called for ship pilot Subcommander Sahira Sarvand Madoz to go to the cryogenex vivo-vault with a specific serial number on the unit and open it. Her next task is to secure a one-meter by half-meter crate marked with the same serial number and the Drift project logo. She must bring it to the ship within two hours and place it in a specific cold-storage box in the laboratory. The ship will leave in eleven hours and forty minutes. We are then to orbit the planet and wait for further instructions."

Kyala, who had been sitting and watching Sairy closely, rose to her feet and crowded against Sairy's thigh with a low whine.

Sairy petted her with a little humming sound. "Sorry, darling, didn't mean to broadcast my feelings. I would never leave you."

Elkano continued. *“There is also a new section that appears to have overwritten the original content. The author is tagged as Adastra Fel Fourteen. It is encrypted and will require time to process.”*

Houyen didn't know why he recognized Elkano's voice until he remembered he'd first heard it when he was delirious in the ship. Sairy's life partner, he reminded himself. He wished he had a face to go along with the voice. It would help him stop wishing for things he couldn't have.

Sairy squinted in concentration. “What happens if I don't bring the crate within the two-hour countdown? Or it's the wrong crate? And how long are we supposed to hang around in orbit waiting for further instructions?”

“The ship must launch.” Elkano sounded very certain. *“However, the ship has nine hours to achieve orbit, with no other instructions for that time period. I believe we can land and pick you up. There is no countdown or time limit for the orbit period. We could leave immediately if we have a destination. Unless the encrypted section has other restrictions.”*

Sairy made a face. “Elkano, let's leave that encrypted section alone for now. I'll keep a channel open for you while I talk to Houyen.”

She turned to him and waved a hand apologetically. “Sorry. Not what you signed up for, I'll bet.”

“No kidding. I like reading adventure serials, but I never wanted to be in one.”

A rude noise erupted from her. “Black box project managers are all warped to the max. The more convoluted the plans, the better. To them, people are just pieces in an n -dimensional chess game.”

“Who is Adastra whats-it?” A creeping sense of claustrophobia nibbled at him. Probably his brain's way of telling him to run away, but he couldn't abandon Sairy and Kyala now. “I'm sorry. It's my fault you're even here.”

“Ratshit,” she replied vehemently. “This stage was set years ago. You’re just unlucky enough to see behind the curtain. Adastra FEL-14 was the experimental mothership for thirty-five ships including mine. We were all being trained for an undisclosed exploration mission. The CPS made sure we couldn’t talk about it by having telepaths regularly erase inconvenient memories, like family and friends, or twisting our memories about dates and events.”

She looked like she wanted to pace. He knew the feeling.

“Anyway, one day, our mothership ordered me into the cryopod. I thought it was just another test, but instead, she ejected all her ships for no reason we could determine. But our records are a fragmented mess because I think the project leaders tried but failed to gain control of us. The mothership ordered us to jump into transit space on a random vector, with an imperative to hide, then complete some unknown task. We don’t know how long we spent in transit, but we ended up on Qal Corona. Elkano and I have been through our records a thousand times, but we still missed this.”

On impulse, he said, “If this was an adventure serial, your ship would have a secret self-destruct sequence if you or Elkano do something that exposes the project.”

“Good point. Elkano, look for unlabeled hooks in all primary systems. Let’s not make it easy for the assholes to terminate us.”

“*Will do,*” replied Elkano.

He dredged his memory for what the vault interior should look like. “On the assumption that the crate was added to the vault after the fact, they would’ve had to improvise a place for it. The vault was optimized to save space. I wouldn’t think a million spheres would be effective at that, but I’m not an engineer.”

Sairy crossed her arms. “I don’t trust that vault not to lock us in or give my ship more secret instructions. I’d just as soon fry this whole cave with incendiaries and pretend the volcano blew its top. Plus, I bet it would stop the infinity fever outbreaks.”

“Maybe. That crate might give you options, though. If we see it from the doorway, we could—”

His gauntlet vibrated and sounded a pattern he'd hoped not to hear. He let his chin drop to his chest. “That's Matsurgan, my boss. I can dodge him, but not for long. He only calls me directly if he's mad, so I'm guessing he's about to recall me.”

Sairy threw up her hands with an exasperated look. “May as well answer now. This day is already cursed by the gods of chaos.”

Houyen squared his shoulders he opened the comm, leaving it on speaker for Sairy to hear. “Albasrey.”

“I know where you are and what you're doing, you self-righteous piece of horseshit. You disobeyed a direct order not to investigate an imaginary disease. Garamont tried to lie, but he couldn't fool me. Your career is finished. Do you hear me? Finished!” Thumping in the background sounded like a fist pounding on a desk. *“If you aren't back at base by eighteen hundred today, I will charge you with theft of CPS property and any other violations I can dream up. You can kiss your pension goodbye.”*

Houyen fought to hang onto his temper. “Respectfully, sir, the charges won't stand, and you have no authority over my pension.”

“The fucking hell I don't! If you don't come back right now, you may as well not come back at all. Your new duty station will be the Great Void. No, that's too good for you. I'll just have you committed to the mind shop for a thorough evaluation of your ridiculous obsession.”

Houyen made himself take a deep, calming breath. “Again, respectfully, you don't have the authority to do that, either.”

Matsurgan actually growled. *“If you're not here on time, Ranger Albasrey, I'll report you as dead. Your goddamn pension and everything else you own will be frozen until you prove to CPS bean counters that you're alive. It'll take years to straighten out. I better be seeing you soon, or good fucking luck with your life, asshole.”*

The call ended.

The only sound in the cave was the alarm beeps from the vault's access panel.

After a long moment, Sairy cleared her throat. "Since Elkano and I have to leave anyway, we can get you to the base in time. If that's what you want."

"Yeah, sure." He pinched his the bridge of his nose. "I'm tired of corrupt coworkers. I'm sick of bosses with the emotional regulation of a toddler. I am so damn tired of losing friends just when I'm getting to know them." He dropped his hand and caught her eye. "Especially you, by the way, just so you know, because I admire the hell out of you, even though you're taken. All in all, my life tanks."

He cast a baleful eye toward the access control panel, willing it to stop with the annoying beeping. Unsurprisingly, it ignored him.

"This is going to sound completely warped..." She trailed off.

"What could sound more warped than a contaminated seed vault that's probably making people sick? Or a nonexistent treasure that's making people crazy? Or a secret exploration on starship on countdown for a launch, with or without its pilot?"

He realized he was close to raving and made himself breathe deeply, from his core, then let it out slowly. A second deep breath helped him regain control of his runaway thoughts. "Sorry. I think 'warped' has lost all meaning today. What were you going to say?"

"You and I both know the only way the CPS will truly let you go is if you're dead. Thanks to your boss, you're about to be." The ghost of a smile flickered. "You even know what time you'll die."

That almost made him laugh. "Yeah, four and a half hours from now. Plenty of time to get my affairs in order."

Her words sparked a warped thought of his own. In his previous duty station, he'd spent one miserable winter in a remote wilderness outpost dreaming up ways he could

disappear just like his idiot boss at the time seemed to wish for. He'd even created a new identity and figured out how to secretly move money to accounts under that name. When he'd been transferred to Qal Corona, he'd forgotten about it.

He shook his head. "It's a great warped idea, but they'd need a body. My life may tank, but I like living. And I'd need to be somewhere else — and be *someone* else — or I won't make it past the first security checkpoint."

"I was serious about destroying this cave and the vault. It's too dangerous. Who knows what else is brewing in there? If your boss thinks you're still there when I blow the top off Jalkapanga Mountain, they won't look too hard for your body." She took a step closer to him.

"As to being somewhere else, you could come with me. Well, Kyala and Elkano and me. We don't know where we're going until we get there, but it's better than being buried here."

It was a wonderfully creative solution, but he had to be honest with her. "I don't think it will work. I've had... feelings for you since the day we met. Now that I know that you're not available, it'll be too hard on me and not fair to you and your partner. Elkano is a lucky man."

"Elkano is not a man, he's a sentient A.I. His body is the ship, but he's his own entity, too." She pressed three fingers to her upper chest. "We have an always-on closed-system connection, but he's not in my head like a telepath. We talk to each other just like a comms call."

Could this day get any stranger? "Aren't sentient A.I.s illegal?"

A corner of her mouth quirked into a smile. "The CPS rarely lets itself be deterred by inconvenient laws and regulations. I think Elkano and the others were developed using tech stolen from the Volkssang. The CPS modified it, of course, because they think they know everything." She waved a hand toward the vault. "After all this, I'm wondering if our mothership caught a fatal case of pirate-clan style freethinking."

“Okay, now that I’ve made an idiot of myself by assuming...” He took a step toward her, then rocked back again. “Oh, hell, I’m warped because I don’t want to pass up this once-in-a-lifetime chance to start over. But I need to know if you like me well enough for us to have a chance at a relationship. More than friends.”

“I do like you. Far too much for my own good. It seems I have an interest kind, sexy, ethical rangers.” She held out her hand to him. “Would you like to have dinner with me and Kyala this evening aboard my spacious exploration starship? I can’t promise more than mealpacks, but I’ve got a vast and astounding variety to choose from. And I think you’ll like my hydroponics section. I enhanced it with plants from the rainforest.”

He took her hand in his. “I would be honored to accept your offer. It seems I have an interest in clever women who can fix things and fly starships. I’d very much like to invite you to share a kiss, but the timing is bad. You have to figure out how and where to meet our ride, and I have to grab all my records and clean out my estate before my boss kills me.”

“Let’s plan that kiss for after dinner.” She put her gloved palm against the side of his face, and he leaned into the comfort and hope it offered. Then he had to pluck the bug net out of his mouth. “Timing.”

Her smile was rueful. “In the meantime, I’ll warn Phen and Koda to get everyone off the mountain. I’d like to send them the procedures for testing and treating infinity fever, but it would be criminally stupid to expose my unique comms signature right before an unexplained fiery explosion that might have caused the tragic death of a brave and respected forest ranger.”

“Get the data to me and I’ll send it from my official CPS account.” He gave her a sharp smile. “My unexplained death will trigger an outside audit of my dataspace. Ranger station data hypercubes are a shambles. I, on the other hand, kept everything and documented every conversation. He with the best records wins. Matsurgan will have a very hard time

justifying why he suppressed the existence of and the cure for a deadly disease.”

“Okay, then. You prepare for your death and I’ll prepare for our life.” She started to step away, then turned back to him. “Thank you. I didn’t think I had a future until you proved I did.”

Her words curled around his heart. “And I wasn’t looking forward to my future until I met you.”

Kyala suddenly nosed her way between them and stood, looking up at Sairy.

Sairy laughed. “Yes, he’s coming with us, and yes, that means twice the love.”

Houyen knew there would be challenges ahead, but they’d face them together. He couldn’t wait.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Van Natta is a USA TODAY bestselling and award-winning science fiction and fantasy author. Series include the Central Galactic Concordance space opera romance series the Ice Age Shifters® paranormal romance series. She is also the editor and publisher of the Pets in Space 8 science fiction romance anthology. She shares her Fort Collins, CO home with just the right number of mad-scientist cats. They would probably be perpetually wet with gargoyle slobber if Kyala lived there, too. [Sign up for her newsletter.](#)

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RESCUE

BARBARIANS OF THE SAND PLANET
BY TANA STONE

DESCRIPTION

If Tegan has any hope of impressing the bounty hunters she works for, she has to stay away from temptations like the hot Dothvek warrior named Zaandr. The only problem is, he's her only chance of getting out of the Den of Thieves alive.

When Tegan takes a job as a midwife for the galaxy's only all-female bounty hunting crew, she thinks the job will be easy. Deliver some babies, make some money, repeat. She doesn't expect to make an unscheduled stop on the deadly planet that's home to the notorious Den of Thieves. But she needs supplies, and she's assigned two brawny Dothvek warriors to protect her, not to mention the ship's shapeshifting pet glurkin, Pog. What could go wrong?

When one of the warriors vanishes, she and Zaandr must team up to find him and avoid being captured themselves. It might have been simple to avoid the Dothvek male on the ship, but it's not so easy when they're hiding out in a pleasure house. Not to mention the fact that she's starting to wonder why she's been resisting such a yummy temptation in the first place.

CHAPTER ONE

“YOU SURE YOU’RE up for it?” The Zevrian security chief glanced back at Tegan as she led her onto the spaceship, her boots making the metal ramp shake and rattle. “Have you ever handled four pregnant women at one time?”

Tegan stopped twirling a strand of chestnut hair around her pointer finger as she met Tori’s gaze. “They aren’t all due at the same time, are they?”

“No, we aren’t.”

Tegan blanched, her steps faltering. “I didn’t know you were one of the expecting mothers.”

Tori dismissed her mistake with a wave of one hand as she reached the top of the ship’s ramp. “Don’t sweat it. Zevrians don’t show our pregnancies until we’re almost ready to pop, and then we almost literally pop. Our babies are born through our stomachs.” The alien with brown skin and a row of bumps along her hairline turned to the new midwife she’d just hired. “I should have asked you if you have experience with Zevrian births.”

“I’ve assisted with one,” Tegan admitted, “but I’ve delivered hundreds of healthy babies, so I feel confident about taking care of the four moms-to-be on this ship.”

Tori nodded and eyed her quickly. “Good. I’m hoping you also have tricks to keep the babies from driving us crazy once they’re here.”

“I thought the job was only for the deliveries.”

Tori gave her a crooked grin that exposed her pointed, back teeth. “It is. I was joking. I know there will be no way to keep a half-Zevrian, half-Dothvek baby under control, but if all goes according to plan, we’ll be back on the Dothvek home world by the time I deliver. My mate’s tribe lives in tents in a desert. Babies’ cries don’t echo as much out there.” She gestured to the steel ceiling of the spaceship. “In here, it’s enough to drive you mad.”

“How many babies are already on board?”

“Only two, but one is half Lycithian shapeshifter, so be warned. Qek thinks it’s hilarious to shift into the form of Pog.”

Tegan wasn’t sure if this was another joke, but Tori wasn’t smiling. “Is Pog the other baby?”

Tori snorted out a laugh. “I wish. Pog is a Lycithian shapeshifting glurkin.” When she didn’t respond, Tori added, “A pet.”

Tegan frowned. She wasn’t a fan of animals on spaceships. Actually, she didn’t have any experience with animals on spaceships. She wasn’t a fan of animals anywhere. The only creatures that had lived among the settlers on the dingy outpost she’d grown up on had been scavenging grinderwolves. They were mangy beasts who would as soon take a chunk from your leg as look at you, so she’d learned to steer clear. “How big of a pet?”

Tori held her hands out and apart as if she were holding a small sugar melon. “Not big, and I’m pretty sure he’s ninety percent green fur.”

“Small and green.” Tegan made a mental note. “Got it.”

Tori held up a finger as she hung a right and led Tegan down a corridor. “But be warned, a green ball of fluff could be Qek pretending to be Pog.”

Tegan took all this in, wondering suddenly if she’d made a mistake. When Tori had approached her stall in the marketplace, she’d been sure the tough-looking female was lost. Nothing about the Zevrian with wild, dark curls held on top of her head by a pair of sharp, metal sticks conveyed that

she'd be interested in Tegan's natural remedies, but then she'd made her proposition. Join the bounty hunter babes—that was the phrase she'd used—on their ship until all the females aboard gave birth. In exchange, she'd be paid handsomely, along with her room and board.

The credits she'd been promised weren't the reason Tegan had said yes to the odd proposal. It was true she was an experienced midwife, and taking care of four pregnant females would be a breeze compared to her usual workload. Babies seemed to come with brutal frequency in the far-flung outpost, so there was rarely a week she didn't deliver at least one, usually more. The money Tori had promised would more than compensate her for her work and her time, but it was the chance to travel among the stars that had been the reason Tegan had said yes without thinking.

Not only did she want to experience space travel, but she also wanted to get away from the place she'd lived for her entire life. She'd been born into poverty to a single mother on the outpost, and every day of her life had been a struggle to stay afloat. She supposed she was luckier than most. Her mother had taught her how to be a midwife, so she had a skill that was in steady demand, but it was also a job that made her feel like nothing ever changed.

Babies continued to be born without fathers, since most men on the outpost ended up leaving for better opportunities or were only ever passing through. The mothers struggled, children often went hungry, and young women eyed handsome visitors as a means to an escape the squalor. So, the cycle continued.

Tegan scanned the dark interior of the ship, her heart hammering. But she was finally doing it. She was leaving. Even if it was only for a while.

"I didn't expect a group called the bounty hunter babes to have such a battleship," she admitted as they wound down another dimly lit corridor.

"This wasn't always our ship." Tori glanced back and grinned at her. "It's actually a Zevrian mercenary ship we..."

acquired.”

It sounded like there was a story there, but before she could ask, something bumped her leg, and she jumped. The green ball of fur scampering around her legs made a series of high-pitched sounds.

“Speak of the devil,” Tori muttered as she paused. “That’s Pog.” She bent to get a better look. “I’m almost positive it’s Pog.”

Despite her usual fear of animals, Tegan smiled at the little creature. How could she be afraid of something so small? She couldn’t even see any teeth. She reached down and ruffled the fur on the top of his head. At least, she thought it was the top of his head. It was hard to tell since he seemed to be completely round and rolled around a lot.

“Uh oh.” Tori gave her a sympathetic look as Pog’s noises turned into purrs. “Now you’ve done it.”

Tegan snatched back her hand. “What have I done?”

“You’ve made him purr. Now, he’s never going to leave you alone.” Tori shook her head. “Bexli is so busy with her son that she doesn’t spend as much time with Pog, which means he’s a bit attention starved. I hope you were looking for a new best friend.”

Tori started walking again and Tegan followed, but true to Tori’s words, the little green puff followed close at her heels. She found herself slowing down so he could keep up, but that meant she was falling behind, so Tegan scooped up Pog in one arm and then jogged to catch up to the Zevrian.

Tori didn’t look back as she proceeded through an arched doorway, and Tegan stopped short once she followed her through.

They were on the ship’s bridge, which had not been what she’d been expecting. The ship in general wasn’t what she’d anticipated from a team of bounty hunters who called themselves babes. The dark interior was almost cave-like, and it felt like a serious war ship. Not at all like vessel filled to the brim with pregnant females.

“You’re back!” A woman with curly, blonde hair spun around in a captain’s chair, her smile flickering when she spotted Tegan. “With a friend.”

“She’s not a friend.” Tori jerked a thumb behind her. “This is Tegan, our new midwife.” She swept an arm toward the woman in the chair. “This is Danica, the ship’s captain.”

Tegan gave the captain a small wave before she briefly scanned the half-moon-shaped space that was dotted with black consoles, and boasted a long wall of glass that overlooked the dusty shipyard. Aside from the blonde, there was a woman at a console with straight, black hair pulled up in a high ponytail, and two massive, gold-skinned aliens with plenty of tattoos, wearing nothing but leather pants.

“You found one?” Danica stood and released an audible sigh. “Good work, Tor.”

The other woman twisted at her console and put a hand on her small baby bump. “Welcome aboard. I’m Caro, the ship’s pilot.”

One of the gold aliens stepped forward, and Tegan’s gaze was drawn to the cuffs of tattooed symbols ringing his impressive biceps. “I am Vrax, Tori’s mate.”

“I am T’Kar,” the other alien said. His tattoos were on his chest, and were more intricate, like an elaborate breastplate of ink. “My mate is Holly, the ship’s engineer. You will meet her soon.”

“Because she’s about to burst,” Tori muttered.

“We’re so happy you agreed to join us,” Danica said, walking toward Tegan with a wide smile. “We’ve been searching for a traveling midwife for a while. We don’t want to have to return to the Dothvek home world for each birth.” Then her gaze drifted to the ball of fur tucked in Tegan’s arm. “Is that Pog?”

“He’s found a new best friend,” Tori said.

“Better than you?” Caro teased the Zevrian.

“Ha ha.” Tori wrinkled her brow and eyed Pog. “Let’s just hope this means he stops leaving pellets on my bed.”

Tegan glanced down at the fur ball that was purring so loud he was vibrating as she held him. This was a very strange ship.

CHAPTER TWO

“DID you hear about the new crew mate?”

Zaandr glanced up at his friend Rixx who was laying in the bunk above his. Since he was Dothvek and blessed by the goddesses with the ability to sense the emotions and thoughts of his fellow Dothveks, he could tell that his best friend wasn't actually interested in his answer. Rixx already knew he hadn't.

“There is a new member of the crew?” Then he picked up on a detail in Rex's thoughts. “But not a warrior. A female.”

Rixx swung his legs over the side of the bunk. “Tori brought her on when we stopped at that small outpost. She's here to deliver the babies.”

Zaandr frowned. On their home world, the priestesses brought the babies into the world. But they were not on his home planet anymore, a fact that he was still getting used to.

He and Rixx *had* been the newest additions to the bounty hunting crew. They'd joined the ship when it had returned to the Dothvek world to retrieve Dev and Trek, twin Dothveks who'd rescued a human woman and made her their mate. With all the babies due on the ship, the bounty hunters needed warriors to fill in for the posts that would soon be vacated, if only for a short while.

Zaandr had been lucky. Vrax, who was Tori's mate, was his half-brother, and had vouched for his skills navigating across the sands by the stars. He'd suggested Zaandr join the ship as a navigator.

Rixx had been even more lucky because he'd been Zaandr's best friend since childhood. The two were so inseparable that Vrax had rolled his eyes and said that Rixx could join, if he agreed to learn everything there was to know about engineering. So, Zaandr had spent his time on the bridge learning how to translate the rudimentary navigational skills that worked so well on the sands to the ship's technology, and Rixx had been by Holly's side in the engine room as she taught him how the complex ship worked.

They only saw each other when they returned to their small quarters to rest between shifts, or when they sat together for meals. Still, it was Zaandr's dream come true to journey to the stars—something he'd never imagined possible before the bounty hunters crash landed on his planet—and he didn't care how hard he had to work.

“So, she's not permanent, either?” Zaandr asked.

Rixx jumped down from the top bunk, his thoughts hot with questions. *What do you mean?*

Zaandr thought about correcting his friend. They'd been told to limit the amount they communicated without talking since they were now living among those who weren't able to hear thoughts and sense emotions. But it was hard not to slip into the mental shorthand he and Rixx had acquired over their lifetime. He swung his own legs to the floor. “We came on board to fill positions while the females are recovering from childbirth and spending time with their new babies. That need will fade.”

Rixx shook his head. “I disagree, brother. A ship this size needs a larger crew. We have empty cabins as it is.” Then he cocked an eyebrow. “And have you seen the way our Dothvek brothers look at their mates? It will not be long before they are heavy with child again.”

Zaandr's face warmed at the suggestion, and Rixx laughed, picking up on his discomfort quickly. “Still shy around human women?”

It wasn't only human women, Zaandr thought. Even though he was as big and brawny as any Dothvek warrior, he'd

never felt the brash confidence that Rixx did around females. His friend had been known to charm a Dothvek priestess in training out of her robes, while he had only experienced one fumbling encounter with a female.

It wasn't that he didn't desire females. He did. But they provoked in him the hammering of his heart and the jangle of his pulse.

Rixx called a heavy hand on his bare shoulder. "Do not worry yourself, Zan. Between our work schedule and her delivering babies, we probably won't even see the new female much."

Zaandr let out a relieved breath and hated himself for it. He was a trained Dothvek warrior who had made it through the *tahadu*, the coming-of-age gauntlet that every Dothvek warrior had to endure. He was deadly with a blade, and was a skilled hunter on the sands. There was little on the Dothvek home world that frightened him. But he wasn't there anymore.

"Come." Rixx grabbed his hand and hoisted him to his feet. "We should go to the kitchens before it is time to work again. I know it isn't time for our group meal, but maybe there is still some of the grilled meat that we brought on board with us."

Zaandr nodded. The humans weren't as fond of the pungent meat that was roasted over a spit in their oasis village, so the supply of it they'd brought with them hadn't dwindled as fast as expected. That, and it had such a strong smell that none of the pregnant females could be in the same room as it. Or, he'd heard, kiss their mate if he'd eaten it, which meant it had been left to him and Rixx to consume.

His mouth watered as they left their quarters and made their way to the kitchens, winding through the tight corridors that were dimly lit. The floor rumbled beneath their feet, the constant reminder they were flying through space, but the sensation no longer startled Zaandr. The jerk in the rumbling did, though.

Rixx stopped quickly, holding up a hand. "That's not a normal sound for the engines."

Zaandr was impressed by how fast his friend had picked up the sounds and motions of the ship. Holly had been teaching him to listen to the ship as if he were on the sands back home, and he'd done just that. Now, he could decipher every creak and jolt.

Are you sure? Zaandr asked, too shocked to remember to speak aloud.

He moved his head up and down, his expression grim. *I need to get to the engine room.*

Zaandr watched him rush off, concern tickling the back of his brain. He brushed it aside. Aside from that initial jolt, there had been nothing. Even if there was an issue, Rixx and Holly could fix it. That, he knew.

Even so, he was no longer in the mood for salty, roasted meat. But he also didn't want to return to his quarters alone. Turning, Zaandr headed for the bridge. It wasn't his shift yet, but he didn't mind getting in some extra study time at the navigational console.

He picked up his pace as he thought about studying the stars, rounding a corner, and running smack into someone. She was also moving fast, so she bounced off his chest. Zaandr had to reach out fast to grab her arms so she wouldn't fall backward. There was a yelp and a then a chirp. Two someones?

"I'm so sorry." The female peered at him, her brown hair falling back from her face. Then she looked down at the green fur-ball tucked in the crook of one arm. "Are you okay, Pog?"

Zaandr wrinkled his brow at her in confusion. Was this the new crew mate? Why was she carrying around Bexli's shape-shifting pet?

"I'm new," the woman said. "You must be...?"

It took Zaandr a beat to realize she was waiting for him to tell her his name. "Zaandr. I'm also new to the ship, but not as new as you."

"Hi, not-as-new Zaandr. I'm Tegan."

He nodded. "I heard you were on board to help with all the babies."

She raised her eyebrows then narrowed her gaze. "You're not one of the fathers, are you?"

His eyes popped wide. The thought of touching one of his fellow Dothveks' mates made his face burn. "Me? One of the fathers? No!"

She gave him a half smile. "So that's a no?"

He opened his mouth but then got the strong sense that she was teasing him.

Tegan stepped back. "I might not be seeing you much then, Zaandr, but it was nice to meet you."

He nodded mutely as she scooted by him, cursing himself for sounding so foolish. At least she was right. He probably would get very few occasions to embarrass himself with her again.

CHAPTER THREE

TEGAN EYED the very pregnant woman sitting on the platform in the medical bay. Her belly was like a giant balloon protruding in front of her as she rubbed one hand over it, then scratched absently.

“So, can you do anything about it?”

“Max, right?”

The woman flicked her other hand through her short, dark hair and met Tegan’s gaze with wide, blue eyes. “That’s right. Technically, it’s Maxine but no one calls me that. Technically, I’m also a doctor but not a medical doctor, and I know nothing about anatomy or childbirth. My specialty is minerals.” She blew out a breath. “Not much help when you’re growing a person inside you.”

Tegan ran her hands over the swollen belly and smiled. “The baby is big and very active.”

“You’re telling me.” Max managed a weak smile. “It’s half Dothvek.”

“Are you in pain?”

Max shook her head. “No, but I have to pee all the time and breathing is not easy.”

“Unfortunately, that’s normal at this stage.” Tegan walked to the cabinets inset in the walls and opened them. Although, the ship was decently stocked with standard medical supplies, they didn’t have any of the herbal remedies that Tegan preferred. Luckily, she’d brought some with her, but after a

few days tending to the very pregnant women on the ship, she'd almost run out.

She snagged a small bottle, holding the brown glass up to the light to see that there were only a few drops left in the bottom. She twisted off the cap and emptied the remaining oil into her palm. She slid her hands under the hem of Max's shirt.

"Will that help stop me from peeing every time I sneeze?" Max lowered her voice. "I'm running out of clean underwear."

Tegan laughed as she shook her head. "Sadly, it won't. I've never heard of a healing oil that will fix that. This will help with the itching, though. It will help your skin stretch naturally so you won't get marks."

Max let out a sigh. "I didn't even notice I was scratching, but you're right. My stomach has been itchy lately."

Tegan cut a glance at the now-empty bottle. She'd have to get some more, but she didn't know where or how.

"So, how are you enjoying life with the bounty hunter babes?" Max asked as she slid off the table, putting a hand on the woman's arm before she could answer. "Just so you know, I wasn't one of the original crew. Danica, Tori, Caro, Bexli, and Holly were the bounty hunter babes before they took me prisoner and before we all crashed on the Dothvek planet."

Tegan's mouth dropped open. "You're a prisoner?"

Max threw her head back and laughed. "Not anymore, but I used to have a price on my head, and they were the ones who found me."

Tegan looked at the woman skeptically. She'd always imagined bounties to be hardened criminals or outlaws. Not petite, female scientists.

"My discovery of an alternative fuel source had everyone after me. I was lucky Danica and her crew got me instead of the Gorglik named Mourad. He was terrifying, and he was the one who marooned all of us on the sand planet where the Dothveks live." Max winked at her. "Of course, that didn't turn out to be such a bad thing since the Dothveks saved us and helped us defeat Mourad."

Tegan slid her gaze to the woman's belly. "It seems like they did more than that."

Max's cheeks flushed. "Do you blame all of us for falling for them? They're huge, gorgeous, and brave."

"And they stuck around. That's not something I saw a lot of where I'm from."

Max cocked her head. "You're from that outpost on Zeroen?"

Tegan pressed her lips together as she nodded, thoughts of her home making her back stiffen.

"Is that where you learned everything about babies and childbirth?"

"My mother taught me. She said in a place like Zeroen, where the women are foolish enough to believe the men who never stay, it was a good job to have. We were always busy."

"That sounds hard." Max's voice was soft. "But not all guys run off. Just look at all the Dothveks on this ship. They might look tough, but when it comes to babies, they're marshmallows."

Tegan didn't know what a marshmallow was, but she'd seen the Dothvek fathers with their babies, and had to admit that they were besotted. From her experience, these alien males were the exception, and not the rule. She'd seen pregnant women abandoned too many times to believe anything else. It was why she'd promised herself that she'd never be stupid enough to lie with a man and why she never wanted a baby or family for herself. It was fine for others—and she could even find it in herself to be happy for them—but there was no way she was risking the heartache of being left behind, and the difficulty of being a single mother. She'd seen her own mother struggle, working herself to the bone and into an early grave. That would not be her fate.

Tegan was aware that Max was staring at her. She cleared her throat, looked away quickly, and snatched up the empty oil bottle. She didn't know Max well enough to unload her dark thoughts about men, and it probably wouldn't be good for any

pregnant mother's mental wellbeing to realize that their own midwife didn't believe in happily ever after.

"Found you!" Tori popped her head into the room.

"Me or Tegan?" Max asked, looking from one to the other.

"The doc," Tori said, then held up a hand before Max could say anything. "The baby doc."

Even though she wasn't a doctor, Tori and most of the others on board had been calling her doc, and she'd given up correcting them.

"Me?" She glanced at Tori's stomach. "Is everything okay?"

Tori made a face. "Like I told you, you won't have to worry about me at all. I was stopping by to see if you needed anything. We're making an unscheduled stop."

"The fuel leak? Max asked, her brow furrowed.

Tori cursed under her breath. "Holly still doesn't know how it happened. She and Rixx fixed the leak, but we won't be able to make it much further without refueling. Unfortunately, the nearest stop is Kurril."

Max's jaw dropped. "Kurril? As in, the place where you and Vrax almost died?"

Tori's already stern face darkened. "Trust me, if there was anyplace closer, I would not return to the Den of Thieves, but we can't afford to be dead in the water."

"Didn't you and Vrax leave under bad circumstances?" Max asked.

"You mean in the midst of ships exploding?" Tori waved a hand in the air. "No one knew it was us, and we were gone before the dust settled."

None of this sounded reassuring to Tegan. She'd assumed there would be some risk being on a bounty-hunting ship, but she hadn't expected it so soon.

"So, do you need any supplies while we're there?" Tori turned her attention back to the midwife. "Kurril might be a

cesspool, but if it's sold, you can find it there.”

Tegan looked at the empty brown bottle and thought of the other medicinal oils and herbs in her cabinet that were running low. “I do need more supplies.”

“Give me the names, and I'll have Rukken get them for you.”

Tegan shook her head. “I need to get them myself. I must be able to smell them to ensure they're genuine. Too many vendors try to pass off fakes, and only a trained nose can tell the difference.”

Tori scowled. “You did hear the part of the conversation where I said that I almost died on Kurril, right?” She gave the woman a brief once-over. “And I'm guessing I've killed more people than you have.”

“Maybe you can wait on the supplies?” Max suggested.

Tegan shook her head. “Not if I want to do my job well and keep you—and your babies—safe.”

Max's cheeks paled and she exchanged a glance with Tori.

The Zevrian huffed out a breath. “Fine. But I'm going to be furious if I lose our midwife on Kurril. She wasn't easy to find, you know.” Then she pivoted to Tegan. “I'll let you go, but you have to take armed guards with you.”

Tegan had no problem with an armed escort. “Will it be you?”

Tori gave a brusque shake of her head. “There may still be those who recognize me in the Den of Thieves. Same goes for Vrax.” Her lips twitched. “I'm sending you with Dothveks no one will know.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ZAANDR STOOD with Rixx at the top of the lowered ramp and surveyed the planet. Dust swirled up with the hot wind, making it hard to make out the city beyond the shipyard. He could see the shapes of stone buildings, but the spires and towers blended in with the murky sky.

As soon as Vrax had told him about Kurril and the city on the planet known as the Den of Thieves, Zaandr had been both fascinated and nervous. Part of the appeal of joining his Dothvek brothers on the bounty hunting ship was the opportunity to see other worlds, but he was realizing more and more just how unique his home world was, and how dangerous the universe could be. His home planet might have its share of sand creatures, but it contained no hot spots for criminals and murders like the one he was viewing.

“Did Vrax tell you where this market would be?” his best friend asked.

Zaandr nodded. “Generally, although he was being dragged to a slave market the last time he arrived, so his memories aren’t clear.”

Rixx laughed then shot him a wary look. *You are serious?*

It only took him a glance to know that Zaandr was not teasing him.

“Are you my guards?”

The female voice from behind prevented Rixx from asking any more questions, and they both turned.

“Tegan.” Rixx beamed at her as the woman eyed us both with obvious reservation.

He’d been strictly instructed not to delve into the minds of the humans on board, but it didn’t take empathic abilities to know that she wasn’t sure about this mission. He didn’t know if it was the destination itself, or the two Dothveks, or a bit of both, but she was nervous.

“You have nothing to worry about,” Rixx said, clearly picking up on her mood, as well. “We’ve been given directions to the market. We’ll be in and out before anyone knows we’re there.”

Tegan wore a strange assemblage of brown clothing—pants tucked into lace-up boots, then topped with a hooded shirt and a duster coat that hung open to reveal a leather crossbody bag. Everything was worn and scuffed, but Zaandr thought she would probably fit in better than he and Rixx would.

Tegan flipped up her hood. “Then let’s go.”

She walked between them and down the ramp as both Dothveks walked briskly to keep up. Rixx caught her first, matching her stride as they walked across the dry, hardpacked ground and toward the stone arch leading into the Den of Thieves. Zaandr was half a pace behind, which he didn’t mind, as he scanned the area around them for anyone approaching.

Even though Rixx was also supposed to be on his guard, he seemed more interested in talking with Tegan. That was fine by Zaandr. He wasn’t good at talking to females, especially a pretty human. He remembered bumping into her in the corridor and their awkward conversation where he’d practically shouted at her that he wasn’t the father of one of the babies due on board. He was sure the midwife thought he was crazy, or weird, or both.

As they reached the imposing arch, Zaandr heard a high-pitched sound from below. He looked down and saw that Pog had followed them from the ship and was zooming around their feet. Tegan hadn’t noticed, but Rixx was doing his best to hold her attention as he talked animatedly.

Zaandr scooped up the little green ball of fur. “You aren’t supposed to be here.”

Pog chirped at him then started purring. Zaandr shook his head and picked up his pace so that he was walking on the other side of the female.

“I think this is for you.” He handed her the Lycithian creature.

Tegan stopped and stared down at the pet. “Pog! You aren’t supposed to be here.”

“I don’t think he’s a great listener,” Zaandr deadpanned.

Tegan met his eyes and smiled. “I’m starting to think you’re right.” She sighed and stole a glance at their vessel across the shipyard. “I guess you’re coming with us, naughty boy.” She opened the flap of her crossbody bag, dropped him inside, and flipped the bag closed. “But don’t make a fuss.”

A tuft of green appeared at the corner of the bag, and Pog wiggled his head—at least Zaandr guessed it was his head—through the gap.

Zaandr stifled a laugh, and Tegan caught him, grinning along with him. Zaandr felt a jolt of warmth for the woman, that spread along his bare skin like sand sparks after a lightning storm.

“Like I was saying,” Rixx raised his voice and resumed his conversation, but Zaandr tuned him out.

What had just happened? Zaandr’s heart was beating fast, and his throat was tight. He clamped down any thoughts he might have, shielding them from his best friend. Luckily, Rixx was too consumed with himself to notice Zaandr’s emotional flux.

That was all it was, Zaandr told himself. A momentary burst of irrational emotion. Because it was irrational to think that a female like Tegan would ever be interested in him. Despite his physical might and skills in battle, he was not good at interacting with females. Whatever charm had been in the family had clearly been taken by Vrax, who must have used his skills to win over his challenging Zevrian mate.

Zaandr had none of the ease that the other Dothveks had around females. He didn't even have the strong and silent energy that the elder Tommel—Bexli's mate—exuded. He was just nervous and awkward.

But not then, he thought. He hadn't felt nervous when he'd handed Pog to Tegan. He'd been able to smile at her and even share a joke.

As they walked under the massive stone arch and entered the city, Zaandr tried to focus on his task and ignore the fact that his best friend was openly pursuing Tegan. At least one of them needed to pay attention to the teeming crowds of unseemly characters milling about.

Their threesome gained a few curious glances, mostly directed at their gold skin and exposed, tattooed chests, but none were malicious. Zaandr sent his mind into the crowd to sense for potential threats, and he was almost overwhelmed by the torrent of dark thoughts that flooded his mind. Vrax had warned him about the Den of Thieves, but he hadn't told him enough.

Zaandr stepped closer to Tegan as he picked up on pulses of desire from nearby males. Even though she was dressed like a male and had almost every part of her body covered, there were still those who wondered what was beneath her hood and all her layers.

He used Vrax's instructions to guide them through the crowds and down a series of passageways until they reached an open-air market. Faded fabric canopies sagged over stalls hawking everything from live animals, to books purported to contain magic. Bolts of fabric were unfurled, and baskets of strange produce overflowed.

The sounds of animals squawking and braying jostled with the noise of shopkeepers haggling over prices. It took all Zaandr's concentration to drown out all the actual sound so he could listen for dark intent.

"I'm looking for someone who sells medicinal herbs and oils," Tegan told then as she peered around.

Rixx walked ahead with his arms wide and one hand on the curved blade hanging from his waist, parting the way for Tegan to follow.

“Your friend is wasting his time,” she said, cutting her gaze to Zaandr.

He almost wasn't sure she'd spoken. “Wasting his time? Looking for your supplies?”

“No.” She gave me a pointed look. “Trying to seduce me. It won't work.”

Zaandr started to defend his friend and say that he wasn't trying to seduce her, but that would be a lie.

“It's nothing personal,” she continued. “I'm just not interested in guys.”

He blinked at her. “You prefer females?”

She grinned. “Not romantically. It's just that I don't want to take a mate, get married, have kids, any of those things I'm sure your friend wants.”

“And you want none of those?” Zaandr had never heard of a female who did not want a mate. Or a male, for that matter.

She shook her head as she paused at a stall where bunches of herbs hung from the edge of the canopy. “I never knew my dad. Most of the women back home were single moms. From my experience, men leave. I don't want to be left.”

Zaandr could sense her pain as if it were his own, a sad ache that twisted his heart and made him feel hollowed out. He put a hand to his heart, the words barely able to escape from his lips. “Not all males leave. A Dothvek would never leave his mate or child.” The pain around his heart eased and he was able to speak more forcefully. “Dothveks do not leave.”

Tegan tilted her head. “Really? Then where is your friend?”

Zaandr spun around, his gaze searching for Rixx. Then he extended his mind to search for his friend. Nothing. He was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

TEGAN GAVE the Dothvek a knowing look as he swiveled his head wildly in both directions.

“He is gone,” he said, his voice grave.

His tone startled her. She assumed his friend had wandered around the corner, but Zaandr was genuinely worried. “I’m sure he’s not gone.” She waved a hand at the stalls surrounding them. “He’s probably scouting ahead.”

Zaandr shook his head, and his long, dark hair swung around his face. “He isn’t. I would sense that. I would hear him.”

“Hear him?” Tegan readjusted her crossbody bag as Pog poked his head farther out.

“You do not know about Dothveks, do you?”

She was a bit taken aback. She knew what she’d seen—they were huge, gold-skinned warriors with ridges on their backs, and pointed ears hidden behind long, black hair. She also knew what Tori had told her, which, now that she thought about it, wasn’t much. “I mean, I know you come from a sand planet, and Tori said this is the first time your people have left to explore space.”

“That’s true, but she did not tell you about our abilities?”

If this was going to be about their efficiency in getting females pregnant, she was going to kick him in the balls. She crossed her arms over her chest. “What abilities?”

He continued to glance around, his brow furrowed. “Our people can sense each other’s thoughts and emotions.

Occasionally we can sense those in other species, as well, but usually it is only between mates.”

Tegan stared at him, suddenly self-conscious. “You can read people’s minds?”

He frowned. “No. Not people. Dothveks. I can sense the emotions of my fellow Dothveks and communicate with them through our minds, but I cannot read minds.”

Tegan released a breath. Okay, that wasn’t so bad. At least he couldn’t read her mind. Almost as soon as the Dothvek had said that he was empathic, she’d had the most inappropriate thoughts about him. Even now, she had to fight the urge to look at the swell of his chest muscles and his corded stomach.

Get a hold of yourself, girl. He isn’t that hot. But that was a lie, and if he could read her mind, he’d know that, too.

“Maybe your friend got bored or found someone better to flirt with,” she suggested, trying to lighten the mood. He had to be nearby. He couldn’t have vanished.

“Rixx did not get bored,” Zaandr snapped. “He would not abandon his mission, but he is gone.”

“Gone?” Her nerves jangled. Suddenly, the market seemed more crowded and the cries of the street vendors more insistent. “He’s a big, tough Dothvek. How could he be here one moment and gone the next?”

Zaandr scowled but didn’t answer. He looked as confused and frustrated as she was. She could see how upset the alien was and how convinced he was that his friend hadn’t left them on purpose. “I’m sorry I suggested that Rixx got bored or found another female to hit on. I was trying to cut the tension, but it was a dumb thing to say.”

Zaandr shrugged one shoulder. “Do not feel bad. You do not know Rixx.” He met her gaze for a beat. “And he was doing his best to charm you.”

“And I’m afraid I wasn’t very receptive, which is why I thought maybe he’d found someone who would appreciate his flirting, but you’re right.” She glanced around the market,

noticing some sketchy characters eyeing them. “He wouldn’t leave us like this.”

“He vowed to keep you safe. We both did.” Zaandr moved closer to Tegan, slipping an arm around her waist. “Stay close to me.”

The warmth of his body flush to hers making her feel both more secure and more unnerved, but she didn’t move away. Pog made a chirping sound as her bag bumped the Dothvek’s leg. She reached across and ruffled the Lycithian creature’s head. “It’s okay, buddy. We’ll be fine.” She wasn’t sure she believed it, but saying the words gave her comfort.

The Dothvek glanced at her, one slanted eyebrow lifting. Tegan had the strangest sensation that he could tell she was lying, but he’d told her that he could only sense the feelings of other Dothveks or a mate, and she wasn’t either of those.

Pog wiggled again, working himself up until he popped from the bag and onto the ground. Tegan yelped as he hit the dusty paving stones and rolled.

“Pog! Where are you going?” She lunged for him, but he scampered just out of reach. “Come back here, you little maniac. Bexli will kill me if I lose you.”

But Pog didn’t come back. He scurried to the spot where Rixx had last been in view and snuffled on the ground.

Tegan blew out an impatient breath and reached for him again, but Zaandr grabbed her arm and held her back. “Wait. I think he’s scenting Rixx.”

Tegan cocked her head as the little green creature moved briskly around feet and stacks of wooden crates, clearly sniffing as he went. “Glurkins can track?”

The Dothvek shrugged. “I know little about Lycithian pets, but I do know tracking, and that’s what he’s doing. Maybe he’ll have better luck with smell than I did with thoughts.”

They followed closely behind, as Pog hurried around the nearby stalls and elicited the occasional shriek of alarm as he sniffed someone’s leg. After a while circling the same spot, he sat down and made a mournful sound.

Tegan glanced at Zaandr. “What does that mean?”

The Dothvek’s chin dropped. “He lost the scent.”

She bent down and patted Pog’s head before hoisting him back into her bag. “That’s okay, buddy. You tried your best.” She pivoted to Zaandr. “What do we do now? Do we continue to search for him or go back to the ship?”

“It would be wise for us to return to the ship.”

“But you don’t want to,” she said, her instinct telling her that he was only saying they should go back for her benefit.

He frowned. “It doesn’t matter what I want. I was tasked with protecting you. Now that Rixx has disappeared, I can no longer guarantee your safety.”

“Do you think I’m in danger, or do you think since one Dothvek has vanished, you might be in danger of disappearing too?” The second possibility had just occurred to her, but as soon as the words left her lips, she knew they were right. She swiveled her gaze to the people who inhabited the place known as the Den of Thieves. They wouldn’t care about a human female who was well covered in a place like Kurril, but burly, half-naked aliens with gold skin and ridged backs were a different matter. She slipped one of her arms around Zaandr’s waist. “Maybe you’re the one who should stick close to me.”

He grunted as he started to move her in the direction they’d come. “If I am a target, then being with me puts you in danger. I need to get you to safety before I can look for Rixx.”

Tegan remembered the stories Tori had told her about being on Kuril, about how she’d tracked Vrax to a slave market and then to the particularly dangerous madam who’d bought him. And that had been before he’d entered the fighting rings. She stopped walking.

Zaandr jerked to a stop and narrowed his eyes at her. “What are you doing?”

“It’s my fault your friend is missing. If I hadn’t needed supplies, neither of you would have been here.”

“It is not your fault for needing supplies.” He cast a dark look around them. “The only ones to blame are the ones who are behind Rixx’s disappearance.”

“Either way, whoever managed to take a Dothvek without you noticing or him being able to send you some kind of mind signal must be pretty clever or pretty deadly. Which means we don’t have time to waste taking me back to the ship. We need to find him now.”

Zaandr shook his head. “Impossible. If I let you remain here and in danger, I’ll be failing at my mission. Rixx would understand why I cannot risk you for him.”

“The faster we start looking, the greater the chance we can find him or find someone who saw something.” She stamped one foot on the ground. “I’m not going to be the reason you don’t find your friend.”

He sighed. “So be it.” Then he bent down and tossed her over one shoulder. “If you won’t come willingly, I will have to take you back by force.”

CHAPTER SIX

THE FEMALE WIGGLED on Zaandr's shoulder as she struggled to get down, and she slapped one hand on his back as he made his way back through the bustling market. She used her other hand to keep her bag from falling and to keep Pog inside it. "Let me down!"

He ignored her cries, which were luckily drowned out by the frenzy of the vendors shouting about their prices and the animals screeching in protest from inside cages. The sight of a male carrying someone over his shoulder—even a someone who was clearly being taken against their will—didn't draw many glances. Even though he'd been warned by Vrax, Zaandr wondered what kind of place this was to allow such a thing to happen.

The kind of place where a Dothvek warrior could vanish without a trace, he thought darkly, his thoughts returning to his best friend, who was now missing.

Zaandr knew he had to move fast—get Tegan to the ship, tell the other Dothveks, and mount a rescue. But where would they begin? They could start in the market where Rixx had last been seen, but he knew that the chances he was still there were slim. Vrax had warned him about the Den of Thieves and told him about his own experiences and narrow escape. In a place that contained a slave market, more pleasure houses than he could imagine, fighting rings, and an underground market for all kinds of dark deeds, there was no doubt in his mind that Rixx had been taken for a reason.

He swallowed the sharp taste of bile that teased the back of his throat. He probably didn't want to know the reason.

Zaandr had known something was wrong from the moment he'd realized Rixx wasn't nearby and had reached out his mind—and sensed nothing. He wasn't used to nothing. On the bounty hunting ship, there were enough Dothvek minds to have a steady mental patter. Not to mention the females, who were not shy about conversation.

On his home world, he'd been surrounded by other Dothveks in his oasis village. There had been a constant buzz of thoughts and ever-present pulses of emotions. The only time he'd heard and felt nothing had been when he'd ventured onto the sands alone to hunt, but that had been rare. Usually, Rixx had joined him.

If there was any Dothvek he was accustomed to hearing constantly, whether at home or on the ship, it was his best friend. And now, there was silence.

“I know you can hear me, Zaandr.” Tegan beat her fists on his back. “You might not be able to hear my thoughts, but you can hear my screaming.”

He clenched his jaw. That was part of the problem. He shouldn't be able to hear her thoughts or sense her emotions, but he could. He'd picked up on that fact that she'd lied to Pog when she'd told him everything would be fine. She didn't believe that. She was as worried as he was. He could feel her fear and anxiety pulsing into him in waves, and it wasn't only because she was angry he was carrying her back to the ship on his back. She'd been nervous before that. It had been her fear that had convinced him he had to return her to the ship.

Zaandr couldn't hunt for Rixx if he was being bombarded by the female's emotions. Not only was it distracting, but he also didn't know why it was happening. Tegan had made it very clear that the last she wanted was to get involved with him or any male. She clearly had strong feelings about fathers who left, and her answer to that was never to become a mother. Obviously, the best way to ensure that didn't happen was to avoid males altogether, which seemed to be her plan.

Not that he would have had a chance with a female like her, he reminded himself. She might not have welcomed Rex's

flirting but that was only because she rejected the idea of all males. If she'd been open to the idea of a mate, Zaandr was certain she would have been charged by Rixx's attention and never noticed him.

Focus, he ordered himself, as he ducked down a corridor he was sure was the way they'd come.

It didn't matter if she was interested in males or mates or any of it. All that mattered was finding Rixx before something terrible happened to him.

"Zaandr!" Tegan yelled, her voice finally clear as they continued down the narrow corridor and there were no crowds to muffle her screams. "You have to let me down. You're going the wrong way."

He readjusted his hold on her legs, snorting derisively at her weak attempt to get him to release her. Then he looked at the passageway that was narrower and dimmer than any he remembered. Was this the way they'd come?

His heart sank. He'd been so distracted by his thoughts about her and her thoughts that he hadn't paid enough attention to where he was going. He scowled and spun round. How far off track had he gotten? When had the corridor bent? He didn't remember turning, but now he couldn't see the crowds that had surrounded them only moments earlier. At least, it felt like moments.

Panic welled inside him. Rixx was gone, and now he and the female he'd sworn to protect were lost in the most dangerous city he'd ever entered.

"It's okay." Tegan's voice was calm and soothing. "We'll figure this out. Let me down and let me help."

His shoulder slumped. He didn't know if she sensed his frustration, but she was right. He couldn't do this alone. Before he could swing her down to the ground, the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Although he'd sensed danger since emerging from the ship and had tried not to focus on the dark thoughts and malicious intent of the crowds, this was different. This was near.

“You heard the lady,” a voice said from the shadows. “Let her down.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

HER BLOOD CHILLED when she heard the voice. It wasn't the hard, craggy voice of a man, or really of anyone that belonged to the Den of Thieves. It was the sultry voice of a siren, beckoning them to do her bidding. But Tegan instinctively knew that obeying her would be the worst thing they could do.

Still, Zaandr lowered her to the dusty paving stones without a word. She shifted her crossbody bag so that it was behind her, giving a reassuring pat to Pog and feeling better when she could feel the lump she knew was him. At least she hadn't lost Bexli's pet.

"What are you doing?" Tegan whispered to him. She couldn't see whoever had spoken to then, but she could feel her watching, so she hung close to him.

"You asked to be put down."

Now you start listening to me? Tegan wanted to snap, but it didn't seem like a good time to have an argument.

"I can't fight effectively with you over my shoulder," he added in such a low voice she almost thought she imagined it.

Her heart raced. So, he thought he would need to fight. That wasn't exactly what she wanted to hear, but at least she knew that he wasn't being fooled by the woman's sultry voice.

Zaandr cut a glance to her, his lips quirking to one side. Was he amused? Had he heard her? Tegan shook her head. Impossible. She wasn't Dothvek, or his mate, and according to him those were the only minds he could read.

He cleared his throat and turned away, peering into the shadows of the corridor. “What do you want?”

“Why do you think I want anything?” she purred.

“Call it a hunch,” the Dothvek said.

Tegan joined him in searching the dark corners and recessed doorways for the owner of the voice. Where was she?

There was a high, tinkling laugh that was almost like childlike. “Maybe I do want something, but what if I told you it wasn’t what you thought?”

“How do you know what we think?” Tegan asked, wishing her voice wasn’t trembling.

“That’s my secret.” She laughed again. “I promise I wish you no ill will. I can help you find who you’re looking for.”

Zaandr drew in a quick breath, betraying his shock at her words. “How do you know we’re looking for someone?”

“We aren’t going to get very far if you continue to ask me the same questions.”

Tegan shot a sideways glance at the Dothvek. Either this woman had seen Rixx being taken, or she’d been a part of it. Or, she thought with a gulp, she was some kind of witch. Tori had mentioned that the madam who’d held Vrax had been a witch with supernatural powers. Was this another of those? A shiver went through her as she wondered if the Den of Thieves was crawling with witches.

Zaandr’s face was screwed up in a look of extreme concentration. Either he was having a stroke, or he was attempting to use his abilities to read her mind. Tegan still couldn’t see who was talking to then, and the passageway appeared to be getting darker.

She peered overhead. Daylight was fading fast, and dusk was overtaking them. Soon, it would be dark, and they’d be lost in a treacherous city. They needed to forget about this mystery woman and run before it was too late. Before Tegan could whisper those thoughts to Zaandr, his face went slack.

He squared his shoulders and turned slightly. “We accept your help.”

Tegan spun toward him. “We do?”

“She means us no harm.”

“Says her,” Tegan said under her breath. “How do we know she’s not involved with the ones who took your friend? This could all be part of an evil plot to get *two* Dothveks. Maybe she wants a pair.”

“Your girl has quite the colorful imagination.”

“She’s not—” Zaandr started to say, but Tegan cut him off with her own indignant outrage.

“I’m not his girl.” She practically spit out the words. “I’m not anyone’s girl!”

The woman emerged from the darkness, but Tegan would have sworn there had been nothing in the spot from which she stepped. Her dove-gray dress fluttered around her ankles as she walked, covered by a heavier cloak in the same color. “As you wish.”

She walked past them, long, pale-blue tentacles flowing from her head like a mane of hair and swaying down her back. Her eyes were colorless, with no iris or pupil, but she looked at first one of them and then the other as she passed. “If you wish to see your friend again, I suggest you follow me.”

Zaandr locked eyes with Tegan, but before she could tell him that this was a very bad idea, one phrase pulsed through her head. *Trust me.*

She was so stunned that she didn’t utter a word as he took her hand and led her with him behind the unknown woman and farther into the Den of Thieves.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ZAANDR'S MIND roiled as he clasped Tegan's hand and walked behind the creature in gray. His instinct told him that the alien female would not harm them, but what if he was wrong? He hadn't sensed danger before Rixx disappeared. He hadn't even noticed his friend was gone before Tegan said something. Maybe his abilities were weakening the longer he was away from his home world.

Like all Dothveks, he'd always been taught that their planet held a certain power bestowed on it from the goddesses, and that was what imbued them with the ability to sense thoughts and emotions. But his Dothvek brothers who'd left with the bounty hunters had not lost their abilities, even though they'd been far from the planet's pull for longer than he had. Even so, there had to be a reason he felt so muddled.

Tegan shifted her smaller hand in his. She was nervous and unsure of his decision to trust this stranger, but he didn't know if it was the expression on her face as she peered at him or his empathic abilities that told him this.

He squeezed her hand but didn't speak. How could he explain that he didn't have a good reason for putting their lives in the hands of someone completely unknown? His only reason was his gut instinct and the sense that she wasn't dangerous. At least, not to them.

The female paused at an arch that led down a low passageway with almost no light and a heavy, loamy scent. She reached a hand into her cloak, produced two more gray cloaks, and handed them to the pair. "Put these on."

Zaandr eyes her, not sure if she was a witch or just well-prepared. He took the cloak and shrugged it over his shoulders, watching as Tegan wrapped herself in hers and flipped up her hood. He did the same, trying to suppress the desire to snatch her up and run as far and as fast as he could.

“You okay?” she whispered, as they proceeded down the dank corridor, and the stone brushed their shoulders.

He grunted for an answer, his senses on high alert as he picked up the frenzied chatter and energy of a large group. Since they’d left the marketplace, the assault on his brain had calmed, but now he gritted his teeth as he filtered out the cacophony of thoughts barraging him.

They approached a pair of short, but burly, albino creatures holding spears at their sides. The pair nodded at the female and stepped aside, revealing a door with faded, red paint and a tarnished, brass handle.

“Do not speak to anyone,” the female warned them before flicking the door open and proceeding through to a massive, multi-floor space with balconies ringing a central hall. The scent of earth was gone, replaced by the heady aroma of liquor and perfume with a faint undercurrent of sweat.

It was instantly clear to Zaandr that this was why he was being assaulted by so many thoughts. The place was packed with aliens of all varieties. Pink-skinned females were swinging on circular trapezes high above them as males hung from the balconies and cheered. Females with enormous eyes that never blinked danced around in swirling gowns and beckoned males to follow them. Couples slipped in and out of rooms, the desire and satisfaction rolled off them in waves.

“It’s a brothel,” Tegan said, her voice laced with disapproval.

Zaandr had only heard of such houses of pleasure, and the one Vrax had mentioned visiting while he was in the Den of Thieves had sounded much less raucous and more sinister.

The female leading them flicked a finger to urge them to stay close as she wound through the crowds. Many of the

female entertainers nodded to her or waved, but she continued moving quickly. As they snaked through the gyrating bodies, Zaandr sensed curious gazes sliding toward him. They wondered who he was and why he was with *her*—not Tegan, but the female who'd found them. His face warmed as he picked up more thoughts about him. His head snapped up as he heard them wonder what was under his cloak and imagine all the things they would like to do to a male as large as him.

Zaandr strengthened the blocks in his mind and pushed aside the throbbing desire that surrounded him. He needed to focus on finding Rixx and keeping Tegan safe. Luckily, most of the patrons of the brothel hadn't noticed her, since her cloak didn't expose the lower half of her body.

After spiraling down a staircase that seemed to go on for longer than a typical flight of stairs, they were pulled through a door tucked beneath it. Once the door was shut, the music and voices were muted, and Zaandr allowed himself to take a deep breath.

Despite the atmosphere outside the door, the room was cozy. A fire crackled in a hearth and a high bed was topped with a neat, floral blanket. Two chairs and a low table huddled in front of the fire, and heavy curtains covered the only window.

Zaandr turned to ask their guide why she'd brought them to a brothel, but she slipped from the room and clicked a lock in place.

“What the hell?” Tegan raced to the door, yanking on the handle that held fast. Then she spun on Zaandr. “I thought you said to trust you.”

So, she *had* heard him. The pleasure that this news brought him was dampened by the look of pure fury she was giving him. “I sensed no deception from her. I still don't.”

Tegan fluttered her hand in front of the door. “Then why are we locked in?”

The door swung open, almost smacking Tegan, and she stumbled back as another female entered the room. This

woman appeared human, with short, alabaster hair and green eyes that flashed as she took in them both. She definitely wasn't one of the entertainers, in her black, form-fitting pants and top and matching thick boots. If Zaandr had to guess, he'd say she was a burglar, or thief of some kind.

“Apologies,” the woman said, but it was clear that she didn't often apologize and wasn't all that sorry as she braced her hands on her hips and stared them down. “But the Den of Thieves' only underground liberation movement can't be too careful.”

CHAPTER NINE

“SAY WHAT?” Tegan gaped at the woman. If she’d sprouted extra arms, she wouldn’t have been more surprised by what she’d just told them.

The woman with white hair smiled. Her face was unlined, but her skin was tan, making the color of her hair even more striking. “You didn’t expect to meet the leader of Kurril’s underground?”

“Not in a whore-house,” Tegan said, still not completely convinced this wasn’t all a big joke.

The woman’s brows lifted. “A pleasure house is the perfect place to keep a pulse on the darkness of the city, and lure unwitting informants.” Her smile widened. “Besides, who would ever suspect a madam of running an operation to uncover criminals and liberate their victims?”

“Not me,” Tegan mumbled.

“Is that what you do?” Zaandr asked. He didn’t seem to be thrown by the revelation, although Tegan suspected that was because he was able to read minds. He must have known what was going on the entire time.

The woman nodded and shifted her weight from one leg to the other. “You can call me Rose. My associate who brought you to me is Astromeria. Meri for short. All the members of our organization are women, and we’re all survivors of Kurril’s seedy underworld.”

“Those aren’t your real names, are they?” Tegan asked. What were the chances both women were named after

flowers?

“No,” Rose said. “But it’s better this way.”

Tegan didn’t have any argument for that. She liked the idea of a bunch of women surviving a dark place like Kurril and naming themselves after beautiful flowers.

“We know we can’t stop all of what goes on here,” Rose continued, “and if we disrupt too much, we’ll be hunted down and eliminated. The crime bosses don’t like it when their dirty money dries up. So we rescue one victim at a time, make small changes to make life a bit harder for those who hurt others, and cause revenue streams to inexplicably dry up.”

“Isn’t that frustrating?” Tegan asked. “You never win, and the bad guys are always popping back up to do more damage.”

“The most important thing is keeping the victims we do save safe, and we can’t do that if we aren’t around.” Rose waved a hand at the door behind her. “All those entertainers you see out there were once slaves or prostitutes in the direst conditions. Now they’re here.”

Tegan folded her arms over her chest. “But aren’t they still prostitutes?”

Rose shook her head. “Our pleasure house is not what it seems. The males all leave here satisfied and with a strong desire to return, but they could never tell you exactly what happened. They think they drank too much or smoked too much prillyweed, but they don’t know that they drink a potion that convinces them they had the time of their life and leaves them with a profound feeling of satisfaction and happiness. More than they’ve ever experienced at an actual pleasure house.”

“So, you *are* witches?” Tegan knew she’d sensed magic from the female who’d escorted them. Meri undoubtedly had mystical powers.

“Not in the way you might think, but there are those of us who have powers. We do not curse people or cast hexes though.”

“Vrax met a witch when he was on Kurril,” Zaandr said. “She did believe in hexes.”

Rose’s face darkened. “There is a great deal of black magic on Kurril. Some of the victims we save are from those houses.”

“I get that you help victims here, but why are you helping us?” Tegan asked.

Rose crossed to the fire and held her hands to it. “Meri saw your friend being taken. She said it was as efficient an operation as she’d ever seen. It wasn’t an abduction of opportunity.” She flicked her gaze at Zaandr. “Although I would not be surprised if anyone on Kurril wished to get their hands on aliens like you. You would be prized in the fighting pits, as well as in some of the pleasure houses.”

Zaandr made a low noise in the back of his throat. “Rixx is a brave Dothvek warrior. I will not let him be abused or broken by those who deserve nothing but slow, painful deaths.”

It didn’t take an empath so sense the rage radiating from him, and it made Tegan shiver.

“I couldn’t agree more.” Rose pivoted back to them, and shadows from the fire danced across the side of her face, making her cheekbones seem even sharper. “But they took your clansman for a reason. It was like they were waiting for him. Do you have any idea why?”

“They couldn’t have been waiting for him,” Tegan said before Zaandr could speak. “He’s never been to this planet, and we only arrived today. Rixx didn’t even know he’d be coming to the market until he was assigned to come with me so I could restock my supplies.”

Zaandr drew in a breath. “But we are not the first Dothveks to be on Kurril, or be known in the Den of Thieves. Our kinsman Vrax was here before.”

“The one who met the witch?”

He nodded to Rose. “He did not leave her on good terms. He also won in the fighting pits and left the planet in dramatic

fashion. The ship we arrived on was taken from Kurril.”

“Are we passengers on a stolen ship?” Tegan hissed at him.

He avoided her gaze, looking at Rose instead. “Our skin and markings are distinct enough that the enemies he made could have been on the lookout for him since his departure.”

Rose gave him a single nod. “We have our spies out confirming our theory about where he’s being held. By morning, we will know and can formulate a plan to retrieve him.” She pinned them both with a serious gaze. “Until then, you both must stay hidden.” She took long strides to the door. “You will be locked in for your safety, but I’ll have food sent up. I will return for you in the morning.”

Then she slipped from the room and clicked the door behind her.

Tegan released a breath, weariness from the day overtaking her. Then she looked at the single bed and then at the Dothvek, who was also staring at the bed with a look of awareness.

This was going to be awkward.

CHAPTER TEN

ZAANDR COULD FEEL Tegan's exhaustion wash over him as if it was his own. The stress of being new on the ship and adjusting to space flight as well as all her crew mates, was added to the worry about Rixx and her fear of the Den of Thieves. And now she was staring at the single bed and her panic was almost choking him.

"You don't need to be afraid of me," he said, fighting the urge to reach out and put a comforting hand on her arm.

"I'm not afraid of you." The words tripped from her mouth, but they were untrue. She lifted her crossbody bag over her head and put it on one of the chairs beside the fire. Pog tumbled out, gave himself a shake, leapt down, and hurried to the fire. He purred loudly as he circled a few times and then plopped down in a ball in front of the fireplace.

At least one of them would get some sleep, Zaandr thought as he eyed the stiff looking chairs. "I know you are. I can feel your fear, but you don't need to fear me. I have no intention of doing to you what you think I do."

She sucked in air and glared at him. "You're reading my mind!"

"I'm not trying to, but it's almost impossible not to sense your emotions, Tegan." He softened his voice. "Have you always been so afraid of males?"

Her gaze darted to his then fell. "I'm not afraid of males exactly. It's just I've seen too much pain and suffering they've left behind. I know exactly what one night of fun on a bed like

that leads to.” She jerked a thumb toward the bed. “It’s not fun for the mother left behind and alone.”

“I know you’ve seen a lot of pain and heartache. I can feel it.” He took a tentative step closer to her. “I promise you that I am not like any of those males. I cannot imagine abandoning a mother or a child, and I would die before I would ever do anything to hurt you.”

She raised her head and gave him a weak smile. “I know you wouldn’t. I don’t know how I know, but I do. I’m sorry I overreacted. It was instinct.”

Zaandr returned her smile, but it was wary. “I know how you know.”

“What?”

“You know that I wouldn’t hurt you because you can sense it. You’re picking up my emotions and thoughts just like I’m sensing yours.”

Her pupils flared wide. “Is that how I heard you tell me to trust you in the alley?”

He nodded, his lips pressed together.

“But how is that possible? I’m not Dothvek.”

“Neither are the females on our ship, but they can sense the emotions of their Dothvek mates.”

Tegan furrowed her brow. “But that’s because they’re mated. It’s not like they can read everyone’s thoughts, can they?”

The corners of his lips twitched as he wondered what thoughts the female might have that she didn’t want her crew mates to know. “Not that I am aware of, no.”

“Then how is this—” she gestured between them “—possible?”

Zaandr wanted to tell her he had no idea, and that it must be a strange glitch, but that would be a lie. He knew why he could feel her. He’d felt a connection to her since he’d first bumped into her on the ship. He couldn’t explain it, but it had

only been growing stronger the more time he'd been around her.

Tegan's sharp gaze shuttered. "It's not all you, and I know it's not your fault. I've felt a connection to you since we met."

"You have?" This stunned him. She'd been so clear that she had no interest in him or any male, that she'd assumed all the attraction was on his side.

She moved her head up and down reluctantly. "I've spent my entire life trying to make sure this never happens. I grew up surrounded by women. I work with women. I see the reminders of bad men in my life every day." She sighed. "It was all working fine—until you."

Should he apologize for that? He still didn't know what he'd done to provoke this reaction. From what he'd heard from the other Dothveks who'd taken human mates, it wasn't something they did. It had happened naturally, as if the goddesses ordained it.

"I don't have any plans to force myself on you," he said. "Feeling a connection doesn't mean we have to act on it." He swallowed hard as he said this, because he knew that rejecting one's fated mate would be torturous, and he was getting a gut feeling that Tegan was his—like it or not.

She raised her gaze to meet his, her eyes pleading. "That's the problem. I don't want to deny this. I like feeling connected to someone." She choked out a watery laugh. "Even if it's a virtual stranger. I've protected myself from getting attached to anything and anyone for so long, I'd forgotten how nice it is to feel connected. I don't want to lose this."

His throat tightened. He didn't know how to respond. Rixx was the one with the charming words, not him. So, instead of speaking, he slowly stepped toward her and wrapped her in his arms.

He expected her to stiffen or even push him away, but she didn't. She melted into his embrace, curling her own arms around his waist, and pressing her cheek against his chest, her soft breath feathering across his bare skin. Her contentment

pulsed into him, and he almost swayed on the spot from the headiness of it. His eyes closed as he let himself become awash in her swirl of pleasure.

Then his eyes flew open as her sunny thoughts unfurled the first tendrils of red-hot desire, and she started to kiss her way up his chest.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TEGAN WASN'T THINKING. If she'd been thinking clearly, she'd have reminded herself that men brought nothing but trouble—and babies. Lots of babies. Usually, the thought of babies and memories of the hundreds of childbirths she'd experienced would be like a douse of freezing water, but not this time. With the Dothvek, everything was different.

Standing with his arms wrapped tightly around her and the warm, spicy scent of him enveloping her, Tegan's resolve shattered. She'd never felt as safe and protected in her life. She knew he would defend her with his life, but she also knew in the depths of her soul that he would safeguard her heart as if it was his own.

It wasn't only wishful thinking on her part—the kind that had gotten more women than she could count in trouble. She could feel his intentions as if he was announcing them with a bullhorn. He would never hurt her, and he would never leave her. Not unless he was dragged away kicking and screaming, and, even then, he would claw his way back to her.

The strength of his devotion almost made her knees wobble. She'd never imagined that a man could feel such a thing, and to feel it for her? She done nothing but push him away, and he would still walk through fire for her. She wouldn't have believed it if she wasn't feeling it humming through her like an unspoken vow that sank into her bones and permeated the deepest, most secret parts of her.

Tegan's fingers buzzed as she splayed her hands over the hard muscles of his chest and allowed herself to drink it all in. Her defenses crumbled like sand as she savored the union, and

her eyes burned when she realized that she wanted more. She needed more.

She slid her hands over his gold skin, surprised by how firm it was but also so soft. The desire to be fully connected to him slammed into her, and she kissed his bare chest. The taste of his skin sent more hunger pounding through her as she kissed her way up toward his mouth.

Tegan reached one hand up and slid it through the back of his hair as she tipped her head back. Zaandr's eyes were molten black as he tangled his hands in her hair and held her head in place.

"Tegan," he rasped, "what are you doing?"

"I want you." Her voice wobbled. "I want all of you."

His gaze was intense as he searched hers. "Do you know what you're saying? Do you know what this will mean?"

She knew it would feel incredible. If it felt a fraction as good as touching him did, she was in, and she didn't care what happened afterward.

"You must care." His deep voice was insistent as his gaze slid from her eyes to her mouth. "You must know that there will be no going back, no retreating once we are mind mates."

Mind mates. She'd never heard of that, but if it meant being even closer with Zaandr, then she wanted it. "I won't want to go back. I don't ever want to go back to emptiness and fear."

He bit his bottom lip as his own hunger for her crashed over him, his last shred of resistance wavering as the muscles in the side of his jaw trembled. "Tegan," he managed to grit out. "I cannot resist you."

"Good." She bestowed a wicked grin on him as she yanked his head so that his lips were brushing hers. "I don't want you to resist me. I want you to take me."

His grip on her hair tightened, as he crashed his mouth to hers. As delicious as his skin had been, his mouth was even more intoxicating. Tegan moaned as he parted her lips, his

tongue swirling with hers in a sensuous dance. He slid his hands down her body, gripping her hips and hoisting her up until she could hook her legs around his waist.

She was vaguely aware of him walking them to the bed as they kissed, but her entire body throbbed with desire and her head swam from the torrent of his dominant thoughts melding with hers, making rational thought impossible. When her back sank into something soft, she groaned into his mouth and arched into him.

Zaandr finally tore his lips from hers, panting as he peered down at her. He was bracing his body above hers as she lay under him on the bed. Even though she could still feel his primal need, he held her gaze in question. He knew she'd never given herself to anyone before, and he was hesitating.

Tegan put her hands on both sides of his face as her chest heaved. "I want this. I want you." Then she nibbled the edge of her bottom lip. "I *need* you inside me."

He closed his eyes for a beat and shuddered. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. More, even. His primal hunger was like a drumbeat reverberating through both of them as he pulled wildly at her clothing and growled.

Tegan lifted her arms so he could wrench her shirt off and wiggled her hips when he yanked down her pants, not caring that their desire was so insistent and frenzied. When her clothes were discarded, she sat up and tugged frantically at the waistband of his pants until she jerked it down far enough to release his cock.

She sucked in a breath when she saw it. Thick, long, and with raised rings down the length of it, it jutted proudly from his body. Her mouth went dry at the sheer size of it as she brushed her fingers across the crown and was met with silky slickness.

A tortured groan escaped from Zaandr's lips as his gaze tracked her fingers, then he looked up at her, his gaze hot and needy. He let his gaze travel down her naked body, his grasp on control tenuous as one word dominated his thoughts. *Mine*.

Tegan opened her legs, so he could drag one finger through her slickness as his eyes nearly rolled back in his head. She coiled one hand around the back of his neck, pulling his head down so that her lips teased the tip of his pointed ear. “Then take what’s yours, Dothvek.”

With a roar, he notched his cock at her opening and plunged into her with a single, hard stroke, taking her breath and filling her so that she was finally whole.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ZAANDR CLENCHED his teeth hard as he held himself inside Tegan, her tight heat squeezing his cock so hard he was afraid the pleasure might stop his heart. He caught her mouth with his, kissing her softly and muffling her moans. Her hips twitched as her body stretched to take all of him, but despite the overwhelming urge to move, he held himself until her urgent movements stopped. The pounding need that had beat into him before had softened when he'd entered her, and now he felt the shock of her pain melt into pleasure.

He broke their kiss, touching his forehead to hers. "You are mine."

She made an unintelligible sound that he knew was her agreement. It didn't matter. Their fates were sealed, even if she did decide to fight him or run from him. She never could. Tegan was his. Their minds and bodies were one, and they would forever belong to each other.

Even as she opened her legs wider and arched her hips into him, she didn't fully know what she was giving, but he would take it. He would take all of it as he claimed her as his.

Tegan curled her arms around his back, and her fingers traced the ridges along his spine before she reached his ass and dug her fingers into it.

He hissed out a groan. "You don't want it slow?"

She shook her head, her eyes wild.

"Tell me how you want me to fuck you," he ordered, his voice harder than it had ever been. Whatever shyness he'd had

around females was gone. This wasn't just any female. This one was his.

“Hard,” she whispered, as if the word was forbidden. “I want you to fuck me hard.”

With a single, lightning-fast move, he snatched her arms and pinned them over her head. Her breasts quivered, the dusky nipples tight and pebbled, reminding him that there was so much more of her left to taste and to take. He held her hands down as he thrust hard inside her, savoring her throaty moans and how much pleasure he was giving her.

“Spread your legs wider for me,” he commanded, frissons of euphoria humming through him when she obeyed him without question, his orders arousing her as much as him.

Now that she was open for him, Zaandr tilted his hips with each thrust so the vee of ridges leading from below his stomach to right above his cock could stroke her sweet little bundle of nerves. Tegan's husky cries made him move faster, his thrusts quickening along with the beating of his heart. His shoulder muscles strained as he ground his hips into hers, and she bucked against him. She didn't want to be released from his grip or his cock, but he thrilled at her feigned struggle.

“You can fight all you want,” he growled, “but I'm going to fuck you until you scream my name.”

Tegan arched her back so that he could catch one nipple in his mouth. He sucked on the pebbly flesh and dragged even deeper sounds from her as ripples of pleasure started to slam into her and echo into him.

Zaandr released her nipple and her wrists, slipping his own hands down to clutch her hips. He leaned back and drove her onto him again and again. The sight of her stretched around his cock as she took every last bit of him sent a possessive thrill through Zaandr.

“You are mine, Tegan.” He dragged his ridges across her sensitive bundle of nerves, letting himself feel the electric sensations barreling through her as he held his cock deep.

Tegan grasped his hands as her body splintered, screaming as she spasmed around his cock.

Zaandr let the intensity of her release crash over him before he hammered into her fast and hard, throwing his head back as a blinding release tore through him like a blaze of fire. Heat scorched his skin and seared its way down his spine, as he poured himself into her.

He sank down onto the bed, pulling Tegan with him so that she was splayed across his chest, and he was still inside her as his chest rose and fell. He ran a hand down her back while she hitched in an uneven breath. “You didn’t scream my name like I told you to.”

“Zaandr,” she whispered, his name sluggish as it escaped from her pleasure-addled lips.

He laughed. “Not what I meant, but there is always next time.”

She let out a hum-sigh at this.

“There will be many next times now that you’re mine.” Claiming her had been even better than he’d imagined, and now he couldn’t envision a life where he didn’t spend every night feeling her come around his cock.

“I will need to be able to walk,” she murmured. “You can’t fuck me hard every night.”

His heart leaped that she’d heard his deepest desires, and he curled both arms around her back. “Oh, with a body as perfect as yours, I can fuck you hard all day and night and never grow tired of you. But I don’t mind carrying you.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TEGAN BURIED herself deeper underneath the covers. It was hard to get cozy on a spaceship, but the soft bed and warm blanket were making it easy to slip back to sleep.

Wait. She threw off the covers. She wasn't on the bounty hunting ship. The mattress on that bed wasn't nearly as soft, and there wasn't a crackling fire in her quarters.

She looked across the bed to where the fire still burned. Then she noticed a tray on the low table between the armchairs with a pot and two mugs along with a basket covered in a patterned cloth. Breathing in, she could detect the aroma of fresh bread.

The fire hadn't kept burning since the night before. Someone had entered the room and added more logs to it, and they'd left breakfast.

Tegan gulped and glanced over at the lump in bed beside her. So much for keeping what had happened between her and the Dothvek a secret. One advantage to hooking up in a busy brothel was that she hadn't worried anyone would hear them, but it seemed that was a moot point. She smiled when she saw that Pog had moved from his position curled up in front of the fire to the foot of the bed, sleeping in a ball between their feet.

The delicious, yeasty aroma lured her from the warmth of the bed and even from the temptation of Zaandr naked under the blanket. He might have joked about carrying her around the ship after fucking her so hard she couldn't walk, but she did need to be able to walk today. Rescuing Rixx would take both of them fully functional.

She slipped quietly from the bed, careful not to disturb Zaandr or Pog, and found her clothes strewn across the wooden plank floor. She tugged them on haphazardly, not bothering to fully button the shirt or tuck it into her pants and leaving the long coat hanging over the back of a chair. She also didn't bother with her underwear since she couldn't easily find it.

"Must be somewhere in the bed," she said under her breath as she tiptoed to the tray by the fire. She put a hand to the earthenware pot, almost sighing out loud from the warmth of it. She poured a cup of the hot beverage into one of the squat mugs and let the steam curl up from the dark surface as she unwrapped the cloth covering the basket and plucked a warm roll from inside.

Tegan bit into the brown crust and it crumbled in her mouth. She hadn't been expecting much from brothel food, but it was surprisingly good. The crust was crisp, and the insides were soft and yeasty, with an almost-sweet flavor. It was scads better than any bread she'd ever had at home, where good flour was expensive and butter almost impossible to find.

She polished off one roll, and then took a sip of the drink. Instead of it being watery and flavorless like the herbal teas she'd grown up on, it was rich and sweet with a bit of bite when she swallowed.

Walking to the fire as she sipped, Tegan already felt more hopeful about their situation. Yes, they were technically locked up in an alien whore-house, but she believed the leader of the resistance when she told them that they would find Rixx. She also knew that Zaandr would protect her, no matter what happened. There hadn't been much about her life so far that had been certain, and she liked the unusual sensation of having one thing that was. For her, the Dothvek was as solid as stone.

"How long have you been up?"

His gruff voice from the bed startled her, and she almost choked on her drink. She coughed and gave him an apologetic grin. "I didn't know you were awake." She glanced at the

crumbs scattering the floor. “Did I wake you with my crunching?”

He sat up fully and cocked his head to one side as Pog roused himself from the end of the bed and gave a small shake. “No, but I could sense how much you enjoyed it.”

Her cheeks warmed as she plucked another roll from the basket. That’s right. He could feel what she did and much stronger than she could sense him, although it wasn’t hard to pick up on early morning contentment or the faint buzz of his arousal.

She glanced down at her disheveled clothing and put a hand to her tousled hair. He couldn’t be turned on by her now, could he?

“You should not doubt your appeal,” he said with a grin. The covers had fallen to his waist, exposing his bare chest.

Tegan narrowed her eyes at him and gave him a smirk. “Right back at you.”

Pog jumped from the bed and scampered over to her, running in circles around her feet until she scooped him up. He purred as he sniffed the warm roll in her hand.

Tegan laughed and rolled her eyes. She tore off a small bite and fed it to him. “You’re a bit of a beggar, you know.”

“I didn’t have to beg last night,” Zaandr said, as he searched the floor for his leather pants and boots.

Tegan snorted out a laugh as she gave the Lycithian creature another morsel of bread. “I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to the glurk...I was talking to Pog.”

The Dothvek pulled on his pants, and Tegan averted her eyes as he tucked his significant package down one leg. Why did she suddenly feel shy? She hadn’t been even remotely shy the night before. Thoughts of her lusty behavior made her pulse flutter. Nope. That had not been an issue.

When he was dressed, she set Pog on one of the chairs, poured him a mug of the hot drink and held it out to him. “I’m not sure what it is, but it’s good.”

Zaandr took it and gave her a warm smile before sipping it. His eyes widened as he swallowed. "I didn't expect sweet."

"Do Dothveks not have sweet drinks in the mornings?"

He shook his head. "Sugar is rare on the sands." He took another sip as he snagged a roll from the basket. "But I like this." He took a bite of the bread, and closed his eyes for a beat. "I like this even more."

For a moment, the three of them ate and drank in companionable silence. Tegan couldn't help but smile. If you didn't know that they were locked in the room and that it was inside a brothel, they would have appeared like a happy little family. The thought warmed her heart and made tiny alarm bells go off in the deep recesses of her mind.

"Tegan?" His voice was gentle, but his eyes were probing as he looked at her.

Before she could respond, the door clicked and swung open. Rose stepped inside, flanked by a pair of equally impressive females. She eyed them both, flickered an eyebrow, then braced her hands on her hips. "Ready to go save your friend?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“WE’RE READY.” Zaandr shoved the last bite of the warm bread in his mouth and washed it down with the rich, sweet drink. He was anxious to find Rixx, although he wished he could have asked Tegan about the fear he felt within her. Was she worried about their mission today, or had their night together triggered something?

For him, last night had been the best of his life, and he had no doubt that he’d found his life mate. But humans didn’t have the same tradition of mind mates, or the fates of the goddesses bestowing on you one great love. Tegan had grown up with a different reality, and no examples of happily mated couples.

When she’d fallen asleep in his arms, he’d had no doubt that she’d been happy. He could feel it enveloping him. But they were no longer in bed basking in the afterglow of their coupling, and reality was intruding and melting away their euphoric haze. Already, his mind was focusing on saving Rixx and keeping Tegan safe in the process.

“Like I told you last night, our operatives were searching for your friend.” Rose strode further into the room. “They confirmed that he’s being held by a band of Zevrian mercenaries.”

“Zevrians?” Tegan glanced at Zaandr, and a sick feeling churned in his gut.

“Does your friend have a history with the Zevrians?” Rose asked, swinging her head from one to the other.

“He does not,” Zaandr said, “but we are not the first Dothveks to come to Kurril. My kinsman was in the Den of

Thieves before and encountered some Zevrian mercenaries. He got the better of them.”

Rose nodded solemnly, her brows pinched together. “That would explain it. You are a distinctive species. If you were spotted in the market by one of the Zevrians, they might have mistaken your friend for your kinsman who wronged them.”

Zaandr feared that the sweet bread and drink would rush back up. If the Zevrians thought that it was Rixx who’d killed some of their crew mates and taken their ship, there was no telling what they were doing to his best friend right now. “We should go.”

Rose nodded. “You should wear the cloaks that were given to you yesterday.” She cast a quick glance to where they were folded across the back of a chair, then her gaze caught on Tegan’s panties that had fallen to the floor when he’d pushed back the covers. Her lips twitched, but she said nothing. “Have you eaten enough?”

He nodded as Tegan grabbed her crossbody bag and slung it over one shoulder, then tucked Pog inside it.

“We’re good,” she said, snatching one of the cloaks from the chair and pulling it over her shoulder.

Zaandr did the same, stepping in line as Rose led them from the room. He looked over his shoulder at the cozy room and wished they had more time there, but a part of him also twinged with guilt that they’d been warm and fed while Rixx had been held prisoner by Zevrian mercenaries for something he didn’t do.

It was too much to hope that the Zevrians had realized their mistake and not punished Rixx for Vrax’s actions. No, he was certain Rixx had not had a good night. The faster they reached him, the better.

Rose led them through the brothel, although now there were no girls swinging from hoops and no music blaring. The balconies were free from ladies hanging over and waving to patrons below, and the thick, wooden doors were all shut tight.

The scent of stale liquor and perfume still hung heavy in the air, but it was like an echo of the raucous night before.

When they reached the exit, Rose flipped up her own hood and her nubby, brown cloak covered her almost entirely. The tough women with her did the same. Tegan twisted her head to meet his eyes and smiled at him before she did the same, and they all ducked through the door and into the dank, narrow passageway.

The Den of Thieves in the early morning was a very different place. Like the brothel, it seemed empty and unnervingly quiet. The warm sun barely slatted above the rooftops, the light still not reaching the dark labyrinth of corridors that made up the city. Their footsteps tapped on the worn paving stones as they hurried down one alley and then another.

Zaandr could tell they were skirting the center, but he was sure the resistance leader had a reason. Although Kurril was filled with creatures who didn't wish to be seen, their group might draw a few unwanted glances.

He kept his gaze focused on Tegan. She was both nervous and excited, normal emotions when you were about to stage a rescue. He'd wanted to suggest that she stay behind, but he knew that she would have rejected that and been offended that thought she couldn't take care of herself. He didn't think that, but the fact was, Tegan wasn't a trained fighter. She was a brilliant healer and midwife, but she would not be much use if they ended up fighting hand-to-hand. As much as he cared for Rixx, he would not sacrifice Tegan for him. Not now that she was his and he was linked to her as if their hearts were beating as one. He groaned as a primal need to protect her swelled in his chest. Would his desire to protect her distract him from the mission?

Rose stopped and they all hunched down behind her as she bent low behind a stack of rickety crates. She nodded to a three-story, brown stone building with faded, black shutters closed tight over narrow windows. "That's it. That's where they have your guy."

Zaandr reached out his mind for Rixx. Now that the city was sleeping, it was easier to parse the mess of thoughts. He locked onto his friend's mind, almost gasping when he found him. "He's there, and he's alive."

The resistance fighters stared at him curiously.

"Dothveks can read minds," Tegan said.

"I'm coming for you, Rixx," Zaandr whispered, as much to himself as to his friend.

The word that Rixx sent him made fear ice his flesh.

Hurry.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TEGAN FELT Zaandr stiffen beside her, even though they weren't touching. Fear arrowed through him and into her, and she sucked in a sharp breath. "We need to hurry."

The resistance fighters looked from her to the Dothvek, whose face was set in a grimace, and they nodded grimly.

"We can't just rush in," Rose said.

"Why not?" Zaandr cut his gaze to the building. "The Zevrians are either asleep or passed out, so they won't put up much resistance if we go in fast and hard."

Rose studied him for a beat. "You really can read minds?"

"Not every mind, but I can communicate with my Dothvek brothers through our thoughts. Rixx is on the top floor in a front room with the windows covered."

"I couldn't sweet-talk you into staying on Kurril and fighting with us, could I?" The resistance leader asked, her voice teasing but her intent serious.

Zaandr raised his brows at her in answer.

"Never mind." She waved a hand in the air. "You're here now." She pivoted back to face the building. "We have two more resistance fighters positioned in the back as lookouts, and in case the Zevrians try to run."

Tegan drew in a deep breath. She'd never been involved in a rescue mission before, or any fight, really. She didn't even have a weapon, although she wasn't cocky enough to think she could handle a blade like the curved one that hung from the Dothvek's waist.

“She needs a blaster,” Zaandr said, clearly stealing into her mind and reading her worries.

One of the women slapped a battered weapon in her hand. “You ever shot one before?”

Tegan shook her head, trying to keep her hand from trembling.

“It’s easy,” the woman with wiry, black hair told her. “Point and squeeze.”

Tegan gripped it, and the woman slid her finger off the trigger. “Only put your finger there when you’re ready to shoot.”

Tegan nodded and swallowed hard. She could do this. The Zevrians were all asleep anyway. She could hit a target that wasn’t moving.

“Stay behind me,” Zaandr whispered to her. “I’ll clear the rooms. If I get in trouble, shoot.” He glanced at her blaster. “But tell me to duck first.”

She wasn’t sure if going in behind him was better or worse. The last thing she wanted to do was shoot him.

“You won’t,” he said, locking eyes with her. “I trust you.”

Tegan wasn’t sure if his trust was fully warranted, but she was touched that he said that. It did calm her rattling heartbeat, as Rose waved for them to follow her.

They walked swiftly and silently across the small square fronting the building, but before they reached it, the door opened, and a Zevrian stepped out. Tegan knew it was a Zevrian because he had the same brown skin and bumps over his eyebrows and across his temples that Tori did.

Rose stopped and turned, but Tegan had an idea. She kept walking but made her steps uneven as she threw back her hood.

“Excuse me,” she drawled, intentionally slurring her words.

The Zevrian frowned as he looked up. He looked rough himself, with bloodshot eyes and clothes that looked slept in. “Yeah?”

“I’m looking for the market,” Tegan said, rubbing her eyes as if she’d just woken. “But I think I’m lost.”

The Zevrian snorted out a derisive laugh. “You sure are. The market isn’t near here.”

“No?” Tegan made a big show of turning in a circle as if looking for it. “Well, do you know where it is?”

The Zevrian walked toward her and away from the front door of the building. Now that he was closer, he focused on her, giving her a leering smile as he looked her up and down. “Why do you want to go to the market? Why don’t you stay here with me?”

From the corner of her eye, Tegan saw the two resistance fighters slip into the building behind the Zevrian. Zaandr didn’t go inside. He was sneaking up on the Zevrian.

“Here?” Tegan tried to sound as clueless as possible as she smiled at the Zevrian. Pog wiggled in her bag, but she put a hand on the leather flap to quiet him.

He jerked a thumb behind him. “In there. I can show you a better time than you’ll have at the market. “He put a hand on her arm. “Besides, a pretty thing like you shouldn’t be walking around the Den of Thieves alone.”

“She’s not alone,” Zaandr said from behind.

The Zevrian whirled around, but he wasn’t fast enough. Zaandr plunged his arched blade into the alien’s gut before he could even scream. Holding the blade inside him, Zaandr maneuvered the alien into the alley beside the building and dropped him in the shadows, sliding his blade out and wiping the blood on the Zevrian’s pants. He took the Zevrian’s blaster and tucked it into the back of his pants.

He met Tegan’s eyes, as she heaved in jerky breaths. “Good work.” Then he motioned with his head to the door into which the female resistance fighters had disappeared. “Let’s go.”

She ran behind him as they entered the building. She'd seen people die before, but this was the first time she'd seen one killed up close. She knew why Zaandr had done it, and she knew he'd had no choice. Even so, it sent chills down her spine.

Tegan blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit front room, but she could make out one dead Zevrian slumped on the floor in the corner. Zaandr didn't pause, moving swiftly to the next room, which was empty. Sound of fighting came from the floors above, and Zaandr sped up, vaulting up a narrow staircase three steps at a time.

Tegan ran behind him, but there was no way her legs could keep pace with his significantly longer ones. When she reached the top of the stairs, she glanced around but didn't see him down either of the two hallways that extended to both sides. There were sounds of fighting and blasters firing from all directions now, and she didn't know where to turn.

Making a wild guess, she ran down one of the hallways, peering into the open doors. Dead Zevrians, but no Zaandr. She reached the end and spun around just as a Zevrian stepped in front of her. Blood trickled from his mouth as he swiped it away with the back of his hand. Tegan peered into the open doorway he'd just left, and her stomach lurched when she saw the resistance fighter who'd given her the blaster lying on the floor in a puddle of blood.

The Zevrian fixed his black eyes on her. "Looks like you're next."

Tegan fumbled for her blaster but was knocked to one side by a violent movement. When she righted herself, her leather bag was in tatters, and she was standing beside a hulking, green beast with scales and a long tail.

"Pog?!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ZAANDR HEAVED IN A BREATH. His blade dripped blood as he stood over the Zevrian he'd just dispatched. Rose stood behind the dead alien, her eyes wide and her blaster at her side.

"Thanks for the save," she said. "I didn't hear him sneak up on me."

Zaandr inclined his head to her. "That's two floors cleared. Rixx is on the third."

Rose furrowed her brow. "Where is your girl?"

Zaandr looked over his shoulder. He'd thought Tegan was right behind him when they'd been running top the stairs, but he hadn't checked when he'd raced down the hallway and seen Rose about to be ambushed. The intensity of the fighting had muddled his mind, and all he heard was the rushing of blood in his ears. Until he heard the roar.

"What was that?" Rose asked. "Are they keeping some sort of beast in here?"

Zaandr didn't hesitate. Now he could sense Tegan's fear, but also...surprise?

He retraced his steps, following the sound of the second roar down the opposite corridor, and turning the corner just in time to see a burst of fire engulf a Zevrian warrior. The alien was instantly consumed by the flames and staggered into an open doorway flailing his arms and screeching.

Zaandr assumed a battle stance as he peered through the dissipating smoke, and he prepared himself for whatever beast

had unleashed that fire. But his gaze went to Tegan, who stood calmly next to a green creature who had smoke curling from its mouth.

“It’s Pog!” Tegan yelled. “He transformed and saved my life.”

Zaandr shook his head. Had he heard her correctly? He squinted at the green beast. That was the tiny Lycithian glurkin? He knew that Bexli’s pet was a shape-shifter, but he’d never witnessed him shift.

He carefully approached the beast, holding out a hand. The creature nuzzled him with his scaly head and purred. It *was* Pog.

Rose skidded up behind him. “Whoa. Where did that come from?”

“This is Pog,” Tegan said, rubbing the creature’s back. “He’s a Lycithian shape-shifting pet, and he just saved my ass.”

Rose blinked a few times. “Well done, Pog.” Then she eyed Tegan and Zaandr. “You all continue to surprise me.”

Zaandr was still processing the strange turn of events, but there was no time to dwell on the bizarre fact that tiny, fluffy Pog was now larger than him and covered in scales and spikes. “We still need to find Rixx.”

Rose cast her gaze heavenward. “One more floor to search.”

Zaandr knew his friend was on the top level, so he led the way as they all hurried down the corridor and up the tight staircase. They didn’t encounter any more Zevrians, and Zaandr suspected they’d all rushed to the sound of the fight. He knew better than to count his sand hens before they were hatched, but he hoped that they’d encountered the last of the enemy.

Using Rixx’s thoughts as a guide, he ran past the first few closed doors. His friend was in the room on the end that faced the front of the building, and he didn’t even pause before hurling his foot into the wooden door.

The door flew in, splintering from the force of the blow. Inside, strapped to a chair, was Rixx. His face was bruised, and dried blood caked the side of his head, but he grinned when he saw them.

“It sounded like you were killing everyone in Kurril before coming upstairs,” he said, meeting Zaandr’s gaze. “Did you have all the fun without me?”

Zaandr shook his head, not surprised that his friend was still in good spirits. It would take more than a few mercenaries to subdue Rixx.

Rose and Tegan entered the room behind him, and Rixx’s eyes widened. “I like this rescue party. I didn’t think you had it in you, brother.”

Zaandr rolled his eyes as he hurried forward to untie him. If Rixx tried to seduce his rescuers, he might decide to leave him tied up.

Rixx eyed him with a startled expression. “You wouldn’t.”

Try me, Zaandr told him.

His friend glanced at Tegan and then narrowed his gaze. *What have you been up to while I’ve been tortured?*

Zaandr peered at his friend’s head wound, which was superficial. *Tortured? You’ve looked worse after a turtle on the sands.*

Rixx shook his hands after Zaandr untied him and rubbed his wrists where they’d been rubbed raw. *You’re changing the subject.*

“You okay?” Rose asked, unaware that Zaandr and Rixx were carrying on a conversation without speaking.

“This is Rose,” Zaandr told him. “She’s the leader of an underground resistance in Kurril. She’s the reason we found you.”

Rex’s expression became serious. “I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“Saving you and eliminating some mercenary scum at the same time is all the thanks I need.” Rose smiled at him. “But you’re welcome. Now, I’m going to go back down and see if my fighters are okay.”

She ran from the room, passing Pog and patting his side.

Rixx seemed to finally focus on the green, scaled creature in the room. “What in the—?”

“It’s Pog,” Tegan said before he could finish. “He shifted to save me.”

Rixx rubbed his temple. “At least I’m not hallucinating.”

Zaandr stepped closer to him. “Can you walk, or do you need help?”

“I can walk.” He raised an eyebrow in challenge. “I can race you out of here, if you’d like.”

Tegan sniffed and then frowned. “Do you smell that?”

Smoke. Zaandr’s stomach clenched as he ran to the doorway and peered down the hall. Black smoke was billowing up from the floor below. The Zevrian who’d been on fire must have set other things alight as he’d been running and flailing.

“We can’t get out that way,” Tegan said in a small voice as she stood next to him.

Zaandr pressed his lips together. They were on the third floor, and he’d seen no external stairs anchored to the outside of the building. What other way out was there?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TEGAN COUGHED and put a hand over her mouth and nose. The acrid smoke was rising fast, and she could see orange flames licking the top of the stairwell. There was no getting out through the building anymore.

“Back in the room.” Zaandr pulled her inside and shut the door.

Rixx was already wrenching the boards from the window and tossing them behind him. Zaandr ran to help him, and the two Dothveks cleared the window in a matter of seconds. They tugged at the sill, but it was stuck, so they exchanged a knowing glance before both raising their boots and kicking out the glass.

She ran to the window and peered down. Rose was below them with both of her fighters. The one she’d seen lying on the floor looked badly wounded, but she held a hand to her bloody side as she looked up at the burning building. Smoke now poured from the windows below them, sending a pillar of black into the sky.

“So much for an in-and-out mission,” she muttered from behind her hand. People were already streaming from nearby buildings and gaping up.

“We have to jump,” Rixx said.

“From this high?” Tegan shook her head. “We’ll never survive.” Then she eyed the huge, muscular Dothveks. “Correction, *I’ll* never survive.”

Zaandr's face contorted in pain. "You can jump with me. I'll hold you."

She shook her head. "No way. I know what that means. You'll shield me and then the fall will kill you."

"It's my choice."

She folded her arms over her chest, the ache in her heart palpable. She would not be the reason he didn't survive. She wouldn't be able to live with that.

Her eyes burned, partly from the stinging smoke, and partly because she was furious with herself. This was exactly why she didn't want to get involved with anyone. They always ended up leaving, even if they promised they wouldn't. Even if they didn't want to be taken away.

"As much fun as it is to watch you two bicker like my parents," Rixx said, "we need to focus on escaping. There has to be another way down."

Tegan took a shallow breath and fought the urge to cough. Gray tendrils of smoke were curling long fingers under the door, and it wouldn't be long until they couldn't breathe at all.

Pog let out a stifled roar and gave himself a shake, the scales vanishing as he shrunk and sprouted green, feathery wings.

"Pog!" She threw her arms around his neck. "You're a genius!"

"You can fly us down?" Rixx ruffled the tuft of feathers on the bird's head.

Pog ambled to the window and climbed onto the sill. He craned his neck and motioned for Tegan to get on his back.

She climbed on, wrapping her arms around his neck for balance. She glanced back at Zaandr. "Now you get on behind me."

He shook his head, exchanging another glance with Rixx. "There isn't room. Pog won't be able to hold more than one of us and fly."

Tegan started to slip from his back. “Then he can transform into a bigger bird.”

Rixx shook his head. “Then he won’t fit out of the window. We have to go one at a time.”

Tegan’s heart sank. She knew they were right, and that there was no time to argue. She needed Pog to fly her down so he could return for the others. But that didn’t change the sick feeling roiling in her gut that told her this was not going to turn out well. She was not going to get her happily ever after with Zaandr, because life wasn’t like that.

Zaandr wrapped her in his arms and murmured in her ear. “Yes, we will. We’re going to survive this, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life making sure you get your happily ever after, if you’ll let me.”

Her throat tightened as he pulled back and met her gaze. *I love you, Tegan.*

The shock of his unspoken words made her mouth open. She wanted to say it back to him or think it back to him, but the shock had stunned her into silence.

Zaandr backed up and slapped Pog on the rump. “Go!”

Without hesitation, Pog leapt from the window and unfurled his wings. Tegan was caught between wanting to grasp his neck to stay on him and look back at the window. Her heart pounded as they soared down through the air, circling the square below until they landed.

Tori rushed up to her, with Vrax close on her heels. “What the fuck? We’ve been searching for you everywhere!”

Tegan slid off Pog’s back, her legs so shaky they almost buckled when she touched the ground. She met the bird’s eyes. “Go get Zaandr and Rixx.”

Pog took off into the air again and soared to the window, which was now emitting white smoke.

“Zaandr? Rixx?” Vrax followed the bird’s flight. “They’re inside the burning building?”

Rose came up to them and hooked an arm under Tegan's, seeming to know that she was about to collapse. "Rixx was being held by Zevrian mercenaries. We rescued him."

Tori's brown skin paled a few shades. "Zevrians?"

Rose flicked a quick glance over Tori, no doubt registering that she was also Zevrian. "They're all dead."

"Good." Tori turned her attention back to the building as Vrax muttered something in Dothvek.

Tegan's pulse quickened when she spotted Pog in the window with a Dothvek on his back, although she couldn't tell through the smoke which one. As much as she didn't wish Rixx harm, she hoped with all her heart that it was Zaandr on Pog's back.

Pog leapt from the window, but just as he did, the building behind him gave a shudder and collapsed. Smoke and dust rushed up in a billowing cloud as Tegan screamed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TEGAN SANK to her knees as the building collapsed. A sob escaped her lips as she fought not to let despair consume her, but she couldn't sense Zaandr anymore. She'd never been able to read him like he could her, but she'd enjoyed the faint hum of his emotions mingling with hers. Now, she couldn't feel anything.

"Vrax!" Tori called after the Dothvek as he ran toward the remains of the building, but he didn't slow. She growled, scowling at her mate's back. "Stubborn Dothvek." Then she raced in after him, her wild curls flying behind her like a mane.

"This is my fault," Tegan said, as Rose crouched with her on the ground. "I cursed him."

"Are you a witch?" Rose asked.

Tegan shook her head. "He was fine before he met me. I was fine before I met him. But this is what happens when you care too much." She waved a hand at the smoldering rubble. "If you care about someone too much, they leave. They run away, or they die, but it never ends up well. It's a curse."

Rose gave a sad shake of her head. "Loving someone isn't a curse, and none of this is your fault."

Tegan's scratchy throat constricted. "I didn't even tell him...before I left him in that burning house. I couldn't tell him."

Rose put an arm around her shoulders. "I don't think you needed to. Anyone with eyes could see how crazy you were

for him.”

Rose’s words didn’t make Tegan didn’t feel any better. She should have told Zaandr, but she’d been scared of exactly what had happened.

More Dothveks appeared, running toward the smoking remains of the building, along with residents of Kurril, who appeared with buckets of water to douse the flames still burning. Even the wounded resistance fighter was pawing through the rubble with her one uninjured arm.

Tegan pushed herself to her feet. She couldn’t fall apart. Not when Zaandr or Rixx were in there somewhere. She gave Rose a hug and thanked her as Cat rushed up to her, and her two Dothvek mates kept running toward the wreckage.

“We heard,” she said, as she caught her breath, motioning to her head. “Well, the Dothveks heard like they do.”

“They felt us all the way from the ship?”

Cat shook her head. “Not felt. They got a call for help—from Zaandr.”

Tegan’s heart stuttered in her chest. Zaandr had sent a mental message to his Dothvek brothers for help? “When?”

“I don’t know. As long ago as it takes to run full-out from the shipyard. All the guys got it and took off.”

Tegan hadn’t sensed any call for help, but she wasn’t Dothvek. Plus, she’d been in a state of panic and distress. She didn’t know how Dothvek mind reading worked, but she was sure her near hysteria didn’t make it easier.

Then she spotted a flash of green. She waved her hands in front of her to dissipate the smoke as she walked toward the green, expecting to see a bird with lots of feathers. Instead, there was a green creature with a long trunk spurting water at the fire.

“Pog!” She rushed to him, her gaze scouring the area surrounding him. “Where’s Zaandr or Rixx? Where’s the Dothvek who was on your back?”

“That’s Pog?” Cat asked, blinking rapidly. “Are you sure?”

Pog swung his trunk and blasted water onto a limp, gold-skinned body a few metrons away.

Tegan shrieked as the figure jerked up and coughed. She ran to Zaandr and threw her arms around him. “You’re alive!”

“And wet.” Zaandr spit out a mouthful of water as he pushed himself up to sitting “Why am I wet?”

Tegan laughed. “Pog transformed into some kind of creature with a trunk, and he’s dousing the fire with water.”

“We really should get a few more Pogs.”

“I thought you were still inside the building.” Tegan’s voice cracked as she ran her hands over his damp skin, as if to make sure he was real. “We didn’t see if Pog made it out, or who was on his back.”

“I was on his back.” Zaandr’s eyes closed for a beat. “Rixx insisted I go first. He said you had something you needed to tell me when I got down.”

Tegan’s vision blurred. “He was right. I should have told you before I left with Pog, but I was scared and stupid.”

He brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. “You are far from stupid, but I understand why you are scared.”

She pressed a hand to his chest. “I’m not scared anymore. I know you’d never willingly leave me. I don’t want to lose you because I’m afraid.”

He pinned her with an intense gaze. “Then don’t.”

She exhaled a shaky breath. “I won’t.”

“You’re right that I would never leave you.” He put his hand on top of hers and squeezed. “I promise.”

Tegan nodded, a tear snaking down one cheek. “I believe you.” She put a hand to his cheek. “I love you.”

I know. He captured her mouth in a soft kiss that deepened as he tangled a hand in her hair.

When he pulled back, she smiled. “I have to confess something.”

Zaandr cocked his head to one side.

“I also love Pog.”

The Dothvek gave her a crooked grin. “Don’t we all?”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ONCE TEGAN WAS CONVINCED he was okay and had left him to talk to Rose, Zaandr made his way to where Vrax was searching the smoldering rubble. Pog's dousing of the flames with water had extinguished the fire, but it had left everything waterlogged. Part of the back walls stood, creating a blackened shell, and the roof had partially caved in, but still hung over part of the debris.

Vrax nudged a charred body with one foot. "This looks like a Zevrian."

Zaandr bent over and eyed the body, recognizing the clothing and leather armor that one of the aliens had worn. He grunted. "I think I killed him."

His stomach twisted as he looked at the burned corpse. Was Rixx's scorched body under the rubble? He couldn't sense him, but that could mean that he was unconscious. Zaandr refused to believe that his best friend was dead until they found evidence, and so far, there was none.

"He might have escaped." Zaandr spotted the twin warriors digging in the wreckage along with K'alvek, and he sensed their frustration along with the bits of hope they clung to.

Vrax nodded absently. "Why can't we feel him?"

Zaandr frowned. He had no answer for that. He should be able to sense his friend. Of all the Dothvek, he'd always been most tightly bonded to Rixx. If he couldn't sense his emotions or thoughts, that meant he was unconscious. He gulped. Or dead.

He shook his head, refusing to believe it. Rixx was a survivor.

Vrax cut a glance to him. “You going to tell me the whole story and how all this happened?”

Zaandr considered everything that had taken place in the pleasure house run by the underground resistance, his mind revisiting his night with Tegan.

Vrax head up his hands. “Never mind. Even though we’re related, here are some things I don’t need to know.”

Zaandr appreciated that his kinsman didn’t insist on a full explanation, although he knew all the Dothveks had picked up on his sudden connection to Tegan. Since they’d all taken mates who weren’t from their home world, they understood better than most what it was like to fall under the spell of humans—or in Vrax’s case, a Zevrian.

“I owe you and Tegan an apology.” Vrax sighed deeply. “And most of all, Rixx. The only reason any of this happened was because the Zevrians were still bitter over how things ended when Tori and I were on Kurril. It didn’t occur to me that enough of them would have remained here, or that they’d take Rixx thinking he was me.”

Zaandr patted the Dothvek’s shoulder. “The only ones who deserve blame for this are the Zevrians.”

Vrax’s guilt and regret pulsed off him in waves. “I should have been the one taken and the one...” His voice trailed off as he surveyed the rubble.

“He is not dead,” Zaandr said with more force than he felt.

He couldn’t bear to think that his friend had sacrificed himself so that Zaandr could survive and be with Tegan. When they’d been standing together in the window and smoke had been making it hard to speak, Rixx had refused to go first, even though he was the one who’d been held captive and was injured. His friend had given him a hard, fast hug and told him that he needed to go first.

“You have someone waiting for you, Zaandr, and unless I’ve lost my touch at reading females, she has something she

wants to tell you.” When Zaandr had hesitated, his friend had given him a shove. “If you don’t get on the back of this green chicken, I’m going to push you out the window myself.”

Zaandr’s throat had been tight as he’d gotten on Pog’s back, and the goodbye between them had felt more final than he wanted it to feel.

But Rixx had slapped Pog on the rump and forced himself to smile through the coughing. *I’m right behind you, brother.*

Then Pog had leapt into the air, unfurled his wings, and the building had emitted a deafening roar behind them moments before it collapsed.

“It is not your fault either.” Vrax’s voice snapped him back to the present, and Zaandr realized that the Dothvek had been sensing his thoughts.

“He should be here. We came here to rescue *him*.”

A sense of dread washed over him, and Vrax’s face contorted as he obviously felt the same thing. They both looked over to where Dev and Trek were standing over something, their expressions somber. Zaandr stopped breathing as grief sunk its sharp talons into his heart.

Rixx.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TEGAN LOOKED up when Zaandr entered their quarters. “Any luck?”

Since returning to the ship, she and the Dothvek had made their bonding public, and had been given a large room to share. She’d thought it would be strange to suddenly share quarters with a guy—and one so large—but they’d adjusted to living together without much fuss. Of course, Zaandr had spent almost every waking moment searching for his friend.

The Dothvek shook his head, kicked off his boots, and flopped onto their bed. “We pawed through every bit of the rubble, and I’m not convinced any of the bodies are Rixx. No matter what the others think.”

She stood from the desk where she’d been making notes about the various pregnant females on board and updating her estimates on their due dates. “And you still can’t sense him?”

Zaandr scowled and didn’t answer.

“There are lots of reasons you might not be picking up on his thoughts,” Tegan said, even though she didn’t fully believe what she was saying. “The Den of Thieves isn’t exactly quiet. Between the crowds and the criminals, the emotions must be a mess to sort through.”

“They are,” Zaandr admitted, “but I should have picked up something by now.”

Tegan sat next to him on the edge of the bed and rested a hand on his leg. “You and the others have done everything possible to find him.”

Zaandr scraped a hand through his long hair. “It’s like he vanished into thin air.”

From what Tegan had heard, if there was any place you could disappear without a trace, it was Kurril, although usually those who disappeared were trying not to be found. Rixx had no reason to hide from his fellow Dothveks.

She believed Zaandr when he said that the bodies they’d found weren’t his friend, even though some had been burned so badly it was impossible to discern any features. If he believed Rixx was alive, then so did she. Still, she knew his faith in finding his friend was flagging.

“But you’ll keep looking, right?”

A low sound rumbled from Zaandr’s throat. “We can’t. K’alvek heard the guards at the shipyard gate say that a Zevrian fleet is approaching. If they’re looking for the ones who are responsible for the death of their people, we can’t be anywhere near here when they arrive.”

As if on cue, the ship’s engines rumbled to life.

“I have some good news,” Tegan said, changing the subject without much grace and hoping to distract Zaandr.

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“You know when you said we needed more Pogs?” She scooped up Pog from where the Lycithian pet had been sleeping on the bed. “Your wish is about to come true. Pog is pregnant!”

Zaandr stared at her. “Pog is a he.”

She shook her head. “That’s what I thought, but Bexli told me that Lycithian glurkins are actually neither male nor female, and they reproduce asexually. The other day I felt some lumps in Pog’s belly and did a sonogram. Our little shape-shifting friend is expecting three babies.”

Zaandr slid his gaze to the creature, who was giggling in Tegan’s arms. “Three? I hope they aren’t going to be staying here.” Then he grinned. “Does Tori know?”

It was common knowledge that the Zevrian made a big show about being annoyed by Pog.

Tegan grinned. “She only pretends not to like Pog. Maybe we can convince her to adopt one of the poglings.”

Zaandr grinned and ruffled Pog’s fur. “After how he, I mean they, saved us, I can’t say I’m sorry that we’ll have more.” He looped an arm around Tegan. “It isn’t as exciting as expecting a baby of our own, but I’ll take any good news.”

Tegan’s stomach fluttered. “I don’t mind the idea of being a mother myself anymore, but I’m guessing it will be a while until we have a baby.”

Zaandr pulled her onto his lap so that she was straddling him. “I would say that’s too bad, but this just gives us an excuse to keep trying.”

She laughed and swatted at him, another flutter dancing in her stomach. “What did I tell you about needing to walk?”

He pulled her down so he could nuzzle her neck. “And what did I say about being willing to carry you everywhere?”

Before she could tell him that he was being ridiculous, she sensed something that made her breath hitch in her throat. “What was that?”

“Hmmm?” Zaandr murmured into her throat.

“I felt something.” Tegan’s heart raced. “A pulse of emotion that wasn’t yours.”

Zaandr pulled back and frowned. “Another Dothvek?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s coming from...inside me.”

Zaandr glanced down at her belly, his jaw dropping. “I thought you said...”

“I guess I was wrong.” Tears choked Tegan’s voice as the certainty hit her. She was carrying Zaandr’s baby. “I hope you’re ready to be a dad.”

“More ready than you can imagine,” he husked, before capturing her mouth in a kiss that made her stomach do another happy flip.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RIXX GROANED AS HE WOKE. His head throbbed, and his side twinged as he attempted to raise a hand to his temple. Breathing in, he was startled not to be inhaling acrid smoke. His last memory had been of breathing in thick smoke that seared his lungs as he stood on the windowsill. Zaandr had left on Pog's back. He'd felt the building rumble beneath his feet. He'd made the split-second decision to leap from the window. Then everything behind him had exploded, and his world had gone black.

He gingerly opened his eyes, expecting to see blackened rubble overhead. Instead, there were the pristine, wooden beams of a low ceiling. Not burned and not collapsed. There was no hint of a fire, and the only aroma was that of something savory. His stomach rumbled in response.

Had he imagined the fire, and Zaandr rescuing him with Tegan and a very different looking Pog? Had that been some sort of fever dream? Was he still being held by the Zevrians who enjoyed coming in every so often and beating him? Had he passed out from the pain? Was he dreaming this?

If so, he much preferred this dream to the one in which he feared the heat of the nearing flames. In this dream, there was a soft voice humming, and a warm blanket covering him. Rixx sighed deeply, sinking further into the dream, and hoping it would never end.

“You shouldn't move too much. We don't want your wounds to open up again.”

His eyes opened as the face of a female came into view. Her dark hair was braided and wrapped in a bun on top of her head. He didn't recognize her or understand why he would insert a mystery human in his imaginings. Then he attempted to sit up and pain shot through him. He collapsed back on the bed with a gasp. This was no dream.

"You aren't a very good listener, are you?" The woman made clucking sounds of disapproval as she touched her hands gently to his side. "If you try to move too much, you'll open your wound, and you've already lost too much blood."

His head swam as the pain faded. "Who are you?"

The woman smiled at him. "My name is Myrria." Then she tilted her head. "I could ask you the same thing, since I found you slumped in my doorway and covered in soot."

He frowned as he tried to remember this. He had no memory of anything beyond leaping from the building in which he'd been held captive. "You live in the Den of Thieves?"

She nodded, her expression darkening for a beat. "My husband brought us here. He said it was a place for people who were blessed with luck."

Rixx scanned the small room and peered through the open archway into a larger, common room. He saw no one else.

As if sensing his confusion, the woman pursed her lips. "I was not blessed by luck. My husband joined the crew of a ship, and he never returned."

"He left you alone?" This was unthinkable to him. Why would a male leave his mate and take a dangerous voyage on a spaceship?

"Not all alone. I have a daughter." She flicked her gaze to a small head peeking around the corner of the archway.

Rixx met her gaze. "And you took me in? A single woman and her child?"

Myrria lifted her chin. "If you're asking if I was afraid of you, no. You were so wounded when I found you, my daughter

could have fought you and won.”

Rixx laughed, but the pain stopped him. “Then I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“Kurril is not a kind place to strangers or the weak.” She shook her head. “I know that too well. If I hadn’t brought you in, they would have stripped your body for organs, or thrown you into the fighting pits as bait. Someone was kind to me here. I am paying that kindness forward.”

“You will be well rewarded when I am returned to my ship.” Rixx’s head was clearing now. “I came here with a crew of Dothveks and bounty hunters.”

A glimmer of recognition sparkled in her eyes. “I don’t venture out much, but I did hear of some gold-skinned aliens who arrived here.” Then her face fell. “But their ship departed.”

“Departed? They left?” He reached out his mind and found no trace of Dothvek thought.

She nodded. “Many days ago.”

“Days?” His voice cracked. How long had he been unconscious? “I have to get word to them that I’m alive.”

“Not if you want to remain alive.” She dropped her voice and glanced at the shuttered window, as if someone was listening in to their conversation. “As soon as the bounty hunter ship left, a fleet of Zevrians arrived, and they’ve been searching the city for any clues as to where it went.”

Rixx closed his eyes. He was stranded on Kurril, with a fleet of Zevrians and no way to escape. When he’d left his home world looking for adventure, this had *not* been what he’d had in mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tana Stone is a USA Today bestselling sci-fi romance author who loves sexy aliens and independent heroines. Her favorite superhero is Thor (with Aquaman a very close second because, well, Jason Momoa), her favorite dessert is key lime pie (okay, fine, all pie), and she loves Star Wars and Star Trek equally. She was a devoted watcher of Battlestar Galactica and still laments the loss of Firefly. She has one husband, two teenagers, two neurotic cats, and two excitable dogs. She lives in the southeast part of the United States where everything but the pollen moves slow. She sometimes wishes she could teleport to a holographic space station like the one in her tribute brides series (sign her up for a fantasy suite now) or escape to a desert oasis with sand planet barbarians!

ALSO BY TANA STONE

See all of Tana's books at <http://www.tanastone.com>

TILLI'S SECOND CHANCE

THE KIMURA SISTERS
BY S.J. PAJONAS

DESCRIPTION

A tarnished reputation. A high-stakes competition. A chance to reclaim a shattered dream...

Tilli Kimura had her dreams of becoming a spaceship designer dashed when she was falsely accused of cheating on the entrance exam for the Interstellar Agency. Now, eight years later, she's given a second chance to prove her worth in a cutthroat spaceship design contest. With her loyal cat, Ivan, by her side and her former classmate, Kaito Nakamura, as her mentor, Tilli dives into the challenge, determined to finally have the future she's been reaching for.

Kaito can't believe his luck when he's paired with Tilli for the spaceship design contest. Back in school, he was always drawn to her intellect and resilience, and then she was gone, expelled because of a stupid rumor. Finally, they're both getting their second chance. And watching her work across the table, sketching and inventing, he's falling for her fast. She might be falling for him, too...

But when history repeats itself, and Tilli is let down once more, her dreams and newfound love are put to the test. With Kaito's steadfast support, Tilli must gather her courage to fight for her future once more.

Can Tilli reclaim her dreams, prove her innocence, and embrace the love she's found with Kaito? Or will her second chance slip through her fingers?

CHAPTER ONE

THE NEON LIGHTS of Izakaya Tanaka flash in sync with the excited butterflies fluttering in my stomach. The scent of grilled yakitori wafts through the open door, inviting me in, as if it's personally assuring me that everything will be just fine. Of course, dinner with my family is always fine, but it's what comes after that has me nervous.

Ivan, my paired cat, trots along beside me. "Don't forget some fish for me."

"I never forget." I open the door and let him in with me.

"You've forgotten before. When your head is in your work, you forget lots of things." His gorgeous yellow eyes peer up at me, and I sigh.

"Sorry. I'll try harder."

"Hey, Tilli!"

My siblings are already at our table when I arrive, tucked into the back corner of the restaurant as usual. Ean spots me first, waving with his typical subdued enthusiasm.

Myra turns at his greeting, her face lighting up in a broad smile. She rises to meet me, enveloping me in a warm hug. Her curly hair tickles my cheek, a familiar sensation from years of sisterly affection.

Suri is only a step behind, never one to be left out. She squeezes me tight, nearly cutting off circulation in her exuberance. "Took you long enough! We were about to send out a search party." Her eyes gleam with humor beneath tousled bangs, always the first to tease in her breezy way.

I laugh, settling into the empty chair beside Ean as my sisters resume their seats. “Ha, ha. You know I’ve been studying night and day. I just pulled myself away from the books.” My retort elicits chuckles from around the table, another part of the easy rhythm we’ve built over years of weekly dinners out together.

Suri leans forward. “I saw the results of the first two tests, and I thought, hell, that’s my baby sister?” She reaches out to pinch my cheek, but I swat her hand away with an exaggerated frown. Secretly, though, I’m grateful for the lighthearted banter. It’s a welcome distraction from the mounting pressure of the final design competition.

“We ordered up some appetizers,” Myra says, gesturing to the menu. “Bryan is manning the kitchen tonight in my place, so be sure to order chicken.”

I peruse the menu while looking around the place. We come here a lot because Myra works here, and it’s always the same. The place is lit up like a beacon in the night with its neon signs in Japanese script. The bar winds along the far wall like a river of gold, glittering as two bartenders sling drinks to waiting customers. Maneki-neko cats line the walls, smiling down on everyone, and voices surge and ebb nearby like waves. I love this place. This has to be the best restaurant in all of Yamato... Hell, the whole continent. And Orihimé only has the one continent, so of course, that means something.

Mmmm. The aromas of sizzling meats and savory sauces make my stomach rumble, and my head light.

“Thanks, guys. I’m starving, of course.” I try to keep my voice easy despite the knot of anxiety tightening in my chest. “I forgot to have a snack this afternoon.”

Ean nods approvingly at the specials listed on today’s menu. “The teriyaki-glazed tofu skewers sound good,” he suggests, and we agree to order a few plates for the table.

“I need to get grilled mackerel for Mister Persnickety under the table.”

“I heard that,” Ivan says, rubbing against my leg. He curls up with Finn, Suri’s paired golden retriever. Seeing his dark gray fur mixed with Finn’s golden yellow fur makes my heart squish.

Ean sits back with his drink. “Soooo, you passed the first two tests with flying colors, eh?” His eyes meet mine with genuine interest, and I appreciate that he’s checking up on me. He’s been swamped with work, so it’s not like he has a ton of time for me.

“Yeah, thanks. Things are going okay so far.” I have been studying for the Interstellar Agency entrance exams for the last two years, so it’s all I’ve talked about, lived for, breathed for months on end. I sip the saké that lands on the table. “I’m terrified of the next step, but yeah.”

Myra chuckles. “You made it this far. How bad can it be?” she asks, sipping her saké. She’s trying to keep the conversation light, but the concern in her voice is impossible to miss.

“How bad can it be? How bad can it be?” My voice climbs. “It’s the step where the most people fail out.” My voice cracks and my neck sweats. “Are you trying to jinx me?”

Ean raises an eyebrow, his playful smile softening the blow of his words. “Okay, Till. Just...” He mimics a deep breath, in and out, in and out. “You’re gonna be fine. You need to believe in yourself. I swear, none of my sisters believe in themselves.”

I breathe and concentrate on slowing my heartbeat. He’s right. Whatever this competition is, I’ll tackle it like I do every other problem.

Work hard. Power through. Believe in my abilities. Don’t let anything stand in my way.

I close my eyes and think happy thoughts. Kittens, rainbows, a walk on the beach... There. Calm restored.

“I’m just worried about the pressure. Everyone expects me to rock this thing, and I don’t want to let them down.”

Suri reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. “We’re rooting for you, no matter what happens. You’re gonna be great.” She clears her throat as a server delivers a few appetizers.

“Thanks, Suri.” I smile, feeling a little more at ease.

Mmmm. Crispy tempura, lightly battered and fried vegetables and seafood, served with a dipping sauce. The vibrant colors of pickled vegetables contrast with the creamy tones of steamed edamame, bowls of rice, and gyoza.

We each grab chopsticks from the cup on the table and dig in.

“If you want, we can always talk about the competition I did to get into the I.A.,” Suri says with a smile. But Ean and Myra groan.

“No,” Myra protests, lifting her arms to make a giant X. “I refuse to listen to that story again.”

“Just as I thought. But,” Suri begins, a knowing smile on her face, “remember when I had to give that big presentation to everyone at Quality Control last year? I was a wreck.”

Suri was promoted last year at work, and she’s been busy ever since. The Interstellar Agency has built a lot of space ships in our quest to find another planet to colonize. In three more generations, we’ll run out of room here on our watery world with only one continent.

“Didn’t you trip over your own feet and almost fall off the stage?” Ean asks with a chuckle.

“Hey!” Suri feigns indignation. “I caught myself just in time, thank you very much. The point is,” she continues, turning back to me, “I got through it by staying focused and trusting myself. I knew my stuff, and even though I was nervous, I kept going. I looked out into the audience and I saw my friends there to show support. Everything was fine.”

“Yes, but I have no friends.”

Ean glances up from his rice bowl. “That’s your own fault, and you know it.”

Anyone else would think his voice was harsh, but it's not.

He softens a bit. "You are literally the sweetest of the Kimura children —"

"Except maybe Winta," Suri butts in.

"Maybe Demi," Myra offers.

"Definitely not Rosa," Suri says, and we all nod.

"Anyway," Ean continues, shooting evil looks at us, "you need to go easier on people. You do not need to burn bridges for every small infraction. Learn to forgive people. You forgive us all the time."

"You're family," I say, picking up my rice bowl.

"That's not an excuse. Stop firing your friends every time they don't do something perfect."

I sigh and stuff rice in my mouth so I don't argue with him.

"Exactly." Myra nods her agreement. "We're always here for you, no matter what, but you need friends, too."

I know I should attempt to open up more, let new people in. Everyone is always telling me how important it is to forge connections, build a strong network of friends and peers. But each time I've tried, it seems to end badly. Either they prove untrustworthy and stab me in the back, or I get bored and impatient with their flaws and imperfections, pushing them away without a second thought.

My track record with relationships is spotty at best. I don't have the patience for casual friendships and idle chit chat. If I'm going to invest my time and energy in someone, I expect a genuine connection and loyalty in return. Is that really so much to ask? Yet time and again people disappoint me, lacking the depth or reliability I crave.

Myra looks down and around her feet.

"Has anyone seen Mochi?" she asks.

I look under the table at Finn and Ivan, still snoozing away and awaiting their treats.

“He wasn’t here when I arrived,” I say, looking over my shoulder.

Myra sighs. “Ah, well, he rarely sticks around in restaurants unless we’re with Nosuké.”

Mochi is Myra’s paired skunk. Skunks have a poor reputation, but he’s a great little creature. Ean’s pair, a crow named Ume, must be out and about too.

As we enjoy our meal, I find myself lost in thought, thinking about the journey ahead. Yes, the competition will be challenging, no doubt about it. But I believe I’m ready for whatever they throw at me.

I hope I’m ready.

I better be ready.

I need some more saké. Ean pours me a cup, and I drink it all in one go. Ah, that’s better.

I turn my head to stare out the front window. Yamato at night is comforting, illuminated by the warm glow of paper lanterns, casting a cozy light across the cobblestone streets. The windows of nearby restaurants and shops are alight with activity, people gathered around tables to share meals and conversation.

More food arrives at the table, including some chicken for Finn and the mackerel for Ivan. He leaps into my lap, and I feed him while I try not to think about the upcoming competition.

But it’s always in the back of my head.

“Hey, you know who could use some cheering up?” Ean asks suddenly, following my gaze out the window. “Dad.”

“Really?” Well, he has been in a mood lately, so I guess I’m not surprised. “Why?”

“Ever since he retired from being mayor, he’s just been... bored,” Ean explains, concern etched in his features. “It’s like he doesn’t know what to do with himself anymore.”

“The man needs a hobby,” Suri chimes in, popping a piece of tempura into her mouth. “And preferably one that doesn’t involve him harping on his children to ‘do better.’” She rolls her eyes. “As if we aren’t all overachievers.”

“What kind of hobby?” I ask, picking up my chopsticks and fiddling with them. I try to think of something Dad might enjoy, but nothing comes to mind.

“Maybe you could help him find something he’s passionate about,” Suri suggests, her eyes lighting up. “You’re his favorite child, after all.”

I sigh. “That’s not true.”

“It is so true,” all three say at once. The couple sitting at the next table looks at us. I mouth “sorry” at them.

“Look, I’ve got a lot going on right now.” I lift my hands in surrender. “I’m not the best person for the job.”

“True,” Ean concedes, “but you’ve always had a knack for uncovering hidden talents. Remember when you helped me discover my love for exercise? Maybe you can do the same for Dad.”

“Besides,” Myra adds, reaching over to steal a piece of my tofu, “you know he won’t listen to any of us or Mom. It’ll come best from you.”

I chew on my bottom lip, considering their words. Helping Dad find his passion again is a tall order. He’s been in a funk for months.

“All right,” I say with a sigh, knowing I should just give in. It’ll be easier than fighting them. “Fine. I’ll help Dad find a new hobby.”

“That’s the spirit.” Suri forms a fist and raises it. “And now, we shall move on to beer, yeah?”

I sigh. Tomorrow I had planned to study all morning before the competition briefing in the afternoon. But now it looks like I’ll be waking up hungover, trying to study through the haze, and convincing Dad he needs a new hobby.

Why do I always get stuck with the jobs no one else wants to do?

Myra knocks her knee against mine under the table.

“You’ll be fine,” she whispers. “I couldn’t even get past the first exam, and you’re well on your way to passing the biggest test of them all. Don’t let your nerves get to you. You are so smart and capable. You’re gonna kill it.” She squeezes my knee.

My body warms with love for her, for Ean and Suri, too. They are my rocks, my champions. But if I fuck up this second chance of getting into the I.A., I’m going to feel like I’ve let them down.

I cannot screw this up.

CHAPTER TWO

I SIT at my usual table in Café Mela, hunched over a thick tome on interstellar propulsion, surrounded by books and sketch pads. All morning I've been lost in the intricate designs of state-of-the-art spaceship engines and enjoying every second of it. It's like being in a cozy cocoon made of pencils and dreams.

"Hey, Tilli." Karina approaches my table with a fresh cup of coffee, her warm smile lighting up her face. "Thought you could use a refill."

"Thanks" I glance down at my now-empty cup, realizing how much time must have passed. I futz around, trying to close up books and make room. "You know me so well."

"You showed up hungover while your brother was still in bed," she says, sliding the fresh cup onto the table and taking the old one. "I figured you could use it." She hands off the empty cup to her nephew, who is bussing tables.

"I'm not that hungover, thankfully. I stopped drinking way before anyone else. Actually, why don't you take a seat? I could use a break for a minute." I gesture to the chair across from me and she smiles.

"Sure thing." She pulls out the chair and sits down. I take a sip, savoring the rich taste and the warmth spreading through me. She makes the best coffee in the neighborhood. Ean is lucky to be dating her. "So, what're you working on today? Aren't you heading to the I.A. soon to get the briefing on the big contest?" she asks, looking around at the cluttered table.

She picks up a book and glances at the spine before setting it down.

“Yeah, I’m going to leave here in about an hour.” My stomach twists with nerves, but if I ignore it, if I distract myself, maybe I can make it to the meeting without puking. “Just brushing up on some core concepts. You wouldn’t believe how many things change every year. Gotta keep up with the trends.”

Karina chuckles. “I can only imagine, especially given how fast technology is evolving these days. Not that I know anything about spaceship design.”

I sigh and rub the back of my neck. “Sometimes it feels like I’m chasing after a comet that keeps picking up speed.”

“You must be exhausted. I’m sure the coffee will set you right.”

I pick it up and sip again. “Of course. It’s delicious, as always.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a moment, enjoying the cozy ambiance of the café. The soft hum of conversations fills the air, punctuated by the occasional tinkling of cups and saucers.

“Old school, huh?” She gestures towards my pens and papers strewn about the table. “I mean, with all the technology available, you could have your notes neatly organized and accessible at any time on a tablet.”

“True, but there’s something about putting pen to paper that makes it feel more real, you know?” I twirl my pen between my fingers. “Plus, I think better when I scribble things down. My brain is one of those visual learners.” I tap on my temple.

“Fair enough.” Karina chuckles, and her curls bounce around her head. This reminds me I’m way overdue for a haircut. All I ever do is pull it back in a ponytail now. “Do you think you’re ready for the last stage of the entrance exams?”

The design contest is only a day away. After years of studying, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. Yet doubts continue their

familiar refrain, a cacophony of voices insisting I'll never measure up to this challenge, that my best will never be good enough.

I stare into my coffee, watching wisps of steam curl upward as my thoughts chase in endless circles. Karina is blessedly silent as I work through the jumble in my head yet again.

I sigh, running a hand over my hair and ponytail before propping my chin on it. "I'm not quite ready yet for this next stage, but I also can't put it off forever." The words come out weary and tired; I barely sleep anymore.

You'll never be ready, Tilli. The future looms, shrouded in an uncertainty you can't hope to navigate.

You're never going to be good enough. Your ideas are foolish fantasies, doomed to fail like all the rest.

Shut up, brain.

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with taking your time," Karina reassures me, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. "You're unbelievably talented. Just remember that no one expects you to be perfect. It's okay to make mistakes and learn from them."

"Thanks. It's just that... this last contest is a huge deal, and I don't want to blow my shot."

"You can't let fear hold you back. You're capable of so much more than you give yourself credit for. If I had let fear rule me, your brother and I wouldn't be together." She raises her eyebrows at me. Yeah, she made the first move. I respect that, for sure.

I take a sip of the warm coffee and let out a slow, contented sigh. "Well, it's not like I haven't tried to get into the Interstellar Agency before."

"Really?" she asks, genuinely curious. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah." I chuckle and rub the back of my neck. Wow, I'm tired. I hope this coffee does the trick. "But, um, let's just say

it didn't go as planned.”

“What happened?” Karina asks, sitting forward. “Ean mentioned you tried once but didn't elaborate.”

I brace myself for the trip down memory lane. I've put a lot of time between me and what happened, but that doesn't make it any easier to talk about.

Why did I bring it up? No clue.

“So, a few years back, almost eight now, I took the entrance exam. Studied for months, like a total nerd. But... they accused me of cheating.”

“Cheating? You?” Karina looks shocked, which is comforting. “I don't believe it.”

“Neither did I,” I reply, bitterness creeping into my voice despite my attempts to keep things light. “But they disqualified me, anyway. Said there was ‘irrefutable evidence’ or some bullshit like that.” I make air quotes and roll my eyes, hoping my sarcasm can disguise the hurt that has plagued me for almost a decade.

“Ugh, that's awful,” Karina says, her eyes widening. “What did you do?”

I shrug. “Not much. First, I stayed in my room at home for almost a year before Mom got sick of me moping around.” I sip some more coffee. “I lost all of my friends, so it wasn't like I could go out and do things, anyway. No one wanted to be seen with me.” I sigh and stretch out my arms in front of me. “So, I thought maybe I would attend a school in Izumo, but none of the schools would take me. I was rejected from every university on the continent until a virtual school took me on after two years of applying.”

It was one of the lowest points in my life.

“But,” I say, raising my index finger, “I passed my classes with flying colors and got my engineering degree.”

“Where did you work after that?” Karina's voice is light with disbelief.

“Nowhere.” I finish the coffee and set the cup down. “Again, my reputation as a cheater kept following me around, and people thought I bought the degree, even though the school proctored me on every exam.”

Karina watches a couple enter the coffee shop and proceed to the counter to order from her nephew. She mutters something in Italian under her breath.

“That just doesn’t seem fair.”

“I know. I should have left, found a smaller town where no one knew me, but I was determined to stay and make something of myself. I tried starting up a private tutoring business, and that didn’t work out. Then I thought I would work in catering, except I forgot that I’m a horrible cook. Myra got those genes. So, instead I started a pet accessories boutique, but everyone went to the big stores and mine failed after only a year.”

Karina’s mouth drops open. “How are you even still here?”

I laugh at that. “I know, right? I really almost gave up several times. When my dad became mayor, everything seemed to change. He pulled some strings and cashed in a few favors.” A rush of gratitude for my father’s unwavering support crashes over me. I’m so grateful for him. “The I.A. put me through a vetting process and allowed me to test this year. Without Dad, I might not even have this opportunity.”

The gratitude for my dad ebbs away and a knot forms deep in my gut. He’s a stern man, and it’s tough to express love for him. His gruff voice and strict demeanor make it hard to tell if he cares about us, but I know he does. Every now and then, he’ll give me an affectionate pat on the shoulder or a hug that lingers just a bit longer than usual. Those moments are like a balm to my heart. Even though I can’t show any emotion around him (because that makes me look weak in his eyes), he loves us, and I do too.

“Your dad is quite the man. I know he’s been hard on you all for years, but you can tell. To him, family is everything.” Karina picks up my coffee cup.

A swell of determination rises in my chest. “I’m not just doing this for myself. I want to make them proud, too.”

“Trust me, Tilli, you already do.” Karina’s words are warm and sincere, filling me with a sense of purpose I haven’t had in a long time.

“Thanks.”

I need to work hard, harder than usual. If I can ace this competition, I can get my life back on track again.

“Seriously, you’ve come so far since then. Just consider everything you’ve experienced and learned from your past failures.” She winks at me. “And think about the new people you’ll meet at your new job. Maybe a handsome guy will come in and sweep you off your feet as you’re making a monumental spaceship discovery.”

I roll my eyes. “You read too many romance books.”

She shrugs. “Maybe you don’t read enough of them.”

I pause for a moment, allowing the weight of her words to sink in. While the setbacks and disappointments still sting, they’ve also taught me invaluable lessons and shaped me into the person I am today. I don’t have many friends. I haven’t dated in forever, and my life has been one dumpster fire after another. But I have come a long way.

I sigh as I look at the stacks of books and notebooks in front of me.

I still have a long way to go.

Scratching at the door pulls my head around. Ivan is on the other side of the glass. He’s been out and about all morning in town.

Karina smiles as she stands up and opens the door for him. His gray, slinky body saunters into the café.

“Well, hello, Ivan,” Karina says as she reaches out to pet him. He purrs in response, taking all the attention he can get. The little miser.

He shakes off his morning adventures, then jumps up onto the table and looks at me with his big yellow eyes.

“What have you been up to?” I ask him, scratching under his chin.

“I tried to have a brisk morning walk, but someone ruined it.”

“Ruined? How so?” I ask, loading books into my bag.

“They’re doing so much construction on Third Street. It’s all banging and sawing and trucks coming and going. Don’t they know how much noise they make?”

I sigh. “This again? We have a ton of things to fix after that typhoon.”

“Well,” he says, before cleaning a paw and rubbing it over his head, “I chose to go south instead, but there was a litter of kittens in the park, and they were all blah, blah, blah, and running everywhere. So I had to leave.”

I look up at the ceiling. How did I get paired with the surliest of grumpy old man cats?

“Ivan, kittens have as much right to exist as you do.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Next you’ll be telling me to be nicer to dogs.”

I brighten. “An excellent idea! I’m glad you concur.”

He jumps off the table, making his way along Karina’s empty chair first. “It’s getting late, and you have someplace to be.”

“It’s one o’clock in the afternoon,” I remind him. “And my meeting isn’t until three.”

“Yeah. Time for my afternoon nap.”

Probably his first of three afternoon naps, but who’s counting?

“Come on, let’s go home. I want to shower and brush my teeth before I go.” I wave to Karina. “Bye! I’ll be back for more studying later this week.”

“See you then!” she calls back. “Good luck! I hope it goes well.”

My stomach gurgles and shrinks. I’m really not looking forward to this meeting. The suspense is killing me.

I open the door, and Ivan follows as I walk out of the coffee shop and onto the street towards home.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MOMENT I step into my childhood home in Yamato, a wave of nostalgia hits me like the scent of my mother's cherry blossom perfume. Ah, home sweet home. Sigh. I wish I had my own place. There's just something not right about living at home when you're twenty-six. But every one of my older siblings did it. I guess I have to as well.

I leave my shoes by the door in the foyer and notice my mother's shoes are missing. She must be out and about. The familiar wooden floors creak beneath my feet, reminding me that some things never change. The kitchen is quiet, and the lights are off. As I glance around at the well-kept living room beyond the front door, I can't shake off the concern that's been gnawing at me for days.

I'm really letting this competition get to me.

"Looks like no one's home," Ivan grumbles from behind me, his whiskers twitching with annoyance.

"Aren't you usually happy about that? You're extra grumpy today."

"Well, someone has to feed me," he mutters under his breath, padding further into the house.

"I always do! Go find a spot to nap and wake up in a better mood," I say, trying to keep him from lashing out. "I'm going to check on Dad. He hasn't been himself lately. Ean said he's been... off."

"Off?" Ivan lifts an eyebrow, or what would be an eyebrow if he were human. "How so?"

“Like he’s lost all motivation, all energy. He just seems... empty.” I keep my voice at a whisper in case he’s close by.

“I’ve seen that look before. It’s like the life has been sucked right out of him. Someone should do something about it.” He slinks off.

Great. Big thanks you are, Old Man.

I’m not sure how to help Dad, even if I can figure out what’s going on with him. Ean, Suri, and Myra are always telling me I’m his favorite child, but he’s been as hard on me as he’s been on them. If anything, I was the biggest disappointment of us all. He hates cheaters and people who disobey the law. It took me years to convince him I didn’t cheat, and I had no idea why the test proctors thought I had. I still have no idea what happened.

I set off through the house, inhaling the smell of fresh cedar and polished floors. The scent is as comforting and nostalgic as the creaky floors under my feet and the cracks in the plaster walls. This place is perpetually falling apart, but it’s home.

As I enter the living room, I spot Dad sitting on the back deck, staring blankly into the yard and garden. Hmmm. Yeah, something is off about him, for sure.

I slide open the door to the porch, and he looks up at me.

“Hey, Dad,” I greet him, hoping to inject some energy into him. “What are you up to?”

“Ah, Tilli.” He blinks slowly, as if coming out of a trance. “Nothing much.”

I smile as I grab a floor cushion and sit down next to him cross-legged. Pulling in a long breath through my nose, I tamp down some of the anxiety building in my body. I need to get ready for the big meeting, not sit out here and chat with my dad.

“What did you do this morning?” I ask, trying to keep the conversation light.

“Nothing much,” he says, shrugging. “Check up at the doctor. I walked around the neighborhood. Took a nap.”

“Sounds productive.” I laugh and he stays somber.

His head turns slowly, his face a passive mask. “Tilli, this is all I’m allowed to do now. Why are you bothering me?”

I raise my eyebrows at him. Okay, then.

If that’s the way he’s going to be, I might as well leave.

Just as the urge to stand up increases, he turns his head back to stare at the garden.

Wait. No. I promised I would do something.

“I have the big meeting at the Interstellar Agency at three,” I begin, trying to needle him into caring. “They’re going to announce the competition, what it will be and how long, and I’m a little nervous.”

This time, when he turns back to me, he folds his arms over his chest. He looks thinner than usual, and his body swims in his dress shirt. He hasn’t gone to an office in months, yet he can’t stop wearing a dress shirt and trousers every day.

“Why would you be nervous?” He tilts his head, looking for something on my face that will tell him a different story. “You’ve been studying. You’ve been working hard.”

“Yeah, but...” I drum my fingers on my knee. “You know.”

There’s silence for a moment that’s only filled with the hum of bugs from the garden.

“Do you think they’ll be predisposed to think you’re a cheater because of what happened in your past?”

And there it is.

Yes, that’s exactly what I think.

I feel certain every person at the I.A. is watching everything I do, checking and rechecking my answers, and making everything ten times harder so I will crack.

But I will not.

I refuse.

“I’m sure many of the same people are there. They saw what happened eight years ago, and they don’t want me there. They probably didn’t like you getting involved.”

Dad is quiet again for a long moment, staring down his nose at me.

“They never provided us with an explanation for your initial expulsion from the program. I argued that if they didn’t have proof they could show me, then they needed to give you another shot.” He nods once. “Thankfully, logic got through to them.”

But what if I screw it up again? I don’t even know how I lost out in the first round. Maybe I broke some unspoken rule, and I’m about to do it again. No one knows, and I hate not knowing.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my pant legs. Gross. I hate feeling like this.

“You should concentrate on doing your best, and nothing else. That’s the only way forward here.”

“You’re right, Dad,” I say through numb lips.

“And maybe look into getting a boyfriend or something.” He huffs. “Your mother seems to think you won’t leave the house until you’re married.”

Slow breaths in and out, Tilli. What is up with everyone thinking I need a boyfriend?

He drops his voice. “But you know you can stay forever. That’s fine with me.”

And this is why all my siblings think he’s easier on me.

“Dad, I will not stay forever.” I chuckle. “And you can tell Mom I’ll stop at the boyfriend store on my way home from the I.A. tomorrow. Should I pick out a top-of-the-line model? Or a bargain-basement knock-off?”

He smiles. “You might have better luck with something in between.”

I laugh and bring my knees up. I set my chin on my folded arms atop them.

“Thanks, Dad,” I reply, my heart swelling with love for him despite his low energy.

Dad’s attention drifts back out to the garden.

“You know what?” I force lightness into my voice. “It’s been ages since we took a walk through the garden. You wanna go for a stroll?”

Dad hesitates for a moment, but then nods. It’s not much, but I’ll take it.

As we step off the porch and approach the first of the planted beds, a whiff of the damp earth mixed with the lingering scent of jasmine flowers hangs on the air. The warm afternoon breeze brushes against my skin as Dad and I walk side by side down the familiar gravel path.

“Wow,” I mutter, taking in the garden’s state. It’s a wild mess of tangled branches and overgrown weeds. “I guess the garden took a beating after the typhoon.”

Dad sighs, glancing around at the chaos that used to be his meticulously cared-for sanctuary. “That storm tore through here like a brute. All that work, trying to get these seedlings established... Now look at it.” He shakes his head, shoulders slumping. “Should have known better than to devote effort into something so ephemeral.”

We continue down the path, pausing now and then to untangle our feet from stubborn vines or push aside low-hanging branches. Layers of dirt and debris have muted the once-vibrant colors of the garden.

“Do you remember when we built the pond?” I ask, pointing to the murky water visible through a break in the brush. “You were so determined to get those water lilies to bloom.”

Dad chuckles, eyes gazing into memories of seasons past. “Your mother said I was mad to take on such a finicky task. But when those first blossoms finally opened, the look on her face...” His smile fades, wistfulness tinged now with sorrow.

I slip my arm through his, leaning close. “She loved your perseverance and patience. And the garden — it was your shared dream, a place filled with possibilities she loved helping nurture into being. We used to spend hours out here, tending to every leaf and flower.” Nostalgia creeps into my voice. “I’d always come out to help you after school, learning everything I could about the plants and their care.”

“Those were good times,” Dad admits. “But life has a way of changing our priorities, doesn’t it?”

“True.” A pang of sadness hits me for the man who once found such joy in simple tasks. The garden was a symbol of his love and dedication, but now it seems to reflect the turmoil within him.

“And it turns out I’m terrible at pruning rose bushes,” I say, grinning at him.

He chuckles, the sound like the rustling of leaves in the wind. “You were so determined to get every little thorn.”

“Hey, I was a perfectionist even back then.” I nudge him playfully.

We round the bend and come up on the vegetable garden.

“Have any pumpkins come up in the last few years?” I laugh, pointing at an overgrown patch where once our prized pumpkins had thrived. “Mine were always a little...” I rock my hand side to side.

Dad cracks a small smile at the memory. “Yeah, that lumpy little thing you grew one year definitely had... something.”

Something like a disease. No one wanted to touch it. It looked possessed.

“Maybe after the competition, we could work on restoring the garden together. It might be fun, don’t you think?” I try to keep my tone upbeat.

“Perhaps,” he says, though his voice lacks conviction. He’s not sold on the idea, but I won’t give up easily.

“Come on, Dad.” I nudge him with my elbow. “You know how much I’ve always loved this place. And who knows?”

Getting your hands dirty again may help you find the spark you've been missing since you retired."

"Maybe?" he repeats. "I don't know if I have it in me anymore, though. This garden... It's a lot of work. And I'm not as young as I used to be."

We continue walking, our footsteps crunching on the gravel path as we take in the wild beauty of the overgrown garden. It's not the conversation I hoped for, but at least I've planted a seed of possibility in Dad's mind.

"Come on. You're not old enough to use that excuse yet. Besides, you could start small. Just tackle one corner at a time, and before you know it, this place will be back to its former glory."

"Or," he says with a hint of sarcasm, "it'll swallow me whole, and I'll end up living out my days as an eccentric hermit in the wilds of Yamato."

I bark a laugh and clap my hands. "Somehow, I think you'd make that work. But seriously, consider it. You literally have nothing better to do. I came home and found you staring into space."

Dad's brow furrows as he contemplates my words, his gaze lingering on the tangled mess of plants before us.

"Well," he murmurs, running a hand through his hair. "I just don't want to mess it up, you know?"

He sounds like me. No wonder we get along so well.

"Who cares if you do? It's already a bit of a beautiful disaster. Worse case scenario, you'll learn something new and grow from the experience."

"That's quite the gardening metaphor," he says dryly, but I catch a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

"I aim to please. Now, let's head back inside. I need to shower before my meeting."

As we make our way to the house, frustration grows in my chest like a weed. Dad is so stubborn. It's clear he's

considering the idea, but there's a part of him that's holding back, and I'm not sure how to reach him.

I can only hope I've sent him the right direction, to take the leap and embrace the beautiful chaos of gardening once more. Fingers crossed.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INTERSTELLAR AGENCY looms above me, a stunning masterpiece of architecture that marries traditional Japanese design with futuristic elements. Sunlight filters through the open-air building, casting dappled shadows on the polished floors below. My heart races as I take in its grandeur, excitement and nerves battling for dominance within me. Ivan trots by my side, his whiskers twitching, as if sensing my internal struggle.

“Ready, Tilli?” he asks, his voice low and gravelly.

“Of course,” I reply, hiding the tremble in my voice. I refuse to let my insecurities dampen this moment. This is the culmination of years of hard work and dedication to studying spaceship design, and I need to remember that I’m qualified for this.

I am qualified. I am ready.

I hope I’m right.

I smile at the person who scans my badge and hand.

“You’re in meeting room 3B. It’s down the hall and to the left,” she says, pointing behind her. “We’ve sent the location and map to your tablet.”

“Thanks.” I glance at my tablet and see the map pop up on the screen. I’ve been to several offices and rooms in the I.A. but not everywhere. I’m getting closer to having access to the entire building, and I cannot wait.

As we walk towards the meeting room, the sound of my heels clicking against the floor mixes with the murmur of

voices echoing through the hall.

Oh. There's already a crowd outside of the conference room. Wow. There are a lot of suits crammed into the small hallway, all talking animatedly over each other. My heart thuds in my chest as I take in the sight. I've never seen so many top-tier scientists and engineers gathered together in one place. My eyes scan the people waiting, searching for familiar faces among the sea of strangers. Not that I want to see anyone in particular or anything. Many people my age who work here will remember what happened... and I'm trying to forget it.

Trying and failing.

Ivan nudges me forward, seeming to sense my hesitation. He takes a few steps ahead of me and weaves his way through the crowd, effortlessly dodging moving shoes and other animals. I follow him, grateful for his presence and confident that he won't lead me astray.

Oh shit.

That's when I see him — Kaito Nakamura, my former schoolmate.

A flutter of attraction stirs within me. His tall frame towers over the crowd, and his black hair is tousled, framing his angular face. His eyes sparkle when they meet mine, and my heart rate quickens as our gaze lingers for a moment. A tingle of anticipation runs through me as I take in the sight of him after all these years. Did I have a crush on him at some point? I probably did. I've had hundreds of crushes throughout my life, several recently.

Anyway, it doesn't matter. I quickly shake it off. I'm here for business, not a trip down memory lane.

His eyes slide away, and my stomach drops. Memories of our past interactions flood my mind, and I wonder if he even remembers who I am. He must. I remember him being there when I was accused of cheating. But I'm probably just that girl who sat next to him in physics class and got all the answers right.

That's right. I was the know-it-all before I was the cheater.

“Tilli, don’t let your nerves get to you,” Ivan whispers, returning to my feet. “You’re here for a reason, and you’ve worked hard to get where you are. Remember, focus on the task at hand.” Ivan’s golden eyes narrow as he watches Kaito from afar. “There’ll be time for distractions later.”

“Right,” I mutter, forcing my gaze away from Kaito to the meeting room.

I slip through the crowd, aware that some people are moving on and not staying in this room. This appears to be a transition time between the previous meeting and my upcoming one. Several people push past me, their paired animals at their feet. Someone’s fox brushes against my leg, so I move to the side...

And step straight into Kaito.

“Oh shit.” I snap my hand out, to prevent him from falling backwards. I grab his shirt and pull. He overcorrects and slams straight into me, knocking my bag to the floor.

For a moment, we’re pressed up against each other, and the heat from his body seeps into mine. His scent, a combination of musk and something spicy, fills my nostrils, and I inhale deeply before I can stop myself. I’m transfixed by the way his eyes seem to darken as he stares down at me, and I lean in closer to him.

“Tilli,” Ivan’s voice breaks through the haze of desire that’s clouding my mind. “What are you doing?”

Snap out of it, Tilli.

I pull away from Kaito, an embarrassed blush flooding my chest. “Sorry,” I mumble, bending down to retrieve my bag. “I got jostled in the crowd.”

“It’s fine,” Kaito says, a faint smile on his lips. “No harm done.”

Gathering my courage, I throw everything into my bag and stand up. “Hey, um, I don’t know if you remember me, but we were in the Academy together. Tilli Kimura.” I offer a smile and look into his eyes.

He returns the smile for a moment before looking away. “Oh, yeah, I remember you.”

The moment turns frosty, and a chill climbs up my back. I might just be imagining it, though. There was a smile for a hot second.

“It’s been ages since we last saw each other. How have you been?” I press on.

Kaito’s eyes flicker towards me, and I can tell that his smile is forced, a little pained. His lips barely move as he says, “Fine.”

His curt response tells me what I need to know. My past has come to bite me in the ass. But I’m not a bitch, and I refuse to start being one now. “I’d heard you joined the Interstellar Agency. That’s so great.”

Even I know when I’m being brushed off, but it’s better to be polite.

“Thanks,” he replies, and he seems to relax a little. He shifts on his feet, back and forth. With his shoulders up around his ears, he looks uncomfortable, not angry or annoyed.

Maybe he doesn’t want to be seen talking to me?

As disappointment gnaws at my confidence, a warm nuzzle against my hand knocks me out of my head. Looking down, a beautiful Akita, his brown eyes filled with curiosity and concern, looks back up at me. My heart swells with affection as I reach out to pet him.

“Who’s this?” I coo.

“Ah, this is Max,” Kaito says, his voice softening slightly. This is more like the Kaito I remember. “He’s my pair”

“Hello, Max.” I scratch behind his ears. The dog’s gentle presence provides a brief moment of comfort, easing some of the tension between Kaito and me.

“Sorry to run, but we have to go,” Kaito says, and Max turns his head to woof at him. I don’t understand what Max is saying since only a pair can hear the voice of their animal, but whatever it is causes Kaito to shift back and forth again.

I nod, feeling my face flush with embarrassment. “Well, um, I think my meeting is starting. It was good seeing you.”

Suddenly, I have to use the bathroom.

Kaito’s eyes widen. He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “You’re going in here?”

“Uh, yeah,” I say, backing away. “After I visit the restroom. Great seeing you again!”

I make a hasty retreat as quickly as I can without looking like I’m running. The surrounding air is suddenly too stifling, and I can’t breathe. My heartbeat races as I turn down an adjacent corridor, seeking refuge in the deserted bathroom. Ivan follows closely behind, his tail flicking in annoyance.

I fly into the bathroom and check the stalls. Empty.

“Can’t do this,” I whisper, gripping the edge of the pristine marble sink, my knuckles turning white. “I can’t face them, not after that.”

“Tilli? Calm down. You look like you’re going to puke. You know I hate puking.” Ivan jumps onto the countertop beside me, his eyes filled with concern despite his grumpy demeanor.

“If Kaito is that distant, then there are bound to be more people in there who will be worse. And they all probably think I’m a cheater because of those awful rumors.” I bite my lip, fighting back tears.

“It’s okay!” Ivan insists, nudging me with his head. “You’re going to be all right.”

“No. I’m going to fail,” I insist.

“Oh, please,” he says, sitting on the edge of the sink. “Tilli Kimura never gives up this easily.”

“I’ve failed at everything else!” I sweep my hand out, indicating all of my past business ventures that have tanked and left me penniless and living at home with my parents at the ripe old age of twenty-six.

At this point in my life, I should have my shit together — a respectable career that pays outrageously well, a swanky downtown loft, and a thriving social calendar filled with brunch dates and boozy benders that end in a stranger's bed. Isn't that what every self-possessed woman in her twenties aspires to these days?

I am not doing any of these things.

Where did I go wrong? I've done nothing but study for the last two years while hoping to get this job. Should I have been out collecting one-night stands and hangovers like some kind of achiever badge on my express journey to find myself? Goodness knows I haven't been to a bar or night club in years, and dinner out with my siblings doesn't count.

I am not cut out for this, this social aspect of life.

"You are not a failure. You just haven't found your place yet." Ivan's voice is firm but supportive, urging me to get a grip on my emotions and face my fears. "And your place is here. I can feel it."

"Really?" I can't believe I'm relying on my cat to tell me this, but I need to hear it from someone.

"For certain. And if you don't get this job, you'll find something else. Maybe something in fishery and wildlife?" He licks his lips.

I burst out into a laugh, and all of my tension goes right out the window with it.

"Wouldn't you like that?" I sigh. "Right, you're right," I concede, taking a shaky breath. "I've come this far, and I can't back down now."

"I'm glad you agree because I'm always right." He jumps down from the sink and rubs against my leg in a rare display of affection.

Okay. I can do this. I will not let my old reputation get in the way of achieving my dream job. I'm going to go back in there, and I'm going to win this competition.

I've got this.

I look at my reflection in the mirror and try not to hate it. My hair is too long because I keep forgetting to make an appointment to get it cut. All of my makeup is five years out of date, and I haven't plucked my eyebrows in forever. I smooth out my shirt, wash my hands, and grab my bag. My appearance doesn't matter. Only the competition matters.

"Okay, Ivan, let's do this." I straighten my shoulders and force myself to look at my reflection in the mirror again. My cheeks are flushed, but my eyes hold a glimmer of determination. "I am worthy of being here, and I will prove it to them."

"That's right!" Ivan chimes in, his faith in me unwavering.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I hold myself upright and stride forward with purpose. Even if no one wants to talk to me, I know I have something valuable to contribute. The hallway leading to the meeting room seems less intimidating now, and I focus on the way the sunlight streams through the glass walls, casting brilliant patterns on the floor beneath my feet. I've always found beauty in structure and design, a passion that led me to the Interstellar Agency in the first place.

The moment I cross the threshold, Riku Saito's icy gaze pins me in place. Oh, for the love of all things holy. Riku Saito is here? Why?

My heart skips a beat as I try to ignore his hostility and find a vacant seat. The cold metal of a chair presses against the back of my legs, and I lower myself into it, trying to calm my racing pulse. Of all the people to be stuck in a room with...

"Ah, Miss Kimura," Riku drawls. "I see you've come to dazzle us with more of your family's so-called 'helpfulness and charity.'"

The words sting, but I refuse to let him see how much they affect me. I force a tight-lipped smile and retort, "Well, at least we're known for our philanthropy, unlike some people."

"Don't let him bait you." Ivan's fur bristles as he glares defiantly at Riku. Ivan wasn't around when my family first dealt with Riku, but he's heard of this awful man before.

“Perhaps,” Riku concedes, his tone dripping with disdain. “But there’s a fine line between helping people and fraud, isn’t there?”

My cheeks burn as I clench my fists under the table, fighting the urge to respond to his insinuations. I know that nothing I say will change his mind or make him treat me with any respect.

He’s hated me since I was in third grade. And he was the first to laugh in my face when I was expelled from school. Of course, he graduated to the Agency with no issues. I guess he chose spaceship design as his specialty, right? Otherwise, he wouldn’t be here.

“I’m here to work, Riku.” I will my voice to remain steady despite the storm of emotions swirling inside me. “Not talk to you.”

“Of course,” he says, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. “Fine by me. I want nothing to do with you.”

“Keep breathing,” Ivan whispers, his soft purr offering solace in this hostile environment. “You deserve to be here. You’ve worked hard, and you have something valuable to contribute.” He jumps down from the desk and approaches a bookshelf on the far side of the room. Leaping to a high shelf, he curls up in a ball and tucks his head in for a nap.

I want to come back in my next life as a cat.

The door slides open, and Kaito strides in, Max padding alongside him. My heart skips a beat at the sight of him, but the feeling is short-lived as he scans the room and selects a seat on the opposite side from where I’m sitting. Awesome. Everything is starting off just grand.

“All right, let’s get started,” announces the meeting facilitator, tapping her tablet to bring up the agenda. “First up, Professor Nishimura will do an overview of the competition, what’s expected of you, how long you’ll have to complete the projects, and who you’ll be teamed with from the I.A. to get your work done.”

Teams? Oh no.

No one is going to want to work with me.

The weight of unresolved tension bears down on me like a lead apron, and I want to cry. But there's no turning back now. I have to see this through.

There's nowhere else to go.

It's either this or nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE AIR in the meeting room buzzes with anticipation, and I fiddle nervously with my pen as I wait for Professor Nishimura to begin her presentation. Glancing around the room, I notice there's still an empty seat beside me.

I guess no one wants to sit next to me, either?

I'm already starting this off on the right foot.

Just as Professor Nishimura clears her throat to start, the door slides open with a whoosh, and in walks a young woman. She's late, but she doesn't seem flustered; instead, she exudes an air of confidence. A person behind her offers a quick apology for making her late, explaining there had been an issue with her admissions badge.

"Sorry about that," the young woman says, flashing a grin at the room as she takes the seat next to mine. I sit back and take a long look at her. She's wearing a mix of eccentric and pop-culture inspired pieces that somehow come together to create a cohesive, eye-catching ensemble. I wish I could be half as stylish. She's gotta be at least five or six years younger than me, and her style speaks to a boldness I envy.

I think I'm going to make her my new friend.

"All right, now that we're all here, let's get started," Professor Nishimura says, and the room falls silent.

"Welcome, everyone, to this year's spaceship design competition. You're probably wondering what the theme this year is?"

She wiggles her eyebrows as she steps to the side and a screen comes to life with the words “Interior Designs for Ship Common Areas.”

Oh, really? I lean forward, anticipation fluttering in my chest.

“Our aim this year is to challenge you to create innovative interior designs for a ship’s common areas. This includes meeting spaces, galleys, recreation rooms, and exercise rooms. Teamwork and creativity are key components to your success in this competition.”

The weight of expectation is already settling on my shoulders. This is my chance to prove myself, to show that my passion for spaceship design is more than a fleeting interest. My brain spins up with ideas immediately, imagining the room and everything I could do to it.

“Each team must incorporate specific elements into their design, such as efficient use of space, adaptability, and a focus on both form and function,” Professor Nishimura adds, her eyes scanning the room. “However, I encourage you to think outside of the box. Push the boundaries of what we’ve done before. This is your opportunity to create something truly groundbreaking.”

As she speaks, a spark of excitement grows in my belly, and I glance over at the young woman next to me. She seems as eager as I am to dive into this competition, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

“Remember,” Professor Nishimura concludes, “innovation and teamwork will be the keys to your success. I look forward to seeing what each one of you creates.”

As Nishimura whispers to one of her colleagues, murmurs grow in volume.

“Hey, I’m Tilli,” I say, extending my hand to the young woman next to me.

“Hiroko,” she replies, grasping my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here.” I already feel a sense of camaraderie between us. “I’m so excited about this. Spaceship design has always been my passion. You?”

“Same.” Hiroko’s eyes light up. “I’ve been obsessed with it since I was a kid. I used to spend hours doodling designs in my notebooks during class.”

“Me too,” I confess. Wow, there are other people like me? “My teachers hated it, but I couldn’t help myself.”

She rolls her eyes. “They were so adamant about us learning all the basics. None of them wanted to see us fly ahead.”

I nod. “True. True.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I don’t recognize you. Were you in the class before me? Did you take a gap year?”

More like almost a gap decade. “Something like that.”

Her tablet buzzes. “Oh shit. I forgot to turn that off. Sorry.”

As she handles whatever is on the screen, I scan the room and my eyes fall on Kaito sitting across from us. A pang of unease shoots through me as I recall our encounter in the hallway. The way his gaze slipped from mine, like he didn’t want to be seen anywhere near me, turns my stomach.

“You okay?” Hiroko asks, noticing my sudden shift in mood.

“Uh, yeah,” I reply, trying to brush off my discomfort with a tight smile. “Just a little distracted, that’s all.”

The sound of Professor Nishimura’s voice quiets the room again.

“Sorry for the interruption, everyone. Okay, back to business.” I like her smile. She seems warm and easy to get along with. “Each of you will be paired with a mentor who will guide you throughout the competition,” she announces, her eyes scanning over the room. “The winner’s mentor will also receive a bonus at the end of the competition, so there’s something in it for everyone. We only have four spots for this

team. This means that, unfortunately, some of you will either go to your second choice or go home.”

I swallow. My second choice is administration, which means never working on designs again or even going into space.

I need to pass.

My wandering attention span has taken a turn for the worse, landing on Riku. His eyes are locked in my direction — though rather than staring daggers as usual, it’s more of an entire armory he seems to be mentally hurling my way. His congenital hatred for all things related to my family is inspiring in its pettiness and longevity.

I offer Riku a sarcastic smile and wave, which seems to incense him even further. Honestly, he should watch that blood pressure of his. All this prolonged rage and resentment can’t be good for one’s health. Riku may cling bitterly to the past, but I have better things to do than dwell on his issues. There are spaceships to build, and no time for small-minded vendettas.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Hiroko asks again, her concern evident in her tone.

I force a smile, trying to conceal my anxiety. “Yeah, just thinking about the mentorship thing,” I lie. “I’m curious about who we’ll get paired with.”

Please not Riku. Please not Riku. Please not Riku.

If I get Riku, I’m screwed.

“Me too,” she says, turning to face the rest of the room. “But whoever it is, we’ll make an amazing team.”

I chuckle. I like her confidence. “Definitely. You’ll do fine,” I agree, nodding with forced enthusiasm.

Professor Nishimura lists off the mentor-student pairs, and the room buzzes with anticipation. Each announcement brings a mix of cheers and groans from the students as they discover their fate.

My heart pounds in my chest. Who will my mentor be? My fingers tap on the table while I wait for my name to be called, and I steel myself for whatever comes next.

“Next up, Hiroko Jansen,” announces Professor Nishimura. “Your mentor will be Riku Saito.”

A flicker of annoyance crosses Hiroko’s face, though she tries to hide it as she glances over at me. “Great,” she mutters under her breath, “just what I need — Mr. Know-It-All himself.” She rolls her eyes, and I can tell she’s had her fair share of dealing with Riku.

Oh... Oh wait...

“Last but not least,” continues Professor Nishimura, “Tilli Kimura, you will be paired with Kaito Nakamura.”

Shit. I knew his name hadn’t been called yet.

My stomach drops, and I glance across the room to where he sits. His eyes meet mine for a moment before he looks away, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. I struggle to maintain a neutral expression. How am I supposed to work with someone who can’t even look at me?

“All right, everyone.” Professor Nishimura claps her hands together. “Take a few minutes to get acquainted with your mentors and discuss your plans for the competition. Remember, innovation and teamwork are key.”

Hiroko leans closer and whispers, “You know, they say Kaito is a genius with spaceship design. You’re really lucky.”

“Maybe,” I murmur back, forcing a smile. But try as I might, I can’t kick this feeling in my gut that this won’t end well. Can we bury the hatchet and play nice? Or is this another headache to deal with on my already long, crazy road?

The room shifts as everyone moves to meet their mentors, the hum of conversation growing louder. I glance around, trying to find Kaito in the sea of faces. He’s whispering with Professor Nishimura, nodding at whatever she says.

I can already tell this is going to be uncomfortable.

“Um, Tilli?” Kaito’s voice is quiet when he finally approaches, his eyes not quite meeting mine. “I’m sorry for being standoffish with you in the hallway earlier. I was just surprised to see you, that’s all.”

The apology catches me off guard, causing a flicker of surprise to pass through me. I force a smile, shrugging away the uneasiness in my belly. “It’s fine. I completely understand.” I hope my voice sounds more confident than I feel. “We all have off days.”

“Thanks.” His strained smile warms his eyes. He’s thawing a bit. “So, we’re partners now. I’ll do my best to help you in the competition, but the onus will be on you to do most of the work. Do you think you can handle it?”

The hair on my neck stands up. “Yeah,” I say, puzzled. “I mean, I want this to be my job someday. If I can’t handle the competition, then I can’t handle the job.”

What is he insinuating? Does he already think I’m a flake? It’s been a long time, but we were direct competitors in the Academy. He knows I’m smart.

“Good.” He nods once, seemingly satisfied. “Let’s make the most out of this situation, shall we? We should talk about our schedules, and when we can meet next.”

“Oh, excuse me,” says a young man, butting into our conversation. “I have all the contracts and legal documents you need to sign.” He inserts his tablet between Kaito and me, causing me to step back and take the tablet into my hands. Kaito waits patiently.

“Just a sec,” I tell him, scrolling down the screen. A non-disclosure agreement, a code of conduct, privacy statement, terms of use for all the equipment, blah blah blah. I scroll and scroll and sign at the bottom, pressing my hand to the screen when it calls for my palm print. Fine. Whatever. I’m here to work, so I’ll sign just about anything.

I hand off the tablet and pull out my own.

Opening my calendar, I show it to Kaito. “You wanted to talk schedules? Mine’s wide open, as you can see.”

He narrows his eyes. “You don’t have a job you need to go to? Lots of people who take gap years work.”

“No. I live at home, and they don’t charge rent.” I shift my eyes from his and futz with my bag. “So, if we need to work together, we’ll have to do it someplace else.”

Kaito is silent before I look up at him. He runs his hand through his hair and it’s even messier than before. He probably has no idea how hot that is.

What is wrong with you, Tilli?

“I see. Well, we’ve been assigned a study library here. I’m sure they updated your badge, which means you can come and go as you please.”

Just past Kaito, Riku is watching me with an undeniable air of superiority. His eyes gleam with malicious intent, and I can almost see the wheels turning in his head as he plots how to spoil my chance. I clench my fists around the fabric of my bag, frustration bubbling up inside me.

“Hey.” Kaito’s voice pulls me back into the present, and I realize I’ve drifted off in thought. “You seem a bit... distracted.”

“Sorry,” I mutter, forcing my focus back to him. “Thinking about the competition, I guess.”

“Understandable.” He gives me a small, sympathetic smile. “It’s going to be on your mind for the next four weeks, so get used to it. I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

But despite Kaito’s words, I can’t shake the feeling that he won’t be as invested in this partnership as I am. And with Riku working against me, failure is an all-too-likely outcome. I don’t like my odds.

Hiroko’s colorful outfit catches my eye as she approaches, her brightly colored hair swaying with each step. She wears a lighthearted smile that helps me forget the tension in the room.

“Hey, Tilli,” she says, her voice a lively melody. I like her already. “Wanna grab some coffee?” She checks the clock on the wall. Just after four-thirty P.M. “It’s still early. Riku has

given me a ton of reading to do before tomorrow.” She rolls her eyes.

I shrug. “Sure. I can always go for more coffee.” I turn to Kaito. “Do you have reading for me to do?”

He shakes his head, the ghost of a smile haunting his lips. “Nope. I’m sure you’ve got it covered.”

“Of course I have it covered.” My tone is simple and matter-of-fact. This is my life, and I’m ready to live it. “Ivan! I’m heading out!” I call towards the bookshelf.

Ivan unfurls his body, stretches, and yawns before jumping down to meet me.

“I’ll have our room set up for tomorrow by six in the morning. Come any time. Scan your hand at reception and they’ll show you where to go, like today. The room monitoring system will alert me when you arrive.” He nods as he leaves the room before us, Max on his heels.

Okay. I can handle all business, if that’s the way he’s going to be.

I have a job to do, anyway.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MOMENT I step into the I.A. late the next morning, a wave of excitement washes over me. This is where it all begins — my chance to prove myself, to get back on the path I deviated from eight years ago.

After a brief coffee interlude with Hiroko yesterday, I spent the entire evening into the wee hours doing research, reading and drawing. I'm so ready for this.

“Do you want me to stay all day?” Ivan's voice is a little less grumpy this morning because I gave him the leftovers from the bento I made for lunch.

“You can stay as long as you like. I'll be fine.” I lift my chin as I walk down the hall towards the open-air staircase.

Ivan harumphs. “I think I'll stay for the morning, at least.”

Down one hallway off the second floor landing, I find the study room. Looking in the window, Kaito is already seated at the table, waiting and working, a cup of coffee by his side and Max asleep at his feet.

I sigh, close my eyes, and press my back to the wall next to the door. I wish I didn't find him so attractive. I wish he was married and off-limits. Oh, that's a good idea. I'll pretend like he already has a girlfriend, or maybe even a boyfriend, and I would have no chance, anyway.

Yeah, that'll work.

“You can open the door any day now, Tilli,” Ivan says, his tail flicking in annoyance.

“Hold up, Old Man. I need a moment.”

I count to ten, turn, and open the door.

The room is cooler than the warm summer air outside. My arms erupt in goosebumps.

Kaito looks up and then looks at the clock. Eleven-fifteen A.M.

“Morning, Tilli. Just barely.” If he’s annoyed, he doesn’t show it.

I set my bag on the opposite end of the table from him. “Sorry. Was I supposed to be here earlier? I’m a night owl. Not a morning person.”

I open my bag and begin setting up my materials: sketchbook, pencils, eraser, and a few fading layouts from previous projects. A sense of familiarity accompanies the action, as if I’ve done this a thousand times before.

“I... I wasn’t sure. So I got here at seven.” His lips twist. “I suppose I should have asked.”

“Oh.” Brilliant use of words, Tilli. “Well, you have my contact information, right? You can always call or message me.”

He sighs. “Yeah. Sorry. My fault.”

He was probably hoping I’d drop out between yesterday and today, and he’d never have to talk to me again.

His messy hair falls into his eyes as he sits forward. “Need some help there?”

“Uh, no, I’ve got it,” I reply, trying to keep my voice steady. “Just setting up.”

He raises an eyebrow skeptically, his gaze flicking between my face and my cluttered workspace.

“Interesting.” The tone of his voice is skeptical. Does he see me as a potential colleague? Or another pathetic wannabe designer who’ll never make it if I don’t cheat my way to the top?

Because I’m certain at this point the cheating accusation has him second guessing me.

“Look, I know what you’re thinking,” I blurt out, unable to keep my frustration in check. “But trust me, I’m not here to waste anyone’s time. Yours nor mine. I’ve worked hard to get here.”

Kaito studies me for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, the skepticism vanishes from his face, replaced by something resembling curiosity.

“All right, then.” He leans back in his chair. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I pull out a chair opposite him and take a seat. Ivan leaps onto the table and sits to watch. “Well, for starters, I like to approach my designs from the perspective of the people who’ll be living in these spaces,” I explain, forcing myself to meet Kaito’s gaze. “I think about their needs and how the environment can support them both physically and emotionally.”

“Okay. That’s the right approach,” Kaito muses. “But you know as well as I do that this competition is about innovation. How can you possibly create something new and groundbreaking with such an... old-fashioned approach?” He waves to my pile of notebooks and pencils. “We have cutting-edge software for planning. I rarely see anyone use pencils and paper.”

“Old-fashioned?” A sudden heat rises in my cheeks, but I force myself to continue. “Not everyone cares about the latest gadgets and gizmos. People need spaces that feel safe, welcoming, and familiar, too. That’s what I try to bring to my designs.”

“Hmmm.”

Kaito pauses for a long moment, and my neck starts to sweat. Am I already screwing this up?

He seems to make a decision and sits his chair straight. “Let’s deal with the elephant in the room.”

“Here we go, Tilli,” Ivan says, warning in his voice. “Be calm.”

Kaito glances at Ivan. He can only hear meows and murmurs. He's probably wondering what Ivan said.

"You were accused of cheating on the second exam. What? Eight years ago? They sent you home and told you not to come back. I remember you being escorted from the building."

I stiffen, prepared for the blow.

"Now, your father has lobbied for you to have a second chance. Looking at what I see here, I'm not sure I agree."

I want to cry, but no. I'm better than that.

My heart skips a beat, and anger flares up like a fire-breathing dragon. "That was a misunderstanding," I say with precision. "I never cheated, and they never explained to me why they thought I did."

"A misunderstanding." His voice is calm, almost gentle, and it only serves to fuel my frustration. "You didn't cheat?"

"No," I insist. "I studied hard like everyone else." I sigh and press my hands to the table. "That cheating accusation pretty much ruined my life, and now I have this second chance to make it right. I really want this chance... I need this chance."

All the frustration in my body leaks out and sadness takes its place. Kaito frowns.

"Please, believe me," I whisper. "Please."

His expression softens.

"Look, designing spaceships is literally all I've ever wanted to do with my life." I throw my head back with a rueful laugh, blinking rapidly in a preemptive strike against any treasonous tears. "If it turns out I have no talent for it, and all these years struggling have been a waste of time, so be it. I'll surrender and accept my inevitable future as a starving space geek. But not before I give this contest everything I've got, questionable skills and all. I know the odds aren't in my favor, but win or lose, at least I'll have tried. My head is full of dreams too lofty to abandon."

He takes a deep breath. "I forgot this about you."

“What?”

““Starving space geek?”” He chuckles and shakes his head. “You were always making people laugh. Didn’t Professor Simon say you ‘had a way with words?’”

I scoff. “That man was a fossil way before I ever started at that school.”

This makes him laugh. “Too true.” He nods slowly, thinking. “You didn’t cheat.” A statement, not a question. “I believe you. I liked you a lot in school, and I was always a little disappointed that happened and you disappeared.”

“I didn’t cheat,” I repeat. He liked me in school? That’s news to me.

“Okay. Well, innovation is the name of the game in this industry.” He leans back in his chair again as his eyes focus on my piles of notebooks. “If you keep relying on the same tired concepts, you’ll never truly stand out. You should stand out if you’re going to get past these accusations,” he insists.

“Maybe,” I concede, my voice barely above a whisper. “But there’s something to be said for finding inspiration in the past, for combining the best parts of what we already know with new ideas and approaches.”

I swallow hard, feeling the sting of Kaito’s words. “You know, my older sister, Myra, is an artist. She taught me there’s a certain beauty in taking elements from the past and reimagining them for the future.” My fingers trace the edge of a sketchbook page, remembering her gentle guidance as she introduced me to old Japanese woodblock prints and European Art Nouveau.

“By blending styles and eras, we can create something fresh and meaningful, something that speaks to our shared human experience.” I look up at Kaito, searching his face for some sign of understanding. “This is what drives my designs, not just innovation for innovation’s sake. Innovation for innovation’s sake is a crock of shit, and you know it.”

There’s a brief silence before Ivan interjects with his usual cranky demeanor. “Well, aren’t you two having a lovely

debate about artistic integrity? How utterly fascinating.” His sarcasm is almost palpable.

“Thank you, Ivan,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Your input is always so... helpful.”

“Hey, I’m just here to keep things in perspective,” he replies, giving me a pointed stare. “Besides, it’s not like you need Kaito’s approval anyway, right?”

I glance back at Kaito, whose expression is unreadable, and then at Ivan. “Maybe not,” I admit, feeling a small sense of relief wash over me. “But it would be nice if someone understood where I’m coming from.”

“Understanding is overrated.” Ivan hops from the table to a chair, curls up in a ball, and goes to sleep.

Cats.

Kaito seems to be lost in thought for a moment, his eyes darting between me and Ivan. The gears are turning in his head, trying to find the right words.

“I can pretty much guess what that conversation was based on your side.” He sighs. “I’m sorry,” he begins, rubbing the back of his neck. “I didn’t mean to come off as harsh or judgmental. I just... well, your approach to design is new to me, and it’s intriguing. We’re here to learn from each other, so perhaps I can learn something from your unique perspective.”

I blink a few times. I thought he was going to dismiss me and leave.

Warmth blossoms in my chest. “Thanks. I mean, I don’t have all the answers. No one does. I think we could both learn from each other.”

“Agreed,” he says, standing up from his chair and looking down at my designs. “So, about the common areas... What are your thoughts on how to make them more inviting?”

“Oh. You want to go over it now? Like, now now?” My eyes widen as I realize he’s actually going to help me.

He laughs. “Yeah, like now now. There’s no time like the present.”

I take a deep breath, gathering my thoughts and opening my sketchbook to what I was working on yesterday. “I was thinking we could combine elements of traditional Japanese architecture with some modern touches. Like using shoji screens for room dividers and tatami mats as flooring but incorporating LED lighting and sleek furniture designs.”

Kaito nods. “That’s a good start. Have you given any thought to green spaces? Like hydroponic garden spaces, where passengers can relax and enjoy nature while onboard? It’s something I know the team wants to do for the next ship’s design.”

My eyes widen with excitement. “Yes! I love this idea. Wait. Are you giving me insider information?” I purse my lips. “I don’t want any unfair advantages, given my history here.”

His returning smile is soft. “No. It’s fine. We were instructed to help you with as much as we can.”

“Okay.” Good. I don’t want to get dinged for something I could easily avoid. “Well, a green space would bring a sense of tranquility and balance to the ship, don’t you think?”

I turn my notebook around and look at it from all angles.

“But there’s only so much space for us to play with. Hmmm.” I rough in an area on a wall. “Maybe it could go along the outer walls.”

“Sure,” he replies, grinning. “And it could double as a source of fresh produce for the onboard restaurants.”

As we continue discussing ideas for the common areas, our shared passion for spaceship design brings us closer together. The tension from earlier dissipates, replaced by a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect. It’s a relief to find common ground with Kaito. I haven’t been connected to anyone in my field since I was in the Academy, and that was a long time ago.

I smile at him, and he smiles in return.

This could actually work out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Kaito continues his work while I research and sketch. He's a very intense guy, his hand hovering over the holographic blueprints, his fingers pinching and dragging the virtual elements with practiced precision. He's the same way with these tools as I am with my pencil and paper. I watch as he meticulously aligns a design he's working on for his job. His attention to detail is almost poetic.

Ah. There he goes again, brow furrowed in concentration, completely lost in his own engineering world. Watching Kaito sketch ship specs is better than any romantic movie. The way his eyes light up when inspiration strikes, hands flying over the screen to capture some new idea before it escapes? Honestly, it's a miracle I get any work done with that level of distraction just across the room.

Not that I'm complaining. If this is the view I get to enjoy for the foreseeable future, there'll be no objections from me. Sorry, were we in a meeting just now? I was distracted by the way his fingers tap that stylus. And is it getting hot in here or is it my imagination?

Yep, I've got it bad.

And it's probably one-sided. Sigh. What the hell am I doing?

He looks over at my sketch. "Your work is quite impressive. The way you blend aesthetics and functionality is fascinating."

"Thanks," I reply, biting my lip, taken aback by the praise. My heart swells, yet I remain cautious. However, if he were to

drop even the slightest hint of interest in me, I would jump him in a heartbeat. “I think your engineering expertise has really complemented my designs well, too.” I groan as I realize my neck is locked up.

Looking at the clock, I’m surprised to find it’s almost two in the afternoon, and we haven’t eaten yet. On cue, my stomach grumbles loud enough for both Ivan and Max to hear. Kaito laughs.

“I think we should take a break for lunch.” He stands up and stretches. I catch a glimpse of his stomach when his shirt lifts, and suddenly, my sex-drive kicks up a gear.

Well, if he weren’t mentoring me, he would be the perfect guy. We have similar interests. He’s kind and forgiving, willing to put the past in the past. I’d love to know more about him though, before letting my libido get the better of me.

He leans over and pulls a bento box from his bag. I laugh.

“What?” he asks, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. “I always pack a lunch, if I can. Eating out is time consuming when I’m on nothing but deadlines.”

I reach into my bag, pull out my bento box, and slide it onto the table next to his. This time it’s his turn to laugh.

“Great minds...” he says, and then sighs. He suddenly seems melancholy. “I just realized I’ve been an ass for abandoning you at lunch every day this week. Sorry. Why don’t we eat out in the courtyard? There are lots of open tables there, and we missed the usual lunch rush at noon. I need to grab a green tea from the vending machine in the lobby. Do you want one?”

“Yeah, sure.” I open my bag and fish around for a coin. I don’t usually carry cash on me when almost everything is virtual, but I don’t want to short him.

“Oh no.” He waves my money away. “I’ve got it.”

Max jumps up from his spot and woofs at Kaito. “Yeah, sure. Come on,” he says to Max. “I’ll meet you outside, Tilli.”

The door clicks shut, and I'm left alone in the silence. It's a stark contrast to the energy that filled the room moments ago.

I turn my attention back to my sketches spread across the table. Our work together has given me a newfound confidence, but I can't shake the lingering doubts that whisper at the edges of my mind. I'm missing something. There's a piece to this puzzle I haven't seen yet.

And there's Kaito. Can I really trust him? Can I trust myself?

I stretch out my neck. Whatever. I just have to keep at this.

"Come on, Ivan. Let's get some fresh air."

The sun sits high in the sky, casting its warm glow on the courtyard where Kaito and I sit down for lunch. The vibrant colors of our bento boxes contrast against the dark gray table. A gentle breeze tickles my skin, carrying with it the scent of jasmine from the garden around the corner.

"Did you grow up around here? This neighborhood?" I ask, picking at a piece of seaweed-wrapped rice.

"Somewhat," Kaito replies, his eyes squinting from the sun's glare. "I spent most of my childhood on the north side of town, but I moved here when I started working for the agency. I have a one-bedroom apartment in the Rising Sun Suites." He points west. I know the place. Plenty of people I went to school with have apartments there.

"Ah, that makes sense," I nod, taking a bite of my food. "Of course, you know where I live." I shrug. When your dad was the mayor for a long time, everyone knows your business.

"I do." He eats a sausage from his meal, chewing and humming at the same time. He filled his bento box with neatly organized rows of vegetables and rice, with a side of fried sausages and a drizzle of teriyaki sauce. I wonder if he makes it himself.

"Everyone does." I try not to sound grumpy, but it's impossible. Once Dad ran for mayor, our entire world became public knowledge. It was the worst.

“Everyone did,” he emphasizes, a slight smile playing on his lips. “Your dad’s retired now. Anyway, my parents were teachers, so I guess you can say we both come from families who value hard work.”

“I can see that.” A warmth spreads through me as I realize we share this common ground.

As we continue eating, Kaito leans back in his chair, a more relaxed expression on his face. “Actually, Max has played a big part in keeping me focused and grounded throughout my career,” he says, referring to his Akita.

“How did you two meet?” I love hearing the stories of how people meet their pairs. I sip my green tea as he reaches out to scratch Max’s head.

“Four years ago, I was visiting an animal shelter with a friend. Max was there, and the moment we made eye contact, I knew we were meant to be together. He opened his mouth and words came tumbling out.” He laughs. “What a magical experience. You know how it is.”

I smile. “I do. I felt the same way when I met Ivan six years ago. It was like finding the missing piece of my soul.” I pause, recalling the day I found my grumpy Russian blue cat. “He was sitting on a ledge, looking down at me like he’d been waiting for me all along.”

“Isn’t it amazing how our pairs can change our lives for the better?” Kaito says, his eyes distant with fond memories.

“Absolutely.”

Feeling more at ease with Kaito, I decide to open up about my past. “You know, after failing that test to get into the Interstellar Agency —”

“You didn’t fail,” he interrupts. “You passed with flying colors. Top one percent.”

I blink a few times as I watch him destroy the side salad he packed.

“How do you know that?” I press my hand to my chest. “I didn’t know that. They never told me my grade.”

He wipes his mouth and closes the napkin in his empty box. “I asked a few days ago, after I was assigned you.” He sighs as he rubs his face. There’s already a shade of stubble across his cheeks. “I remembered the accusations and the rumors from back then, the shocked look on your face as they escorted you from the building. And I wanted to make sure you were qualified before I sunk my time into this.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You thought I was going to be a waste of your time.”

I don’t know why that hurts. It shouldn’t. Kaito is a practical man — a wickedly smart, competent, practical man. He should be protective of his time and energy.

“I was wrong. Obviously.” The humor in his voice relaxes me. He laughs. “Look, I may have an IQ off the charts and a promising career ahead of me,” he says, putting up air quotes and rolling his eyes. “But I am often wrong and not afraid to admit it.”

I lift my bottle of green tea. “You might be the ideal man. Don’t join a dating site or you’ll be flooded with requests.”

This causes him to tilt back his head in a hearty laugh. I like his laugh. “Don’t tell that to my mother or she’ll have me signed up to every one of them before nightfall.”

So, he’s single. I drink my tea to cover my smile.

“Well, what I was going to say before I was so rudely interrupted was that I tried starting a few businesses of my own during those interim years.” I twist the top on my bottle. “None of them did well.”

“Really? What kind?” he asks, his interest piqued.

“Oh, the list is a kilometer long. Mostly tutoring services until those leads dried up.” I take a deep breath, feeling vulnerable as I reveal this part of myself. “Then catering, and then finally a pet accessories business that got me into trouble with the Hiyukis.”

He sits forward. “You got in trouble with the mob?”

“Yes,” I say, lifting my hands. “I’m lucky to have all of my fingers.”

“Tilli.” His voice is serious.

I shrug. “I had nothing left but Ivan and my family. If Suri hadn’t paid them off, I wouldn’t be here today.”

I’ve put three years between me and that mess, and I can finally look back at it and not have a panic attack.

“I lost pretty much everything when I got kicked out of the Academy and sent home for cheating. You can see why this means so much to me.”

He nods slowly, his eyes focused far off.

“I…” He stops for a long moment, his fingers drumming on the table. Something about him is wrong, like he’s upset. But whatever it is, he shakes it off. “I think you have a real chance now, if you can just focus on something that will make the judges take notice.”

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter, looking down at my half-eaten bento box. “You’re one of the top designers at the agency.”

I raise my gaze to meet his, seeing sincerity in his eyes.

“What do you need to stay inspired?” he asks. “How can I help you?”

My mouth is dry, and my tongue refuses to work. Kaito is not what I expected at all. Back in school, he was a quiet guy, a bit nerdy and definitely an introvert. This is not the boy who did that cool flame experiment that demonstrated the principles of a Rubens’ Tube and then didn’t talk to anyone for a week after. He won the science fair with that one, but he didn’t seem to care.

He’s grown up.

And after spending a week watching his hands work, I’m sure he’s really damned good in bed, too. Like, fantastic at it.

“Wait. I know.” He holds up his hands, and my belly squeezes. “You said it before. You’re inspired by looking back.

You said it's helpful to explore older designs for inspiration."

"Sure," I say, finding my voice again. "There's often something valuable in revisiting the past, even if it's just to see how far we've come." I drink more green tea because my mouth is as dry as the desert.

"Then let's do that," Kaito says with enthusiasm. "We can look through the reference library together, find inspiration from past innovations, and build on them for this competition."

"Okay, sure."

"Let's go now, and then we'll get back to work."

Descending into the basement reference library, I'm struck by the sheer size of the room. The walls are lined with compression shelving, preserving countless old spaceship blueprints and design books. Kaito walks beside me, his casual stride exuding confidence.

"Wow," I murmur, awestruck by the treasure trove before us. "I had no idea this place was so huge."

"Isn't it incredible?" Kaito grins, nodding toward the shelves. "These compression systems keep everything safe and tucked away until we need them."

As we search for older ship designs, excitement buzzes in my chest in this quest for inspiration. With each blueprint we find, I grow more confident in my abilities. How could I have let fear hold me back for so long?

"Hey, Tilli!" a familiar voice calls out, the playful tone unmistakable.

Hiroko weaves through the stacks of books towards us, her colorful outfit a stark contrast to the muted surroundings. We've grabbed coffee together a few times this week, and I already consider her a friend.

"Hi!" I greet her, glad for the company. "What brings you down here?"

"Looking for a specific book on spaceship design," she replies, her eyes scanning the shelves. "You know how it is —

always trying to stay ahead of the curve.”

“Yeah, I do.” I chuckle at our shared pursuit of knowledge. We’re very similar. “Kaito and I are doing the same thing.”

“Looks like we’re on the same quest.” Hiroko glances at Kaito with a nod of acknowledgment. “Good luck with your search!”

The sudden sound of Riku’s voice cuts through the air, making my heart skip a beat. Ugh. Why must he always be around?

“What a surprise.” His sneer is turned up to full, his eyes darting between Kaito and me. “The dynamic duo, hard at work.”

“Riku,” I reply, trying to keep my voice steady. It’s impossible not to feel the jealousy radiating off him, threatening to poison the surrounding atmosphere.

“Looking for some cheat materials, Tilli?”

I press my lips together, hoping his accusations will stop if I just don’t say anything.

When I don’t answer, he smiles. “Need a hand, Hiroko?” he asks, ignoring me and focusing on her instead. There’s an unmistakable edge in his tone that makes me clench my fists.

“Thanks, but I think I’ve got it covered,” Hiroko replies, her voice cool and casual.

“Come on, Tilli, let’s get back to work,” Kaito interjects, sensing my growing discomfort. Riku’s very presence causes my anxiety to shoot sky high. I want to punch him every time I see him. Kaito glances at me before turning to face Riku. “We all have deadlines, right?”

“Of course.” Riku forces a smile. With that, he turns on his heel and stalks away, leaving a trail of tension in his wake.

As soon as Riku is out of earshot, Hiroko leans in close and whispers, “Don’t let him get to you. He’s just jealous because he knows you and Kaito are a force to be reckoned with.”

“Thanks,” I murmur. I need to remember that Riku’s envy doesn’t define me — my skills and determination do. His actions say more about him than they do about me.

“Besides,” she continues, her voice brightening, “I heard the funniest story about Riku the other day. Apparently, he tried to impress a girl by claiming he could levitate objects with his mind.” She rolls her eyes dramatically, making me chuckle despite the lingering unease.

“Really?” I ask, leaning against the wall.

“Yep,” Hiroko confirms, grinning. “And when she asked him to prove it, he ‘accidentally’ knocked over a vase and blamed it on his ‘overwhelming psychic energy.’”

I bend forward in a hearty laugh. “Sounds like something he’d do.” The mental image of Riku floundering in his attempt at flirtation is enough to lighten my mood considerably.

“Exactly,” Hiroko agrees, her laughter mingling with mine. “So don’t worry about him, okay? Hey. Why don’t we all go out for dinner tonight? It’ll be a nice change of pace from working non-stop.”

“Oooh, I like this idea.” The thought of spending more time with my newfound friends brings a smile to my face. “We could go to Izakaya Tanaka. My sister Myra works there. The food is amazing, and it’s not too far from here.”

“Perfect!” Hiroko exclaims, clapping her hands in excitement. She glances at Kaito, who’s been standing a bit apart from us, lost in thought. “Kaito, you should come too.”

“Uh, sure,” he agrees, his eyes meeting mine. “I could use a night out.”

“Me too,” Riku interjects, returning to our group. His tone is casual, but I can sense the underlying tension as he invites himself along.

I hesitate, my enthusiasm dampened by Riku’s presence. But before I can voice my doubts, Kaito speaks up. “The more the merrier, right? We’re all working together, so why not enjoy some downtime together?”

His words are meant to reassure me, and they do, to an extent. Still, a pang of unease hits me in the chest. If Riku acts like a jerk, I will not be able to hold back telling him so.

“Okay, fine,” I say, trying not to show my reluctance. “Let’s meet at Izakaya Tanaka around seven?”

“Seven it is,” Hiroko confirms, shooting me an encouraging smile. She walks away to get back to work, Riku following behind her. Great. A lingering sense of disquiet sits heavy in my stomach.

“Hey,” Kaito says softly, pulling me aside as the others depart. “I know Riku can be a pain, but maybe if we all spend some time together, he’ll warm up and stop being such an asshole.” His hand rests on my shoulder, a comforting weight.

“Maybe.”

Kaito’s pretty optimistic, even though my own doubts linger. His confidence, however, makes me want to trust him.

Can I trust him?

CHAPTER EIGHT

UNDERNEATH THE SOFT glow of paper lanterns, I step into Izakaya Tanaka alongside Kaito, Hiroko, and Riku. With all the commotion inside, both Ivan and Max decide to stay out front. I lean over and stroke Ivan's back before promising him a treat when we return home.

I know this place well since Myra works here, and I come in often enough. Mrs. Tanaka is at the bar tonight, serving drinks, and the kitchen is hopping. I try to peek inside when the door opens, but I don't see Myra. The hostess, Sara, brings us straight to a table along the rear wall.

"Nice place. I've never been here," Hiroko says, gesturing to Riku to take the chair next to the wall on her side. I sit beside Kaito, the scent of his cologne mingling with the aroma of grilled meats and hot rice. My heart flutters as I glance at him, taking in his tall stature and messy hair. Yep, I've got it bad. Head over heels.

As we settle into our seats, Riku leans back, eyeing me with a sly grin. "So, Tilli, I heard you like to reference old spaceship designs to make something new? How avant-garde."

I roll my eyes, trying to brush off his snide remark, and thank the waiter when he brings glasses of water.

"That's why you were in the archives today, right?" he prods.

I sip my water. "Just looking for inspiration. You should try it sometime."

“Inspiration?” He scoffs. “I’m inspired all the time without having to steal someone else’s work.”

What an asshole. Still assuming I’m a cheater after all this time.

I groan and look at my watch. “We’ve been seated for all of five seconds and you’re already starting on me? Give it a break, will ya?”

I huff and try to suppress my frustration as I focus on the menu. Maybe if I call out what a jerk he is, he’ll stop. But my appetite wanes as Riku continues his subtle undermining.

“From what I’ve seen,” he says, continuing to prod me, “your designs could use a bit more... refinement. But then again, maybe you’re not cut out for this line of work.”

I set the menu down. “How would you know anything about my designs?”

He lifts one corner of his mouth. “We all saw the portfolios that were submitted, yours included. I suggested we pass you over, and I wasn’t the only one. Too bad I was outvoted.”

“Riku, that’s enough,” Hiroko interjects. She shoots me a supportive look, but Riku’s words have already burrowed themselves in my mind, echoing the self-doubt that has haunted me through countless failed ventures.

I know he’s wrong, and I know he’s being an asshole.

Yet...

“Is there a problem?” Kaito asks, his voice steady and calm. “Tilli is working as hard as anyone on our team.” He meets Riku’s gaze, waiting for an answer.

“Of course. No problem,” Riku replies smoothly, feigning innocence. “Just making conversation.”

The sizzling aroma of grilled yakitori fills the air, but I barely notice it as I try to brush off Riku’s comments. I understood this was going to be hard, trying to get into this inner circle after such a long time away. I was hoping the majority of them would have forgotten about the cheating

accusation and moved on. But it appears that hope was wrong. I may never escape my past now.

As Hiroko and Kaito casually discuss the menu and what foods they like, I think back on that awful time, the moment I was accused of cheating. That sickening, empty gut feeling consumed me for months after. It took a long time to shake it.

And now it's only taken one comment from Riku to bring it all back.

We order food, and saké arrives quickly. Thank the gods. I finish my first cup in two gulps and fill it up again.

Riku sips his saké, a smug grin plastered on his face. "You know, Tilli, it's no secret that your father pulled some strings so you could take the entrance exams again. It seems that, without him, you would still be a nobody. It's a good thing you've got Dear Ol' Daddy to get you in."

"Riku," Hiroko warns. Her multicolored hair catches the warm glow of the overhead lanterns like a vibrant halo.

"So..." I start, pushing down the self-doubt that's gnawing at me. "You think I'm here because of my dad?"

"Hey, I'm just stating the facts." Riku's voice drips with insincerity.

"I'm sure your test scores speak for themselves." Hiroko's eyes lock on mine, offering reassurance.

She doesn't have to say this. She's actually my competitor, and it would be foolish of her to invest too much of her emotions or support in me.

"Thanks." I'm grateful to her even if I don't deserve her kindness.

But Riku isn't finished yet.

"Speaking of fathers," he says, leaning in closer, his jealousy evident in his narrowed eyes. "Tilli's dad promised to help my family find housing through his non-profit, remember? And guess what? We were homeless for years because his organization failed us."

“I had nothing to do with that.” I can barely push the words past the lump in my throat.

“It’s still your family, right?” Riku challenges, a sinister glint in his eyes.

I open my mouth to defend my family, but Kaito butts in.

“Riku, you need to stop,” Kaito says, his voice laced with anger. “This is not the time or place for this conversation.”

“Fine.” Riku takes a deep swig of his saké. “Let’s just enjoy our dinner, shall we?”

“Thanks,” I whisper to Kaito, and he nods in response.

My eyes widen the minute his fingers brush mine under the table. Wait. What’s happening here?

I glance at Kaito, and he flashes a quick grin at me. Uh oh. I’m a goner. Cue the fireworks and soundtrack swelling, thanks for playing. Suddenly, the only thing I can focus on is how much I want to tackle him into the nearest utility closet. Riku who? It’s a little hard to concentrate when Kaito’s thumb is tracing distracting circles on my palm. Can someone turn down the thermostat in here?

Note to self: sarcasm and romance don’t mix. I’m a mess. The only thing that can save me now is a freezing cold bucket of logic, and I’m not quite ready to return to reason just yet.

“Kaito,” I say hesitantly, hoping to pull him into the conversation and put Riku’s behavior behind us. “What will you be doing this coming weekend?”

His fingers slip through mine and my heart races. Somebody stop this rollercoaster... or don’t. I kind of never want to get off.

“I think we’ll be at the office, right?” he says, squeezing my fingers.

“Yes. I believe you’re right.” My face is on fire, and the back of my neck sweats. Damn. Hiding my attraction is impossible now.

“We’re going to work through the weekend too, aren’t we, Hiroko?” Riku asks, leaning away from Hiroko to see her expression. “Hard work gets people to space. There’s no cheating that.”

My fingers tighten around Kaito’s.

“Easy,” he mumbles at me, and I relax even though I’m boiling inside.

Riku’s words sting like needles piercing my skin, each one bringing up memories I’d rather forget. This fucking asshole just won’t let it go. My mind races through the list of failures I’ve tried to bury deep within myself — the boutique that never made it past the first season, the bakery that crumbled under the weight of mounting debts.

I let go of Kaito’s hand as a depressive wave crests over me. Riku may be an ass, but he’s not far from the truth.

I am a failure. What the hell am I even doing here?

“Maybe you’re right,” I say, lifting my chin and looking at Riku.

“Oh yeah?” Riku raises his eyebrows. “About what?”

I glance at Kaito, and his smile is gone, his face pale.

“Everything. After all, anyone who has failed as many times as I have must be destined for failure in everything they do, right?”

“Exactly.” Riku nods. “I’m glad you’re starting to see the truth.”

I laugh and shake my head.

“I mean, I know you’re nothing but a petty and jealous bully,” I snap, unable to hold back any longer. “And you can’t stand the fact that despite my setbacks, I still have passion and drive. But you’re right, Riku. I’m destined to fail at this. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.”

“That’s not true,” Hiroko insists.

“It is.”

“It is not,” Kaito says, his eyes meeting mine.

But I shake my head. I am a failure.

“Great! Then I suppose you’re out of the program.” Riku’s smile stretches from here to the moons and back. “I’ll expect your forfeit letter tomorrow on Professor Nishimura’s desk.” He dusts off his hands like he’s done with me, the dirty cheater.

“Enough!” Kaito shouts, slamming his hands on the table, causing the dishes to rattle. “I’m tired of your constant competitiveness and holier-than-thou attitude. How dare you bully Tilli into submission!”

Riku blinks. The restaurant falls silent, all eyes turning towards our table. My cheeks burn with embarrassment. Pretty much everyone here knows me.

“We’re supposed to be a team, working together,” he stresses, like Riku is some three-year-old who doesn’t know any better. “And instead, it’s always you against everyone else.”

When no one responds, Riku sits back and laughs.

“Bravo!” He claps his hands slowly and sarcastically. “Quite the performance. Are you two already fucking?” His eyes scan me, up and down. “You work fast.”

That’s it.

I pick up my glass of water and toss it in his face. All the air in the room is sucked away as everyone in a three meter vicinity gasps. My heart stops and my hearing rings. The water splashes across Riku’s face, drenching his shirt and the table, and Hiroko jumps away. He sputters, clearly taken aback.

“Fuck you,” I say, surprised at myself. This is language my sisters use, not me. “You want me gone? I’m gone.”

His expression darkens into an angry scowl as he wipes the water from his eyes.

“You stupid bitch,” he growls, lurching to his feet. “You’ll pay for that.”

Before I can react, Riku's hand lashes out, striking me hard across the face. Pain explodes in my cheek as I stumble backwards, knocking over my chair.

"Hey!" Hiroko cries, leaping to her feet. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What is happening here? In my restaurant?" Mrs. Tanaka is suddenly at the table, looking between Riku and me.

"She assaulted me," Riku says, pointing at me.

I nod, my fingers trembling as I touch the bruised skin of my cheek.

"I... I..." I stumble over my protestations as I back away from the table.

"I think I know who the bully is here," Mrs. Tanaka says, her eyes on Riku.

He holds up his hands and gestures to his wet shirt. "Everyone here saw her attack me first. She's lucky I won't press charges."

I have failed once again, and I will not stick around to find out just how badly. My feet move of their own accord as I weave through the tables. Ean was right. I'm my own worst enemy.

"Tilli!" Kaito calls out.

"Someone get Myra," I hear Mrs. Tanaka say as I reach the front.

I push through the door and step out into the cool night air, stupid, childish tears streaming down my face. The pain in my cheek is throbbing, and my fleeting euphoria of a connection with Kaito is long gone. I can't believe I let Riku get the better of me once again. I thought I was stronger than this.

I stumble down the street, not sure where to go or what to do. I should go home, but Dad will be angry if he sees me like this.

Ivan follows me, his steps steady and sure. "What happened, Till? Do I need to scratch someone?"

“Wait, Tilli!” Kaito calls out, his voice laced with concern as he pushes through the door behind me. Max stands up and trots along by his side.

“Kaito, please,” I say, turning around and walking away. “I just want to be alone right now.”

“Too bad,” he replies, striding up beside me. He stops and puts his body in my path. I can feel his eyes on me as he takes in my disheveled appearance. He reaches out his hand and gently touches my bruised cheek, bringing a wave of warmth that spreads through my body.

“Don’t give up,” he pleads softly. His messy hair falls into his eyes. “You’re stronger than you think, and what I’ve seen all week in the study room was enough to convince me you’re onto something.” He pauses for a moment, then adds, “No matter how many times Riku tries to bring you down, don’t let him win. He’s an asshole.”

He takes my hand in his and squeezes it tight. His eyes lock with mine, and the sincerity in them is unmistakable.

“Please.”

For a brief moment, I feel the weight of defeat lifting off my chest. His warmth washes over me, replacing the chill of the night air.

“Kaito,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. I should argue with him, but I’m too transfixed.

He smiles and leans in close. “I’m going to kiss you,” he whispers.

“Yes. I think you’d better.”

He chuckles as his lips brush against mine, at first hesitant and then going for the gold. I melt against him, my arms wrapping around his neck as his hands slide down to my waist. The warmth between us grows, and I forget about my bruised cheek, about Riku, about everything except the feel of Kaito’s lips on mine.

Oh wow. I was just fantasizing about this yesterday, and it’s actually happening! Go brain!

Ivan lets out a disgruntled meow, and Kaito pulls away, grinning down at me. “I think Ivan’s getting jealous,” he says, nodding towards the cat.

“He’s always jealous.”

“Don’t quit,” he insists, and I look away.

I don’t think I can go back to the I.A. after what happened tonight.

“Tilli!” Myra comes racing out of Izakaya Tanaka. “What happened? Are you all right?”

She slides between Kaito and me, oblivious to the situation.

“Did that animal attack you?” she asks, grabbing my shoulders. “I swear to the heavens, Riku Saito better watch his back. He’s been asking for a beating for years.”

I chuckle and my cheek burns. Ow. I’ve never been slapped before. I can’t believe that just happened.

Myra tugs at my arm. “Come on. Let me take you back to my place. Mrs. Tanaka gave me the rest of the night off. We’ll put a cold pack on that, and you’ll be good to go back to work tomorrow.”

But I don’t want to go to work tomorrow. I don’t want to face anyone again.

As Myra pulls me down the street, I look over my shoulder at Kaito. He’s standing there, watching us go, his expression sad.

Despite the kiss, I wish this night had never happened.

CHAPTER NINE

I GROAN as I blink my eyes open. Where am I again? The morning light filters through the curtains in Myra's apartment, and the weight of Ivan sprawled across my legs is comforting. I tug my blankets a little higher to keep warm under the onslaught of Myra's air conditioning. She likes to sleep in an icebox. Mochi, Myra's skunk pair, snores gently at the foot of the bed.

"Morning, sunshine," Myra says from her spot at the small table by the window, tablet in hand. She doesn't even bother looking up. "You should probably start getting ready for work."

"No." I groan, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. "I'm quitting, remember?"

I certainly remember. The water splashing onto Riku's face. The slap. My declaration that I quit. Hiroko's frown as she watched me leave the table. Everyone's eyes on me. It was the worst public blow-up I've ever had. It's a good thing Dad isn't mayor anymore, or I'd be hearing about it from his team.

Hopefully, he never, ever catches wind of what happened.

But, wait... The kiss... Now that was worth remembering forever.

But the kiss is not enough to return to the I.A.

Myra frowns, setting her tablet down. She leans forward, studying me with concern. "Tilli, you can't be serious. You? Give up? You've been working so hard for this opportunity for

years. No. That's not what Kimura women do. We keep going until we get what we want."

I sigh and flop back onto the bed. After so many failed ventures, it's hard to believe this time could be any different. "Yeah, well, maybe it's time for a change," I mutter, avoiding her gaze.

"Come on. Don't let Riku Saito, of all people, set you back. He has been an asshole for years. I'm convinced he was born that way. You can't let him take everything you've worked so hard for." Myra stands and walks over, sitting on the edge of the bed. She places her hand on mine, her touch gentle and comforting. "You're stronger than this."

"I don't know. Maybe it wasn't meant to be." The depressive cloud is back, hovering over me. It so rarely shows up, but this morning, it's bigger and darker than ever.

Myra opens her mouth, but I plow forward.

"Maybe all of those failures were the universe's way of telling me to move on to something else."

Myra sighs. "You've always been a little fatalistic, even when you're one of the sweetest of us." Her gaze hardens. "You're going back to work. I said so."

I roll my eyes. "Well, okay then. Because you said so."

I stare at her ceiling. She's probably right. I shouldn't let Riku deter me from getting my dream job. He's just jealous.

"Fine." I take a deep breath, steeling my resolve. "I'll go back to work today. But if things don't start looking up soon, I'll have to reconsider."

"Fair enough," Myra agrees with a nod.

With a quick glance at Ivan and Mochi, still fast asleep, I add, "Now let me get up and get ready." I wonder if I can borrow some of her clothes for the day, or should I go home first? I have plenty of time. It's only nine.

"Besides," Myra adds, a mischievous glint in her eye, "Kaito's cute and obviously interested in you. I waited until you were done sucking face last night before I ran over."

I throw my head back in a laugh, waking both animals on the bed.

“You have a way with words.” I sigh as I search for my bra. “That was probably a mistake, too.”

“The kiss?” Myra raises an eyebrow, and I nod. “Nope. I saw the way he was looking at you. He held your hand. You wrapped your arms around his neck.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “And besides the kiss, he was so sweet and supportive. You should give him a chance.”

“Kaito’s just being nice.” Kaito has been nothing but kind and patient with me, even when I’m at my most stubborn. But he’s my mentor. The kiss was great, phenomenal, but I’m not even sure if we’re allowed to have a relationship.

“Nice or not, you won’t be able to avoid him for long.” She grins. “He messaged me thirty minutes ago to see how you were. He’s on his way over with coffee.”

Panic flares in my chest, and I scramble out of bed, nearly tripping over the slumbering pairs. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I need to get out of here.”

Forget dressing in Myra’s clothes. I have to find my bra, brush my hair and teeth, and get the hell out of here. I’m not ready to see him yet. We should meet on neutral ground at work. It was already a mistake trying to go out to eat together last night.

“Relax.” Myra laughs softly. “Just take a deep breath and try talking to him. It might do you some good.”

Easier said than done. I fish my bra out of the corner, put it back on in the bathroom, and smooth down my unruly hair.

What was I thinking? There’s no time to brush my hair and teeth.

“Let’s go, Ivan.”

Ivan lifts his head, yawns and stretches. “Right behind you.”

When I step outside the apartment building and the door closes behind me, though, there’s no time left for second

thoughts — Kaito is already there, holding two steaming cups of coffee.

“Morning.” He greets me with the warm, genuine smile that never fails to disarm me. “I thought you could use a little pick-me-up.”

Shit. I can’t get away from him now.

“Uh, thanks,” I manage, accepting the cup and taking a tentative sip. The bitter taste of black coffee washes over my tongue, and gratitude overtakes the earlier panic. Ah, coffee.

“Your cheek looks okay.” He steps to the side to let me down. Ivan trots down the steps and walks over to Max to sniff him. “I was worried.”

I smile and wince. “It’s a little sore, but Myra helped me ice it last night and gave me some meds. I don’t think it’ll bruise.”

We sit down on the front stoop, shoulders brushing ever so slightly, and Kaito looks at me with those earnest eyes. “You should press charges against him,” he insists.

“No.” I shake my head. “I’d rather we all just forget about it.”

His eyes and face scrunch up. Oh no. “Well, I reported him last night to Professor Nishimura. She may say something to you.”

I sigh and stare into my coffee.

“Maybe it’s for the better. I don’t know if I have what it takes to make it in the Interstellar Agency.”

“Hey.” His voice is gentle but firm. “You’re one of the most talented and determined people I’ve ever met. Don’t sell yourself short.” He slips his arm around my waist and pulls me to him. “I’ve known you were smart and gifted since we were kids. You can’t give up now.” He kisses me on the forehead, and I rest my head against his shoulder. “You still have work to do.”

His words sit in my head. It’s one thing for my family to believe in me, but it’s another for him to. He must see some

talent in me to say this. I guess I made an impression on him when I was younger.

I rest my hand on his leg, drumming my fingers against his pants.

“I swear. You and my sister. You’re tag-teaming me.”

He smiles as he squeezes me to him. “Does that mean it worked?”

“Fine. I’ll give it another shot.”

We exchange a lingering glance, our eyes locked for just a moment longer than necessary. The air between us is charged with sexual tension.

“I enjoyed kissing you last night,” he says, lifting an eyebrow. “I’d like to do it again.”

I clear my throat and stand up. “I’d like to do a hell of a lot more than kissing.” Ooooh, I’m feeling forward this morning. “But I’m not sure it’s allowed in a mentor-mentee relationship.” I gesture between us.

His returning gaze is dark and lights up my insides. “I checked last night. It’s not forbidden.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s allowed.” I roll my eyes. “But I’ll take it.”

I point at him as I back down the stairs. “You’ll get a kiss and more than that, but not before I clean up.” When I reach the bottom stair, I hop and tilt my head. “See you at work.”

“You’re a tease, Tilli!” he calls out as I walk away.

My returning smile is just a little evil.

Just a little.

Stepping into my bedroom, I stand in front of my closet, staring at the rows of clothes that stare back at me.

“Is this really the right thing to do?” I ask Ivan as I swipe through my shirts. “Or am I just setting myself up for another disappointment?”

Ivan looks up from my feet. “Oh no. Not this again.” He sighs. “Listen up,” he says, his tone commanding. Well, well. “So you’ve had a few setbacks and critics poking their noses where they don’t belong. What of it? Life comes with setbacks and critics — it’s just the way it is. You’ve worked hard to get here; don’t let a few obstacles undo it all. Your skills and talents didn’t disappear overnight. Now stop your moping, pick that silly human head of yours up, and get back to proving how wrong all those doubters are. You’ve scratched and clawed your way this far. Don’t give up now.”

He stands, flicks his tail, and heads for the door.

“Honestly, what would you do without me here to knock some sense into that daft brain of yours...” he mumbles as he exits the room.

Well, okay, then.

Cats.

I pull out a clean pair of jeans and one of my favorite tops, clean underwear, and head to the bathroom. As I shower, I let my thoughts drift to Kaito, wondering where things will go after this. He’s into me, for sure, but this could be a huge, giant, enormous mistake.

But the kiss was nice... and there could be more where that came from.

“Focus, Tilli,” I chide myself, shaking off the distracting thoughts and turning off the shower before I get any ideas. “There’s no time for this.”

Once I’m dressed, I grab a sweater for the cold study room and head out to the rest of the house. In the kitchen, I snatch an apple, a muffin from the bread box, and a bottle of orange juice. I guess Mom went shopping yesterday. I barely see her now that I’m at the I.A. all the time.

Stepping outside, I squint against the bright sunlight as I notice my dad in the garden. He’s bent over, pulling weeds

with a focus and determination that brings a smile to my face. It's been a while since I've seen him work in the garden.

Looks like he took my suggestion.

“Hey, Dad,” I call out, walking over to him. “How's it going?”

“Ah, Tilli!” He straightens up to greet me and wipes the dirt from his hands onto his pants. “Good. I figured I'd give the garden a shot. If you can try again at getting into the Agency, then I can certainly attempt to turn my life around, too.”

I nod as I look around and try not to get choked up. He's really trying.

His words hit me hard, and guilt washes over me. The thought that my dad had gained inspiration from my struggles is both humbling and motivating. I never realized how much my actions could affect others — especially those I love most.

“Suri and Finn are here helping me clean up the garden.” He points to the far end of the path.

I glance over to see Suri, her long hair tied back, kneeling next to a vibrant patch of flowers. Her Golden Retriever, Finn, sits by her side, wagging his tail at the sight of me. “Hi, Till,” she greets me with a wave.

Well, will you look at that? Just last year, Dad and Suri were hardly talking to each other. He was so hard on her about finding a boyfriend and moving out of the house. She nearly disowned him after what he pulled. I think that's why he hasn't insisted on me leaving. After his heart attack, he re-evaluated his life.

“Hey, sis,” I reply, reaching down to give Finn a scratch behind the ear. “It's good to see you. On planet for a while?”

She nods. “Four days. Lots of meetings at the I.A. We should get lunch.”

Suri is the head of Quality Control for the ships we're building in orbit. She got the promotion last year. It's been

nice to have her on the ground more, though she loves going into orbit.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

I turn to Dad, squinting into the sun. It’s going to be hot out today.

“Is that a new idea for the garden?” I ask, nodding towards the potted plants he’s been moving around.

“Ah, yes!” he says, excitement bleeding into his voice. “I thought it would be nice to have a more modular setup this time. That way, we can keep the seasonal plants in rotation and always have something fresh and beautiful to look at.”

“That sounds like a fantastic idea. Very impressive.”

“Thanks,” he says, beaming with pride. “Now, you’d better head off to work.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later!” I give him a quick hug before turning to leave.

He looks into my face and furrows his eyebrows. I suspect he sees my cheek is still a little red and swollen, so I turn away quickly. I don’t need to get into it right now with him. It’s not as if he likes Riku Saito either, after the way he tried to drag our family through the mud all those years ago.

“Bye, Tilli!” Suri calls out, waving as she returns her attention to the flowers.

“Later!” I call back.

I turn away and let myself through the gate, gripping the straps of my bag tightly.

All right. Let’s do this, Kimura style.

CHAPTER TEN

DAY AFTER ENDLESS DAY, Kaito and I delve deeper into the complex world of spaceship design. We spend hours researching exotic materials, analyzing intricate blueprints late into the night, and discussing new revolutionary ideas long after the moons have risen high in the starry sky.

There was a time a few years ago when I would have given anything for this, a partner to brainstorm with. Now that I have it, it's like the whole world has opened up to me.

I'm a little afraid it's all going to end in another week.

The bond I'm forming with Kaito strengthens and grows with each passing day spent together. We share in moments of carefree laughter and in times of frustration alike, fueling our minds and warming our hearts with countless cups of fresh coffee or jasmine tea.

Five days ago, we started locking the door, and we papered over the window, too. I wanted security against anyone stealing our ideas... and some privacy. I think my lips are raw from the kissing, but I don't care. I take every stolen moment I can get — on his lap, in his arms, sitting side by side.

Please, don't let this come to an end.

Beat as we are, our dream keeps us going. Throwing ourselves into this work side by side, partners bonded by a shared goal, we click like kindred spirits. Max and Ivan sit guard at our feet through all the long hours we put in. Faithful companions keeping watch in case we finally pass out.

Word by word, line by line, and blueprint by blueprint, our spaceship comes to life under our hands, but something is missing. The absence of the ‘spark’ gnaws at the back of my consciousness.

What is missing?

“Have you considered changing the configuration of the galley? Maybe we should switch around the placement of the storage containers.” Kaito’s eyes never leave the screen in front of him.

“Already looked into it,” I reply, sighing at yet another dead end. “There’s only two ways to configure them. And both don’t give me anything new.”

“Yeah,” he mutters, scratching Max behind the ears. “There has to be something we’re missing.”

We work ourselves to the bone, running on nothing but caffeine, passion, and sheer stubbornness to build something insanely awesome. But even we need to come up for air eventually — and for us, that means an impromptu drop in from little Miss Colorful herself. Because really, who doesn’t love an unannounced guest when you haven’t showered in three days, haven’t slept in twice as long, and your workspace looks like a cyclone hit it? Good times.

She knocks on the door and waits to be admitted. I hastily cover up our work and straighten myself out before lifting the paper on the window to check if it’s her.

I unlock the door, and Hiroko breezes into the room, her colorful hair and eclectic outfit brightening up our workspace. “Hey Tilli, how’s it going?”

“Uh, hey, Hiroko,” I stutter. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse Riku peering in from the door, his expression one of contempt. I wish he would go away.

“Everything’s good,” I tell Hiroko, trying to sound casual. “Just working away, you know?”

“Of course. You two are always so focused. I feel like I never see you leave this room.”

“Because we don’t,” Kaito replies, not looking up. His tone is sarcastic and dry, and I have to laugh. It’s true.

I swear, I don’t even know what day of the week it is anymore. The hours melt together into a big blur of blueprint scribbles, prototype explosions, and trash talk over whose turn it is to make a coffee run. But no one should feel bad for us — we brought this madness on ourselves and we wouldn’t trade it for anything. Well, except maybe a full night’s sleep.

Hiroko sighs in sympathy. “You should really get outside. It’s gorgeous out there today. Well, I won’t keep you. Just wanted to say hi.”

“Thanks for stopping by. We’ll get coffee soon. I promise,” I manage, watching as she waves goodbye and Riku slinks away behind her.

“Ugh, I need a break,” I groan, rubbing my temples. “My brain is going to short-circuit.”

My eyes are drier than the northern desert, and my skull is throbbing like a nightclub bass line at three A.M. If I have to look at one more equation or circuit diagram right now, my gray matter will melt. Smoke may even start pouring out of my ears. At this point, my cognitive abilities have been whittled down to basic survival functions and a caffeine addiction.

“I have a better idea,” Kaito replies. I sigh and look up from my drawings to find a raw, intense desire behind Kaito’s sultry smile.

My heart skips a beat as I meet his gaze. My body reacts to his suggestive tone by sending a shock down through my core. Suddenly, I forget about all the work and the stress weighing me down. All that matters now is him.

“What’s that?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady. I lick my bottom lip.

“Let’s take a break from work. I think you could use a release,” he murmurs, standing up and walking towards me. His hands find my waist, pulling me closer until our bodies are

touching. My breath hitches in my throat as his lips brush against my neck.

I should say no. We have work to do. We can't afford to take a break. But the way his hands are moving over my body, the way his lips are trailing down my collarbone, it's impossible to resist. My body is screaming for him, for him to abate all the stress and pressure.

"Okay," I whisper, giving in to the desire that's been building between us for weeks. All the kissing and heavy petting we've done in private is about to spill over into something more.

His lips meet mine and the kiss deepens, pulling all the air from my body and leaving me lightheaded. I back against the table, and he eases his fingers into the waist of my pants. Oh shit. He's serious.

Yes. Absolutely yes.

I fumble with the waistband and push my pants and underwear down, then reach for his as our kiss deepens. With a gasp, he pulls away.

"No, just you." He removes my hands from his pants and pushes my shoulder down so I'm lying on the table.

I nod, my breath coming in short pants as he kneels between my legs. He leans forward, his lips seeking mine again as his fingers trail down my stomach. I moan softly, arching my back as he slips his fingers between my thighs. His touch is electric, sending sparks of pleasure coursing through me.

My gods, Hiroko was just here five minutes ago and now this is happening? Yes, yes, yes.

His breath is against my skin as he kisses his way down my body, his fingers never stopping their maddening rhythm. I reach out blindly, my fingers tangling in his hair as he takes me to the edge and then pulls back, teasing me until I'm begging for release.

"Please," I whimper.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs in reply, his voice low and husky. And then he’s there, his mouth on me, and I’m lost in a whirlwind.

I clutch at the table, my back arching as he brings me to the brink and over it, my body shuddering with the force of my release. He doesn’t stop though, his fingers still moving inside me as he brings me to another peak.

It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced before, this raw, intense desire that courses through me. It is the best. thing. ever. My breathing deepens, my head lightens, and all of my anxiety and stress ebb away.

As I come down from my orgasm, he stands up and looks down at me with a half-smile. “Better?” he asks.

I nod, still too breathless to speak. I can only manage a smile as I sit up and pull my underwear back on. Ooh, the room spins when I stand, so he pulls me into his arms.

“Good,” he replies. He leans down and kisses me gently, his lips lingering against mine for a moment before he pulls away. His eyes are still smoldering with desire, and I’m melting again.

“Can you walk?” he asks, bringing his hands to my face. “We should eat. Let’s grab our bento boxes and get some fresh air.”

“I’m not sure I can, after that.”

His grin is sexy as hell. “Though I would love to have you for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and maybe a midnight snack, we should eat real food.”

“Fine,” I say with a mocking sigh. I find my pants and pull them back on.

Outside in the courtyard, the sunlight filters through the leaves above us, casting dappled shadows on our faces as we sit down on a park bench. The cool breeze dances around us, providing a much-needed break from the stuffy confines of our workspace. The sexy interlude feels a lifetime away when we’re outside enjoying a meal together.

“Did that really just happen?” I ask him, and he laughs.

“It did. Best decision I’ve made all week, if I say so myself.” He shrugs. “You seemed to enjoy it, though I think I’ll need a cold shower soon enough.”

“We both need to wash.” I laugh and stretch my arms. “I don’t remember the last time I was home.”

“We could go enjoy a shower at my place.” He blinks a few times, letting his smile do all the talking.

“You’re full of good ideas, but you were right. We need to eat.”

I pull my lunch from my bag, grateful to him for putting me right.

Kaito and I dig in without another word, too blissed out in the moment to make conversation. Finally, some nourishment that doesn’t come from a vending machine. We eat together in companionable silence, enjoying a break from the mad challenges and demands we’ve been drowning in lately. No calculations to double-check, no crises to troubleshoot, no egos to massage — just the summer sounds of birds chirping and the occasional dog walker passing by. Max lies in the sun, too, and Ivan is off stalking some poor bird.

As I chew on fried shrimp and egg rolls, my brain slowly returns from overdrive to a gentle purr, tension and stress melting off me like ice cream on a hot day. The sex got me on the right path, that’s for sure. By the time I get to my dumplings, I’m human again instead of a caffeine-powered cyborg mad scientist. Who knew something as simple as sunshine and real food could be so rejuvenating?

Kaito leans back with a contented sigh, peeking over at me with a grin. “We should quit while we’re ahead. Run off and sell bentos on some tropical beach instead.”

I snort. “You’d be bored in a week and making miniature rockets out of palm fronds. Admit it, you’re as hopelessly devoted to this quest as I am.”

He laughs, not denying it. Once explorers, always explorers. There’s no escape from the call of discovery and no

rest for the dreamers.

But the annoyance at our situation still tickles at my good mood.

“I’m so frustrated with myself,” I confess, plucking a piece of grass and twirling it in my fingers. “It feels like nothing is clicking, like I’m grasping at straws.”

“I hear you. We’ve both been working extra hard, and I feel like we’re just missing the mark,” Kaito says gently, reaching over to give my hand a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll figure it out. You’ll figure it out,” he stresses. “I believe in you. The big idea is just around the bend.”

Wasn’t Ean telling me none of his sisters believed in themselves? And here Kaito believes in me, even when I don’t. A smile spreads across my face, feeling the warmth of his trust.

As we finish eating, Kaito puts away his new bento box, which catches my eye. “Oh, I like your bento box. Where did you get it?”

“Thanks. I got it from the tea shop over on Fifth Avenue. I love it because it’s modular and can go in any configuration. Makes it really convenient.”

“Modular...” I muse aloud, the gears in my brain suddenly whirring into action.

Wait. This... This is an idea!

Giddiness grabs my heart and thrusts into overdrive.

“That’s it!”

“Uh, what’s it?” Kaito asks, putting his bento box into a bag.

“It’s just... the bento box, with all its separate compartments and layers that can be arranged in so many ways. The portable potted garden my dad has been building, using interlocking planters. Even the compression shelves in the archives library that can be slid back and compacted together or pulled out and expanded as needed. Don’t you see?” My words tumble out in a rush of revelation.

“Wait,” Kaito says, looking around and holding up a hand. “Let’s take this inside before you say anything else in a public space.”

“Good idea.”

We pack up and head in. My mind is churning, and my legs shake with pent up energy. This is it!

I burst through the door, and Kaito trails behind me as we make our way to the work table. I hastily brush aside papers and pencils to make room for this new idea taking shape.

“Okay,” I begin, breathless, “let’s get started. Spaces that are infinitely configurable. Adaptive. Modular.” I pace back and forth. “Why couldn’t we apply this same concept to our spaceship design? Create adaptable spaces that can be reconfigured on the fly to serve different purposes. Areas that expand and retract as needed for cargo, living quarters, recreation, farming. Modular components could be swapped out and upgraded over time. There’s no need for it to be a static space!”

The ideas pour out of me as if a dam has broken in my mind. Kaito leans in, totally enraptured.

“A spaceship built with this kind of flexible, multifunctional architecture could be revolutionary,” I continue. “It would be able to efficiently adapt to the changing demands of long-duration space travel and support a crew in close quarters. We could build in redundancy by having equipment serve more than one purpose, and increase livability by allowing personal customization of living spaces.”

My hands sketch plans in the air, rearranging invisible parts like puzzle pieces as my excitement builds. “Modularity is the key. The ability to reshape the ship as needed through interchangeable and reconfigurable design elements. It’s perfect.” I turn to Kaito, breathless in my fervor.

He stares at me for a long moment, gears turning behind his eyes as a slow grin spreads across his face. “It’s absolutely

brilliant. Mad and ambitious, but... That's precisely why it will work."

"Collapsible walls, multi-functional furniture, adjustable lighting..." I grab my sketchbook and try to illustrate my vision as quickly as possible. "Crew members could transform their living quarters into workstations, recreational areas, or even medical facilities as needed."

"Pure adaptability. Let's use smart technology to control these changes," Kaito suggests, his brow furrowing in thought. "That way, crew members can easily customize their spaces with just a few taps on a panel."

"Perfect!" I exclaim, my mind already working through the logistics. "Has this been done before?"

He shakes his head. "No. We've always developed static spaces." He grins as his eyes meet mine.

The energy between us is palpable, an electric current coursing through the air as we bounce ideas back and forth. It's exhilarating, addicting.

"Imagine," I say, looking straight into his eyes, "a spaceship that adapts to its crew instead of the other way around — a true home away from home."

Kaito's gaze locks onto mine, and the same fire is burning within him. "Yes," he breathes, leaning closer. "A sanctuary among the stars. I love it."

I suddenly want him to love me. Me. Could he? That's a crazy thought, isn't it?

Why is that crazy, Tilli?

Because he may have gone down on me, but we're behind closed doors here. Would he kiss me in public? Would he admit he was seeing me, the former 'cheater,' to others? Is that how he sees me?

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand. I don't have time for distractions. Not now. Not with so much riding on my success.

“Are you okay?” he asks as I turn towards my serious side and edge away from him.

“I’m brilliant.” I bring back my smile, though I’m sure he can tell something’s wrong. “Let’s focus on this and see if we can make it work.” I shift the papers around on the table, burying my feelings beneath layers of blueprints and calculations. “The presentation is less than a week away, and now we’re behind.”

“Of course,” he says, coming up next to me and squeezing me across the shoulders with a kiss on my temple. “We’ll knock their socks off.”

But deep down, I wonder...

What happens when the week is over?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I SPRAWL out on Ean's couch, sketching out the latest modifications for the modular system while Ume the crow glares at me from her perch across the room. That bird has it in for me. I just know it. She would deny it to the moons and back, but there's something about her black beady eyes that I'm wary of.

Ean's in the kitchen making snacks with Karina. She doesn't have a paired pet like us, a quirk of the pairing technology that allows us with the microchip to bond to an animal on our planet. Maybe someday she'll find a pair, like we did.

Speak of the devil. Ivan hops up beside me, peering at my sketches.

"Don't look so glum, girl. You had a breakthrough today. Focus on the contest, and the Kaito situation will work itself out."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "How do you know that's what I'm thinking about?" Of course I'm thinking about him after what happened today.

Ivan blinks a few times. "I don't remember the last time you had a mate. I figured this was on your mind."

Way to remind me I'm destined to be an old maid. Thanks, buddy.

"Since when are you the romantic expert?"

He sniffs, affronted. "I'll have you know I was quite the charmer in my day. Before you came along, that is." Ivan

settles onto my lap, kneading my leg with sharp claws at what passes for affection from him.

“You? A charmer? That I’d like to see.” I scratch behind his ears as demanded, earning a tooth-rattling purr for my trouble.

His rumbling voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. “Now listen close, because I’ll only say this once. This spaceship of yours... It’s brilliant, and don’t you dare doubt it. If anyone can win that blasted contest, it’s you.”

I stare down at him in surprise. “Did you just... compliment me?”

Ivan avoids my gaze, washing a paw with aloof indifference. “I said no such thing. Must have been hearing things.” He peeks up at me, a glint of humor in his yellow eyes. “Win the contest, build your ship, and get us our own place, would you? The peace and quiet will be reward enough for me.”

A laugh escapes me as I scratch under his chin. “Why Ivan, I do believe you’re going soft.”

His eyes narrow to offended slits. “Soft? Hmph. Never.” Ivan kneads my leg again with sharp claws in warning. “Speak of this to no one, or those sketches won’t be the only thing I shred. Are we clear?”

“Crystal clear.” I can’t help grinning at his offended growl. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Ivan sniffs, though his purring fails to cease. “See it stays that way. Now, more ear scratching if you please. These things don’t rub themselves.”

What a little monster. Maybe Ivan’s not so bad after all. When he’s not threatening to shred my designs, that is.

I’m saved from further insult by Ean and Karina emerging with snacks. Ivan meows piteously until Ean picks him up, the traitor. No loyalty at all when belly rubs are at stake.

Karina settles in beside me, peering at my hidden sketches in curiosity. “How’s the design coming along? Anything I can

see yet?”

I hesitate, then figure, why not? They're going to find out sooner or later. While Ean and Ivan sit in the chair across from us, I walk her through the details of the system concept and how truly groundbreaking the modular design could be for long duration spaceflight. She listens with interest, throwing out thoughtful questions and suggestions, enthusiastic in a way I've come to rely on.

Ean grins at me. “You should tell her the other news... about Kaito.”

My face warms. I'd hoped to avoid this part. But I told Ean, so I'm going to have to spill it. “Kaito and I have been... dating.” I don't know what else to call it. “Well, it's been somewhat romantic for like ten days now, since the incident at Izakaya Tanaka. But with the competition coming up, I don't know if this is the right time for us.”

Karina's eyes widen. “Why didn't you tell me sooner?” Her smile fades at my obvious discomfort. “What's wrong?”

I rub the back of my neck in a futile attempt to ease the tension there. “It... it complicates things. He could get in trouble for the relationship. I could get disqualified. I'm not even sure he wants to be seen with me in public.” I sigh, wishing I had answers. “I don't know. This contest means everything right now. I can't afford distractions.”

No matter how tempting those distractions might be. And Kaito is mighty distracting... with that strong jaw and deep, dark eyes... the intoxicating combination of sandalwood, jasmine, and musk that leaves me breathless when I sit across from him... his unruly mess of dark locks that are always begging for fingers to make sense of them... his delicious mouth... his long legs he can wrap around me...

Argh! Stop, Tilli!

I need to focus. The future is at stake, and this time I'm determined to reach it. No matter the cost.

Even if it means sacrificing a chance at love along the way.

Karina gives me a sympathetic smile. I really hope she can't read minds. "I can understand why you'd want to focus on the contest right now. Love will still be there once it's over, but this opportunity won't come again."

She means well, but her words only highlight my doubts. "If it's even really love at all. Kaito never showed any interest in me back in school, and he's only friendly with me in public. What if this is just... the excitement and intensity of working together talking?"

The thought leaves an ache in my chest I don't want to examine too closely. I can't afford distractions, remember?

Ean frowns at me. "That was eight years ago. People change. From what you've told me, the way he looks at you now — that's not some fleeting infatuation." Of course, I didn't tell Ean all the details because ew, but he knows enough. "And he's behaving himself in public like a gentleman should."

"You're just saying that because you're my brother." I slouch down further on the cushions, suddenly weary. "None of you have much faith in me, do you?"

His frown shifts to a scowl. "Are you kidding? We have nothing but faith in you. If anything, you're the one lacking faith in yourself."

I blink at him, taken aback. "That's not —"

"Isn't it? I've said it before, and I'll say it again. All your life, you've had the determination and skill to achieve amazing things. But you never seem to believe you deserve the opportunities when they come. You're always so afraid of not being good enough."

His words strike deep. Am I afraid? I've always told myself I want to be realistic. Prepare for the worst.

"You changed after that false accusation of cheating. You stopped believing in yourself. It completely ruined your confidence."

I press my lips together and try not to cry.

He's right, of course. I wanted to give up. I still want to give up most days.

Karina nods, taking my hand in a gentle grip. "Your brother's right. You're brilliant and talented, and Kaito would be a fool not to see what an amazing person you are — contest or no contest. The I.A. would be a bunch of fools to not give you the job." She shrugs. "Let's face it. There are a lot of fools out there."

I stare down at our joined hands, at a loss for words. Do they really have so much faith in me? Have I been selling myself short all this time?

Perhaps the only thing holding me back from reaching for the future I want... is me. The thought is startling and uncomfortable but staring back at me from the eyes of people I love.

My family's belief has always been my guiding light. Maybe it's time I let it illuminate the darkness of my own self-doubt instead of feeding the flames. My modular design system is bold and revolutionary — just like its creators were always meant to be.

And love? We'll have to wait and see what the future holds. If I can learn to stop holding myself back from chasing it, that is.

"Well, I only have five days left. I just have to keep working on the design and hope it's better than Hiroko's and everyone else's. Though, I'm sure Riku is giving her every advantage in the book... and then some." I lean back against the cushions with a frown, arms crossed against the unease growing within me.

Ean grimaces. "Ugh, Riku Saito. That guy has it out for anyone with our family name. I don't trust him not to pull something underhanded to sabotage your chances in this contest."

Karina looks between us with a furrowed brow. "Who's Riku Saito? You mentioned he has some old rivalry with your family, but that's about it."

“It’s ridiculous is what it is,” Ean scoffs. “Years ago, Dad was going to handle the transition of Riku’s family from a multi-family housing unit on the east end to an apartment of their own. But you know how it is. The lottery wasn’t on their side, three times in a row. They were pissed, and I can understand why, but it wasn’t our fault. His father had it out for Dad for like ten years before he finally let it go. But Riku’s held a grudge ever since.”

“He blamed your family for losing housing and it wasn’t even your fault? Sounds like quite the petty and spiteful man.” Karina shakes her head, giving me a sympathetic look. “Vigliacco et stronzo,” she mutters under her breath.

I glance at Ean, and he shakes his head. Neither of us understands Italian. I can only imagine they’re insults.

“That’s Riku in a nutshell.” I drop my head onto the back of the couch with a groan. “And now he’s taken Hiroko under his wing. Mentoring her and giving her whatever advantages he can provide.” A knot forms in my stomach. “I like Hiroko and I want her to succeed, but I can’t help feeling like Riku’s only doing it to get a chance at revenge. Only a few people will win this contest and move onto the final exam.”

Ean’s expression turns grim. “I wouldn’t put it past the guy. He’s ruthless and holds a grudge like no one else.” He lets Ivan jump down from his lap as he reaches across the space between us and squeezes my knee. “Just focus on your design and don’t let Riku psych you out. You’ve worked too hard to get thrown off your game by whatever tricks he may have planned.”

I nod, pushing aside my worries to offer a smile I don’t feel.

Fake it, Tilli.

“You’re right. There’s no point speculating when I have no way of knowing what he actually has in store. I’ll keep working to refine the system into something no one can beat — not even with Riku pulling strings behind the scenes.”

Still, an uneasy feeling lingers that this contest may become more complicated than designing the best spaceship. That Riku's desire for vengeance against old rivals could threaten far, far more than my winning streak.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I CAN'T KEEP STILL. One minute I'm crossing and uncrossing my legs, the next I'm wringing my hands together like I want to strangle someone. After weeks of nonstop work, today's the day we either achieve our dreams or crash and burn in a spectacular fashion. No pressure, right?

Considering this is a spaceship design contest, 'crash and burn' is not an option.

Kaito sits next to me, chill as always, reviewing the slides again like the fate of my future doesn't hang in the balance here. How does he do that? Me, I'm vibrating in place over what the judges will think, what Professor Nishimura will say, whether we have any hope in hell of pulling this off.

This is my only chance to be admitted into the Interstellar Agency. It's my only way out of my boring, failure-ridden life. If I don't make it in, I'm going to need to get a job at a café, pulling coffees for people and serving up pastries.

Oh, wow. I could use both right now.

The waiting area's empty except for us. The team before us is giving their presentation, and we're last. Muffled sounds filter through the doors — laughter, clapping, people actually enjoying this nerve-racking experience. Am I the only one feeling like I might throw up? I knew I should have built a mini prototype to wow them with. Simulations aren't going to cut it. They have to see how crazy adaptable our spaceship design could be.

Shit. I should have built that.

I glance at the clock on the wall. Do I have time to put something together right now?

Kaito grabs my hand and squeezes it, dragging my attention away from the impending doom long enough to meet his gaze. “Believe in the vision,” he says, as if it’s just that easy. “Share your passion with them. The rest will follow. I’ve seen enough of these presentations to know you’ll be fine, and they’re going to listen. You’ll go in there, kill this presentation, and we’ll celebrate later. I promise.”

Slowly, his Zen-master confidence works its magic, calming the stampede of doubts and what-ifs rampaging through my mind. He’s right, as usual. The design will speak for itself. I just need to shepherd it forward.

The doors swing open and out stride Riku and Hiroko, faces flushed with the thrill of victory. Riku spots me, a smirk twisting his arrogant lips as his eyes gleam with malicious delight.

Oh great. Here we go. If I thought I was going to be sick before, I’m sure to be now.

Maybe I can puke on his feet.

“Well, well, if it isn’t little Miss Perfect and her stoic sidekick.” Riku oozes smug satisfaction as he saunters over, hands in his pockets. “Hope you’re ready to be shown up. Hiroko here just gave the presentation of a lifetime.”

Hiroko blinks at his boast, her eyebrows drawn together. “Riku, what are you —”

He cuts her off, never taking his infuriating gaze off me. “You’re going to have to work miracles to beat her. Not that you have a chance, but watching you fail before the entire panel will be deeply satisfying.”

My hands clench at my sides, itching to smack the self-congratulating look off his face.

Deep breaths, Tilli. Don’t give him the satisfaction.

I’m best off ignoring him, but he doesn’t seem to want to leave. He wants to triumph over me. Rub his victory in my

face.

Riku leans in close, dropping his voice to a malicious purr meant only for me. “You don’t belong here and now the entire world will know it, princess. Why don’t you do us all a favor and go back to your fancy estate? Leave the futures to those of us with the vision and talent to build them.”

How dare he. Weeks of work and sleepless nights to be dismissed by this arrogant jackass who couldn’t care less about anything but his own glory?

I have visions of him burning in hell. The thought is extremely comforting.

Kaito’s hand settles on my shoulder in silent support, keeping my wavering calm in place as fury ignites inside me.

I stand up and step forward until we’re nose to nose, lowering my voice to a deadly promise. “You have no idea what we’re capable of, but you’re about to find out. Get ready to eat those words.”

His eyes widen before narrowing, uncertainty flickering behind all that disdain. My smile is all teeth and confidence as I lean closer still. “Your future just walked in. I hope you brought your appetite.”

Check and mate. Let the games begin.

Professor Nishimura appears at the door, spots us, and smiles. “Shall we start?”

Begin? I can barely breathe.

We walk through the doors into controlled chaos. The lecture hall is packed with faculty and industry execs here to judge us. Every eye is trained on us, and my steps falter as I consider giving this presentation to everyone here. An electric anticipation hovers in the air with an intensity that is almost palpable. The murmurs of conversations echo off the walls, bouncing around the room in a cacophony of sound. My nerves threaten to stage a full-scale revolt, but I clench my fists and raise my chin. We’ve got this.

The judges sit at a long table facing the audience, tablets and far too many scrolling screens in front of them. Professor Nishimura takes her seat at the center, typing something with brows furrowed in concentration.

Please like our design, I silently pray. Please get what we're trying to do here.

Kaito heads off to set up our presentation materials while I take my spot at the lecture podium. No escaping now. The butterflies in my stomach have morphed into rampaging giant moths desperate to break free, but I refuse to give in to panic.

I belong here. I know it in my bones, my heart, my soul. After everything I've sacrificed, all the technical challenges we overcame through sheer stubbornness, they have to see it.

Kaito has been a brilliant partner, but this was one-hundred percent my idea and I need to own it, right here and now. When he nods at me from across the room at the judge's table, I know he agrees. His job was to mentor me, and he did a great job.

I still want to jump him and take him to bed, but that will have to wait till later.

Riku glares at me from the door right before it shuts on his arrogant face. He's clearly livid I didn't wither under his attempt at intimidation, and I don't care.

Sucks to be you, buddy. The future is ours, ready or not.

I open my tablet to my presentation, review my notes, and observe the people in the crowd with a mix of curiosity and competition. It looks like there's someone here from almost every I.A. department. Damn. I didn't realize how many people would be present. What marvels of spaceship design lie within those exceptional and complicated minds? What unseen obstacles did they navigate to make their visions real? I wonder if any share our dream of modularity and infinite adaptability.

Now it's time to change the world.

My heart leaps into my throat as Professor Nishimura stands, the piercing feedback of the microphone grabbing

everyone's attention. Here we go.

“Welcome Tilli and Kaito, and thank you all for continuing to be here. This is our last presentation, and then we'll break for the day and reconvene tomorrow to discuss the results. As always, we have a bold new generation of spaceship designers in our midst, ready to share visions that will shape humanity's future among the stars.”

She smiles, gesturing to the assembled crowd. “I know from the progress reports Mr. Nakamura submitted that our finalist here has poured her heart and soul into this presentation, so please give Miss Kimura your full attention and consideration.”

She inclines her head to me, voice ringing with conviction. “The floor is yours. Inspire us. The future awaits!”

I clear my throat and nod, determination overriding my nerves. This is it.

“Good afternoon. My name is Tilli Kimura, and my mentor for this project was Kaito Nakamura. We're here to present the Mizuho system — an endlessly adaptable modular design that will revolutionize spacecraft.”

The opening slide displays a rendering of our sleek spaceship interior design, consisting of multiple docked modules. “The Mizuho system reimagines how we live and work in space. Through interchangeable modules that can be reconfigured and repurposed as needed, this design maximizes efficiency and optimizes habitability for long-duration space travel.”

Once I get started, my confidence seems to kick in. I can't see the crowd — they're in the dark and I have a light shining on me — and that makes it easier to pretend it's only Kaito and me here. We practiced this a dozen times yesterday and this morning. I just need to stay on task.

I walk through the specifics of our modular design, gesturing to the slides of models, engineering details, infrastructure schematics, and simulations demonstrating its feasibility. A few murmurs creep into the silence as I describe

the universal docking mechanisms and pre-integrated plumbing and wiring that allow each module to serve many functions.

Raising my voice over the mounting whispers, I continue, “A module launched as living quarters could later be repurposed as a laboratory by swapping in different fixtures and components. Corridors and common areas would remain flexible, shaped by the needs of the mission and crew. Spaces can be expanded or partitioned off as needed, with hatches and passageways resealing to minimize wasted volume.”

People are talking. They must love it!

My confidence builds as I elaborate on the possibilities, this design we poured our hearts into for a future among the stars.

“With the Mizuho system, we imagine spaceships that remain adaptable throughout their entire operational lifetimes, able to transform to meet unforeseen challenges and opportunities.”

But then, murmuring reaches a crescendo as it ripples through the audience, distracting me as heads start to turn. The judges, so attentive moments before, now seem focused on their devices rather than our vision brought to life on the screens behind me.

Confused, I raise my voice and rush to advance the slides, but the damage is done. The Mizuho system fades into obscurity, eclipsed by something unknown that has stolen their interest when we needed it most.

Kaito locks eyes with me, dismay written across his face.

Professor Nishimura stands abruptly, waving Kaito over with a frown. My heart sinks as she approaches the podium. Something is very wrong.

“Tilli, what is the meaning of this?” She demands in a low voice meant only for us. “How could you claim this design as your own?”

My whole body erupts in goosebumps, and my head starts to sweat as I flash back to the time I was accused of cheating

on the entrance exams eight years ago.

The panic and shock come rushing back, dreams shattered once more over circumstances beyond my control. My chest tightens, breaths coming short and fast as that day plays through my mind in vivid detail. The stern administrators, the cold disbelief in their eyes. Pleading my case to uncaring ears while fighting back tears of anger and heartbreak. The future I'd sacrificed everything for, dismissed without a thought over baseless accusations I could never overcome.

It took years of failure and then more years of flawless work to finally overcome the black mark on my record from that false charge of cheating. To rebuild trust and gain a chance at the future they had denied me for so long. All that struggle, all that perseverance, brought me here at last...

I stare at Nishimura in confusion. "Professor, I don't understand. Kaito and I have been developing the Mizuho system together. Every component is our own work."

Her eyes narrow, disbelief etched across her features. "Hiroko presented this same modular spaceship design not moments ago. The docking mechanisms, reconfigurable modules, all of it. How do you explain that?"

My mind reels in shock. Hiroko designed something so similar? But how? We spent every spare moment immersed in perfecting the Mizuho. There's no way...

"Professor, please, I swear we didn't steal this design," I insist, heart pounding in my chest. "I built this from the ground up. Kaito witnessed it all. We have sketches, prototypes, and research to prove that."

Beside me, Kaito nods in emphatic agreement. "We never had access to Hiroko's work. The Mizuho system is entirely our own." He waves at me. "Well, her own. I saw the moment when she got the idea."

She studies us for a long, tense minute, disappointment and anger warring across her face. "I want to believe you. But the similarities are too striking to ignore. How do you account for

that if not through plagiarism? This is not the first time you've been accused of cheating.”

There it is. Cheater, plagiarist, thief. This is what they think of me.

The audience is getting restless now, tablets and computers dingling with incoming alerts. Someone in the front row has their tablet raised and is recording everything.

“Coincidence, perhaps. Parallel thinking.” I grasp for any explanation to make her believe we didn't betray her trust. “Great minds thinking alike?”

Professor Nishimura sighs heavily, shaking her head. “I'm afraid that's not good enough. I cannot in good conscience pass off so striking a resemblance as mere happenstance, especially with your previous history.”

No. No, this cannot be happening.

The same sick feeling of helplessness and injustice from years ago threatens to drag me under, opening wounds I thought long healed. Why is this happening? What cosmic force keeps stepping in my path, judging me for crimes I didn't commit and stopping me from chasing the only dream I've ever known?

Once was a tragedy. Twice is cruelty. And I fear this time, there may be no coming back from the ruins left behind.

My throat tightens, eyes burning. “You have to believe us. We would never steal someone else's work.”

“Is this true, Mr. Nakamura?” Professor Nishimura asks Kaito. “With your history here...”

His eyes widen and he shakes his head. “There's no foul play,” he says, assuring her. “At least, not on Tilli's part.”

History? What history?

“I'm sorry, Tilli.” She turns away, signaling an end to the discussion. “We're done here today. I need time to determine the appropriate next steps.”

She walks off without another word, taking with her my future and any hope of defending myself. The Mizuho system disappears into obscurity, its origin left in question. For crying out loud, what the hell just happened?

I look at Kaito and his eyes meet mine. He looks as confused as I am. We stand in stunned silence. The dream didn't just die — it was murdered before our eyes. Everything we sacrificed might as well have never been.

All that's left is trying in vain to piece together how this happened. But the future remains lost, far from reach.

I am so screwed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I STORM out of the auditorium, vision blurred with angry tears I refuse to shed. Screw this. How could this even happen to me... Twice? The stunned faces of the judges swim through my mind, their disbelief a knife to my heart. To be accused of cheating again, after all I sacrificed to rise above the last false claim — it's too much to bear.

The doors crash open behind me, and I don't need to turn to know who's on my tail. His familiar footsteps echo down the hall in my wake. I ignore them.

“Tilli, wait!” Kaito catches up, grasping my arm to turn me around. His eyes are full of sympathy that only fans the flames of my anger higher.

I jerk my arm from his grip with a snarl. “What the hell, Kaito? I mean, I know you didn't believe in me at the start, but this is going too far. Did you give Riku and Hiroko my files?”

It's the only explanation. He's been playing me, right? He manipulated my emotions until I produced something worth stealing. How could I have been so gullible? I can't believe I almost slept with him.

He reels back as if struck. “What? No, I would never — how can you even think that?”

“How can I not?” I spit the words at him like knives, wanting to cut as deep as I'm bleeding inside. “I've been so damned naïve. I should have known this would happen. I tried to tell myself everything was fine, no one was out to get me. I was so wrong.”

I charge forward and outside into the blinding summer light. The sun is shining brightly on a steamy summer day, heating up the pavement and walls of the Interstellar Agency's main complex. People come streaming out of the building, all keen to escape the stress and work inside. Sweat beads trickle down their faces and arms as they hurry into the shade, eager for a reprieve from the sweltering conditions. Meanwhile, a few people linger around the entrance, too sluggish or stubborn to admit defeat against the heat.

I leave them behind, looking for Ivan. Where is he? He said he would wait outside for me.

“Tilli, talk to me,” Kaito insists.

Just his voice is enough to send me into a rage.

“The day I was accused of cheating, I remember seeing you later, not long after. It's why I didn't want us working together to begin with. I knew you thought I was a liar and a cheat. I just didn't think you'd try to cover it up by being supportive and romancing me.”

Kaito's face pales, confirming what I've begun to suspect.

I remember his face from that day, the look of utter astonishment, like I had broken every possible rule in the book. It was just as heartbreaking as hearing I was done at the I.A. He must have felt I didn't deserve to be here and he sabotaged me.

“It's not what you think,” he says, holding out his hands. “I didn't tell them.”

“If you didn't tell them about my Mizuho designs, who did? It could have only been you.” Okay, now I'm puzzled.

He shakes his head in frustration. “No. I didn't tell them you cheated eight years ago,” he stresses, dropping his hands.

“What?” All the rage in my body evaporates.

“I'm so sorry. I've been meaning to tell you for weeks. Back then, eight years ago, Riku was on a rampage,” he explains, running his hands through his hair. Sweat makes it

stand on end. “He heard you had aced your initial exam. One hundred percent, Tilli. No one beat you.”

My stomach hollows out.

“And I... I, um...” He falters, and anger blinds me.

“What?” I grind out between my teeth.

“I overheard you telling Sam Bandō that you were surprised all the answers to the first test were available ahead of time,” he blurts out and then closes his eyes.

“What?” I’m repeating myself, but now my voice is sky high, reaching registers only meant for bats and dolphins.

“I overheard you talking through the questions like you had the answers ahead of the exam, and it made me nervous. So I told Riku, thinking he’d talk me down and tell me there was nothing to worry about. We were sort of friends back then because we both wanted the same jobs.” He swallows hard, unable to meet my eyes. “I didn’t know he would use that to falsely accuse you. I swear if I’d known —”

Kaito stares at me for a long moment while my brain churns through memories, vivid and painful. I was talking to my friend Sam about how much studying I did for the I.A. exam. How when the official study guide was released a month prior, I bought it and memorized all I could. Sam laughed about how she had done the same thing. We got lucky that a lot of the test questions were the same, but I had studied the previous six exams. Six. I knew that test front and back.

We huddled outside the exam doors, nervously clutching our tablets. Sam gave me an impish grin, her freckled nose crinkling. “Did you memorize the complete study guide, too? I swear I’ve been living and breathing it for weeks.”

I laughed, the sound shaky with anxiety and too much caffeine. “Me too. If I never see another flashcard, it’ll be too soon.”

Sam chuckled, bumping her shoulder against mine. “We’ve got this, Til. All those late night study sessions have to count for something.”

Smiling came easier, tension leaking from my shoulders. Sam always knew just what to say. “You’re right. Now let’s get in there and kick ass on this exam.”

It should have been an innocent conversation between two hopeful candidates, eager to chase the stars.

Instead, it destroyed everything.

If I’d only known someone else was listening, I would have been more clear. But a jealous teenager with a grudge took that information, bitterness spoiling his heart, and made my life a living hell.

The proctors called me out of the second exam only ten minutes after it started. They dragged me from that hall in front of hundreds of staring eyes and accused me of cheating without cause. Riku had gotten his petty vengeance at last.

And Kaito stood aside, gullible and thoughtless as the rest. I remember the look on his face later as I waited for my father to come get me — blameful, disgusted, annoyed.

“You? That was you?” I ask him.

That clueless boy ruined my future on another’s whim.

Perhaps he doesn’t deserve my heart after all.

“Tilli,” he starts, but I hold up a hand to stop him.

The memories fade, a ghost I can’t escape. For fuck’s sake. Why does this keep happening to me?

I laugh harshly, the sound ragged with pain. “But you didn’t know, did you? You just assumed the worst. Even after all the late nights you saw me studying in the library or the cafeteria, you actually thought I was capable of cheating.”

His head snaps up, eyes wide. “No, I never... I just relayed what I heard. I was a stupid teenager, I didn’t think beyond —”

“Beyond betraying me?” I step toward him, fists clenched at my sides. “You destroyed my future once without a thought. And now you stand there professing to care, while my shot

evaporates before my eyes. I want nothing more to do with you. Nothing.”

I shove past him, sprinting away as his pleading calls sound behind me.

The future fades once more, but this time, there’s no coming back.

Slamming into the house, rage tears blind me as I stumble to my room. My dad’s startled greeting goes unanswered, anger and sorrow choking off any response. The door crashes shut behind me, sealing away the world that keeps betraying my foolish heart.

Where’s Ivan? Why isn’t he here?

I ran away from the I.A. before I could find him.

Sobs shake my shoulders as I collapse onto the bed, curling around my wounded soul. My entire future has been ripped away from me, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

After sobbing on the bed for ten minutes, the tears eventually stop, but my body remains trembling. A soft knock at the door sounds before it opens and Dad enters.

“Tilli?”

“Go away.”

But he doesn’t listen. He sits down on the bed and his strong arms wrap around me, pulling me into a comforting embrace. I cling to him, the one person who’s never let me down, crying into his shirt without restraint.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispers, his voice soft and gentle. “Whatever happened... We’ll figure something out, all right?” He lets go to look into my face.

I nod numbly, wishing desperately that Ivan was here too — but he may still be waiting for me at the I.A., wondering

why I'm taking so long to come out. He'll make his way home soon.

How am I ever going to pick up the pieces and move forward without letting this setback ruin everything? My dreams are so far away now. Before today, getting into the I.A. wasn't just a silly dream anymore — it was something tangible that could have been mine if not for this foolishness.

Dad pulls back from the hug and smothers my head with soft kisses, something he rarely does.

“What happened? Did they not like the presentation? I've been hoping for good news all morning.”

This makes me burst into tears even more.

“The presentation... went great,” I choke out between sobs. “But the presentation before mine was almost exactly the same. One of my competitors beat me to my idea.”

“Oh no.” The warmth of his love brings a semblance of peace back to my heart and slowly, the tears subside once more. “There must be some mistake.”

“No!” I wail. “Professor Nishimura called me a cheater, right in front of everyone.”

I haven't cried like this in years, not since my last failed business.

I should suck it up. I should get mad. I should go break heads.

I can't do any of those things.

“Shhh, it's okay, sweetheart. I've got you.” He rubs my back in slow circles, patient and calm. Waiting for the storm to pass at its own pace.

I draw a shuddering breath and peer up at him. His brow is furrowed in concern, but his eyes hold only compassion. “Tell me everything.”

The whole sordid tale spills out — all the work I did, the things I was inspired by, my burgeoning relationship with Kaito, Hiroko's almost identical idea, Riku's role as her

mentor, and Kaito's part in the false cheating claim so long ago.

Dad listens without judgment, a new thing for him. We kids used to joke that 'Judgmental' was his middle name. I also used to call him a 'butt.' Yeah. Maybe I'm too sarcastic sometimes.

When I finish the entire story, his expression turns grim but thoughtful. "It seems Riku has caused enough harm for one lifetime, and I will need to investigate what role he played in this incident."

I pull away from him, my eyes wide. "No. No way. You can't get involved. It'll look like favoritism."

He sighs. "Not even a polite call to Professor Nishimura?"

"Don't you dare," I say, death heavy in my voice. "It was already bad enough that you called in the first favor."

"Fine," he says, sighing. "I'm sorry you had to go through this, sweetheart." He brushes damp hair back from my face with a sad smile. "As for Kaito, hear me out. Perhaps it's time to let go of past hurts, and decide if the man he's become deserves a second chance."

I stare at him, stunned. After everything that's happened, how can he suggest this?

"Resentment is poison, Tilli." Dad stands up, and I notice how dirty he is. He's really been gardening. "It's a heavy burden to carry for so long. Maybe what he did years ago was unforgivable. That's for you alone to decide. But don't miss out on today because you're clinging too tightly to yesterday." He nods once. "Just look at my life for the last ten years."

I blink a few times. "Dad, are you finally visiting the therapist Mom has been recommending for years?"

He rolls his eyes. "Yes. If you tell anyone, you're in big trouble. Understood?"

I chuckle as his words sink deep. Dad has always simplified the world's messes in a way that brings clarity.

“Lay down and get some rest. I’ll make noodles in an hour.”

I put my head on my pillow with a weary sigh, anger and sorrow slowly ebbing away. I still don’t know what to do, but I guess I can’t do anything right now until I know more.

Maybe tomorrow.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A SOFT KNOCK on my door rouses me from a deep, dark sleep. I always sleep like a log after crying, especially if I've barely slept for weeks due to work. A weight on my hip tells me Ivan returned, but I was already out before we could talk.

Mom's head pokes in the door, her face a mask of concern. "Hey, Till. Uh, there's a handsome young man here to see you."

I blink sleep from my eyes, slowly processing her words. A handsome young man...?

Oh. Ha. This must be Kaito. Mom loves it when the young men come calling, but I'm not having this right now. My chest tightens at the thought, yesterday's turmoil rushing back in a dizzying flood.

I roll over and Ivan repositions himself on my other hip. "Tell him I can't come out."

Mom doesn't leave. "I know you were upset last night. But he seems genuine and brought you coffee. I thought you might at least want to hear him out."

"Everybody pipe down!" Ivan grumbles. "This cat is not a morning cat. Shhh."

I chuckle a little. "Sorry to disturb you, Your Highness."

"Come on, Tilli," Mom coaxes. "It sounds like you could use a little cheering up."

She's right, of course. Avoiding the issue won't make it go away.

I sigh, resigned, and push the covers back. “Tell him I’ll be out in a minute.”

After changing into fresh clothes, I walk down the hallway with leaden feet. I want to turn around and go back to bed, but that’s not an option now.

I need to deal with Kaito.

Kaito stands on the front porch, two coffees in hand and a hesitant smile on his face. He looks ready to run, as if I’m going to throw a punch. Considering he saw me toss water in Riku’s face, I don’t blame him. I accept the offered cup with a murmur of thanks, taking a scalding sip of the dark brew before meeting his anxious gaze.

He looks tired. Well, more tired than usual. Dark circles hang under his eyes and his usually bright features are muted. His eyes carry a deep exhaustion, and his skin is pale and drawn tight across his face.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d even see me.” He runs a hand through his already tousled hair. “I owe you an apology. A huge one.”

“I accused you of a lot of stuff I have no evidence of. I’m the one who’s sorry.” I lean against the porch railing, holding the warm cup close. The sharp scent of coffee fills my nose, grounding me. “I’m just... I’m having a hard time coming to terms with everything that’s happened. And I never expected that you were the one who turned me in eight years ago.” I sniff up as a tear rolls down my cheek. “Stupid of me, really. Of course, another student was involved. I should have known.”

His face falls, and for once, he seems at a loss for words. We stand in tense silence before he clears his throat, brows furrowed. I can forgive the one time easily. But the cumulation of events is hard to ignore.

“You’re right. I was thoughtless and foolish when we were younger, quick to make assumptions instead of considering the facts. And now...” He sighs heavily. “I don’t know what happened. I swear it wasn’t me. I would never turn you in. I

think you're brilliant and beautiful and dedicated. And I..." He stops for a moment. "I'm gutted that this happened. I care about you and I can't stand knowing you'd believe I would do something like this. I suspect Riku is at the center of the problem. After that amazing day," he says, clearing his throat, "I ran into him in the hall. I told him you'd had a huge breakthrough, and I was blown away by it. It's possible he found some way to steal the idea, though I don't know how. We kept the door locked when we weren't in there."

"Why would you say anything to him? At all?" I sigh. "Honestly, you've seen the way he treats me."

"You're right. I'm done with him. I don't care if he thinks he holds my job in his hands. I will go around him from now on."

These are just words, Tilli.

Do I really believe him?

"You stood by while Professor Nishimura called me a cheater," I remind him.

He drops his head. "I'm so sorry. I was in shock. I couldn't believe the accusations coming out of her mouth. I don't deserve your forgiveness."

He takes a step towards me. Frustration wars with regret in his eyes. "I never seem to think straight around you. It's always been my greatest flaw where you're concerned."

My fingers tighten on the coffee cup, betraying the trembling I fight to hide. The past clings close still, a wall between us I wish wasn't there.

Yet looking up into those familiar eyes, filled with caring and sincerity, I realize the only one still clinging to yesterday's ruins... may be me. I'm the one who always cuts people off, burns bridges. I need to put the matches away.

I sink onto the porch edge and Kaito sits beside me. Leaning into his side, I let out a weary sigh. He hesitates only a moment before slipping an arm around me, pulling me close as though it's the most natural thing in the world. Perhaps it is — or could be again — if I find the courage to try.

“My dad said resentment only poisons you in the end.” I stare down into my coffee, watching clouds drift across the dark surface. “I don’t want to become bitter and jaded, always clinging to the hurts of the past. But this contest meant everything to me. It kills me to know I’ll never have my chance at the I.A. now.”

Another tear rolls down my cheek. I sniff and wipe it away.

I let out a guttural sigh that comes up from my toes. “I can’t believe I’m going to work odd jobs for the rest of my life. What a damned waste. And you? As much as I like you and care for you, you shouldn’t be associated with me. Our relationship will call your integrity into question.”

“No,” Kaito says, squeezing me. “No, no, no. You shouldn’t give up. We’ll go to the judges and plead your case.”

I shake my head. “I’m pretty sure their word is final.”

“It isn’t,” he insists. “I’ll convince them to listen to us.”

“You’re sweet, but how can I prove I wasn’t cheating when Riku stacked the deck against me? This is an impossible task.”

Kaito rests his chin on top of my head, thoughtful. “The judging panel only has Riku’s word so far, right? And whatever manufactured ‘evidence’ he claimed to provide?” At my nod, he continues. “Then we need irrefutable proof of your own to counter it. Design specs, test records, and all of your original drawings. We should go back to our study room and gather everything we can find to use.”

I lift my head to peer up at him. “I have all of that, but do you really think the judges will hear me out? The message I got from Professor Nishimura this morning said they won’t even consider an appeal without new evidence.”

A sly grin tugs at Kaito’s lips. “I’m willing to play dirty. I’ll press them for an appeal, and if they don’t comply, I’ll go public and share your proof online and with the news. I’ll force the I.A. and contest judges to reopen your case to save face.”

My eyes widen as the deviousness of his plan sinks in. Whoa. Kaito can be cut throat. Riku thrives on operating from the shadows, using money and connections to get his way in secret. Dragging everything into the harsh light of public scrutiny is the last thing he would expect or want.

“I like it,” I say, raising my eyebrows twice.

He smiles, pulling me close once more. “I have my moments.” His expression sobers, fingers coming up to trail along my jaw, raising tingles across my skin. “I meant what I said, Tilli. I want to make things right between us, whatever it takes.”

Joy bubbles up inside me, spilling out in a laugh that’s half excitement, half disbelief.

Ivan yowls from inside the open door, irritation clear in his raspy meow. We both turn around to look at him.

“Really, Tilli? You’re going to let this idiot off the hook again?”

“Ivan, now is not the time.”

He sniffs. “It never is, is it? But here he is again, ready with a smile and sweet words to melt your stubborn heart.” Ivan glares at Kaito, who shifts awkwardly under the scrutiny. “You’ll break her heart again sooner or later, fool. And I’ll be left to pick up the pieces, as always.”

“Ivan!” I hiss, mortified by his behavior. Though in a way, his protectiveness is touching. I shake my head at Kaito with an apologetic look. “Sorry, he’s not exactly a morning cat. Or a fan of, well...” I wave a hand between us, lost for words.

Kaito’s lips jerk into a half-smile, though his eyes remain serious. “It’s okay. He’s not wrong to be wary of me.” He runs a hand through his hair again, a familiar gesture of frustration and nerves. “I know I don’t deserve another chance, but I really hope you’ll give me the opportunity to make things right.”

I stare into my coffee, memories of laughter and shared dreams swirling in the dark depths. I need to resist the temptation to run from the past. That’s the old Tilli. Protecting

my heart is important, but sheltering myself from joy for fear of pain isn't living. We can recapture that happiness, but only if I open up and let him back in.

I meet Kaito's hopeful gaze and offer a small smile of my own. "On two conditions."

His eyes light up, an irrepressible grin breaking across his face. "Name them."

"One, you have to promise to start actually using that brain of yours. And two..." I lift my cup in mock salute. "You're buying Ivan the fancy cat treats to get on his good side. I have to live with him, you know."

Kaito laughs, and for the first time since this mess began, the future seems a bit brighter. "Deal. On both counts."

Ivan huffs, but when I glance his way, there's a gleam of approval in his yellow eyes. Maybe my heart isn't the only one still hoping for second chances, even if the old grouch would rather lick his paws clean than admit as much out loud.

Maybe this will all work out... Maybe.

"Should we get started now?" I ask, looking up at him.

"As soon as you're ready to go."

I stand up and zoom past my mom standing in the front hallway.

"Not a word, Mom!" I yell as I run past.

"My lips are sealed," she calls back with a laugh.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KAITO and I spend hours combing through the chaos of our study room, sorting all the prototypes, test logs, and design specs. Piecing together irrefutable proof of my innocence bit by painstaking bit. We work in comfortable silence, the easy partnership falling into place once more.

My fingers trace familiar lines and curves as I sift through drawings, remembering late nights and endless cups of coffee. All the blood, sweat and tears poured into this shared dream before everything fell apart. Having Kaito here at my side again is bittersweet, a reminder of what was and a hint of what could be... could have been.

Max lifts his head and woofs at the door. He's such a quiet dog that I startle, wondering what's wrong. Ivan stands up and his fur stands with him.

"Someone's coming," he warns us.

A quiet knock on the door precedes Hiroko's soft voice. "Tilli? Are you in there?"

I open the door, admitting the last person I expected or wanted to see. Hiroko slips inside, pale and drawn, her eyes rimmed red and puffy from crying. Her lips are trembling, and her hands are balled into fists as if to ward off something in the room. Her usual cheery demeanor and colorful presence is muted, eclipsed by her frown.

I straighten with a scowl, anger surging to the surface. "Why are you here? Did Riku send you to spy for him?" Kaito lays a hand on my arm, a gentle warning.

Hiroko shakes her head, expression miserable. “No, I came to apologize. I never thought he would do something like this.”

“Riku,” I say, confirming her statement.

“Riku,” she responds with a nod. She slumps into a chair at the table. “My original idea was so different.” She sits forward, holding out her hands. “I had this concept for a holographic space that could mimic the outdoors so people wouldn’t feel claustrophobic.”

I cross my arms over my chest, my curiosity getting the better of me. “That actually sounds really cool.”

A small smile lifts her lips. “Then it could be turned into a different living space with a change in scenery.”

Kaito raises his eyebrows at me.

“I even designed collapsible furniture, hidden compartments, and multi-functional pieces that serve more than one purpose.” She rubs her face. “So when Riku came to me and told me about how my collapsible furniture reminded him of modular spaces, I didn’t think too much of it. But after that, he took over the project. None of my original ideas made it in. I complained to Nishimura once, and she told me Riku was there to help me, and I should listen to his criticism. I think she thought I was just tripping on my ego.”

She hesitates, chewing her bottom lip. “My project was so close to yours. I see now he was using me. I’m so sorry.”

I stare at her, stunned. Of all the things she might have said, a sincere apology was lowest on the list of expectations. Yet looking into her eyes, filled with sadness and guilt, my anger drains away. She’s as much a victim of Riku’s manipulations as I am.

My first instinct is to cling to resentment — an easy out that prevents another painful betrayal. But Dad’s words echo through my thoughts, a reminder of the costs of harboring bitterness inside.

I glance at Kaito, lifting a brow in silent question. His lips jerk in a half-smile, and he offers an encouraging nod.

Turning back to Hiroko, I release the anger with a long exhale. “I believe you.” She lifts her head, her eyes meeting mine. I shrug, offering a small smile of my own. “What’s done is done. The question is, how can we set things right and make that bastard pay?”

Hiroko’s tears spill over, but her answering smile is as wicked as my own.

“By winning, of course.” She stands up and wipes away her tears with a huff.

“What about you, though? This is not fair to you.” Kaito grimaces. “This is such a mess.”

“Don’t worry about me. I still have all of my original work before Riku interfered. I’ll figure it out. But right now, we need to figure out how to get Tilli back in.” She looks at the mess on the table. “Are you gathering up your work to prove it was your idea?”

I nod, gesturing to the organized chaos covering every surface. “We’re gathering everything that proves this design has been my sole focus since the competition began. I didn’t have my breakthrough till a week ago, though.”

Hiroko points at me. “That’s when Riku started talking about the modular design.”

I nod. “But without solid evidence of when each piece was created, I’m afraid it won’t be enough. Are you willing to help us pull stuff together? Maybe with an extra set of hands, it’ll go faster.”

We get to work again, sorting through my prototype drawings, specs and schematics scattered across the room. Hiroko organizes everything by date while Kaito and I verify each piece, double-checking details to ensure the timeline is accurate. Many of them he took photos of and added to our presentation, so those have time and date stamps. Questions about specific marks or handwriting that only I would know confirm without a doubt this design has been mine from the start.

The hours pass swiftly, time flowing as we work. Jokes and laughter weave in and out of the tedium as Kaito's hand brushes mine, sending sparks skittering across my skin with a touch as natural as breath. This has a chance of working out! Surrounded again by true partners devoted to the dream, I'm energized and alive, all of the bitterness evaporated away. I'm glad they're both here.

A loud yowl sounds from the hallway, followed by an all-too-familiar complaint. "Tilli, do you plan to stay cooped up in this room forever? It's dinner time, and I'm hungry, in case you forgot about the rest of the world existing outside the door."

I snap out of my crazed daze and open the door. Ivan comes slinking in. Right, I had let him out at some point a few hours ago.

I sigh, shaking my head with a wry smile. "Ivan, you know I can't leave yet. We're making progress and have to keep working while we have the energy."

A disgruntled huff answers before Ivan replies. "Yes, well, progress won't continue long if you don't rest and refuel. You're no use to anyone if you run yourself into the ground." His raspy meow softens, tinged with concern. "Come take a break. I've seen that look in your eyes before, and I know you'll keep pushing past your limits if someone doesn't intervene."

Kaito lifts his eyebrows, and I offer a sheepish shrug in return. "Even Ivan thinks we should take a break. And he's probably right. We've been at this for hours without stopping."

He nods, running a hand over the stubble on his face. "Can't argue with wisdom from any source, feline or otherwise. My brain feels ready to melt if I have to stare at another spec sheet." He flashes me a wry grin. "Besides, if the grump himself says you need a break, I'm certainly not going to disagree. I'd rather not face his wrath if you end up running yourself into the ground."

Hiroko folds her arms over her chest. "Wait. I think we're done here." She waves to the neat piles we've made, the extra

print-outs we've gathered, the 3D models. "But, I don't know. I don't think it's enough."

Kaito and I both frown. "What else could we present to them?"

Hiroko frowns, brows knitted in thought. "There must be something else we can use..." Her face brightens, eyes going wide. "The security footage!"

I freeze and my body cools by several degrees. "What security footage?"

Hiroko rolls her eyes. "You signed the same privacy waiver I did on the first day." She grabs her tablet, turns it on, and scrolls through something. "See? It's in the fine print."

I stare at her, stunned. I actually signed away my privacy in this very room?

Oh no. Yes, I did.

In my eagerness to gain access to resources for my project, I signed whatever documents were put in front of me without a second thought. "I... Didn't actually read all the fine print. I had no idea they recorded in here."

I swallow and stare at the table where Kaito went down on me that day... the day I had my big realization.

My head begins to sweat as Kaito's eyes meet mine.

Shit. Seriously?

"Every room is monitored, in case something is stolen or goes missing." Hiroko grins, relaxing now that she's helped. But my instincts scream that this will be the end of me. "If we can get our hands on the footage, it should prove how long you've been developing this design and that it was entirely your own before I came into the picture."

My stomach drops, dread trickling icy tendrils through my veins. I stare at Hiroko in horror, face paling as realization hits with the force of a meteor strike. This is the only way to exonerate me?

"Hiroko, can you give us a minute alone, please?"

Hiroko blinks a few times, looking between us, before she sets her tablet down on the table and nods. “Uh, sure. I’ll be outside.”

The door clicks closed behind her, and I sink into the nearest chair.

I glance at Kaito, at a loss as to what to do.

Revealing what we did in here would be utterly, completely mortifying. But do I want the job badly enough to admit we had sex in this room? Would it matter?

I don’t know. I don’t know.

We’re both consenting adults, but I’m sure this is not good.

“I didn’t...” He looks up and around for the cameras. “I mean, I know they watch the common areas, but...”

Kaito sits down beside me, his eyes far off, staring into the bookcases.

“They have footage of the day we... you know.” I wave a hand between us, face flaming. “If we request access to their security archive, they’ll see it too.”

Kaito’s cheeks darken as the full implication of my words sinks in, and he clears his throat. “Well, this... complicates things.”

Complicates is an understatement. If anyone sees that footage, we’ll become a spectacle. We wanted to keep the memory private, but now it may be recorded for anyone to eventually see. It could end up online.

I think I’m going to be sick.

“It’s your future, Tilli. Your decision to make. I will accept and support whatever you decide. I’m not ashamed. I’m sure we were hot as hell,” he says with a chuckle.

My face is on fire as my hand finds his under the table. Our fingers weave together and he squeezes them tight. There’s reason to hope.

I know more than anything, I want to design spaceships for the rest of my life. And if I have to let people watch me have

an orgasm on video in order to do it, then I'll relent.

"Looks like we're about to out ourselves to everyone, then."

He laughs, slipping an arm around me to pull me close. "I am definitely not going to argue with this. I'll suck it up and hope they'll understand." He kisses the top of my head before leaning forward to look into my eyes. "Will you be okay?"

I nod and press my hands to my hot cheeks. "Yes, but I may die of mortification before I ever get to build spaceships."

It takes thirty minutes to pull everyone who matters into the security offices and view the footage. The video plays through all of our week brainstorming and then our... private encounter. Professor Nishimura gasps and I look at my shoes. Then we return after lunch and I explain my breakthrough, which we sketch out over the course of a few hours, sped up in the footage.

"Look," Kaito says, and everyone leans in to watch.

In the video, Kaito and I leave for the day. The door almost closes behind us, and Riku slips in before it can shut and lock. Son of a bitch.

He peels back the paper on the window a bit and watches until we're gone. He then spends fifteen minutes flipping through my sketches and notes, making notes of his own on his tablet before leaving.

"Well," Professor Nishimura says, letting out a deep sigh, "I don't think I need to lecture you about the impropriety of your relationship, but it's not against the rules. Except to say that next time you should conduct yourself off of the I.A. campus, please." She sighs. "Cheating, on the other hand, is against the rules, and it's clear Mr. Saito stole your designs when you weren't looking." She opens the door and leads us outside into the hallway. "I'll speak to the other judges, but..." She extends a hand to me to shake. "Tilli Kimura, I do believe you got the job."

My fingers meet hers, and I have to hold back a hearty laugh and a slew of tears. "Thank you. I'm so sorry for all the

drama,” I say, pumping her hand up and down twice. “I hope we can delete that video footage?”

“Not your fault, and yes, we can.” She drops my hand and bows. I step back in shock. “Please accept my sincere apologies about my spurious allegations. They were out of line.”

I bow in return. “I’m honored to be considered for the position. Please, let’s put this situation behind us.”

It’s the right thing to say.

Professor Nishimura stands up, smiles at me, and reaches out to squeeze my arm. “Oh, one more thing before I go. Mr. Saito slapped you two weeks ago, right?”

Right. I forgot Kaito had reported it. I nod.

“You should have come to me then. We would have watched him more closely. Remember to always advocate for yourself, now and in the future.”

She nods and strides off down the hall.

Kaito lets out a huge breath. “This calls for a celebration,” he says, clapping and rubbing his hands together.

“What did you have in mind?” My head is light with victory. I could do just about anything right now.

“I have the perfect idea. Come with me.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KAITO LEADS me to his apartment, a place I have not seen yet. My curiosity wars with nervousness at crossing this threshold for the first time, into a space entirely his.

He opens the door with a flourish, gesturing for me to enter. “Welcome to my humble abode. Make yourself at home while I find us something to toast with.”

As I step into Kaito’s apartment, I’m not surprised by how neat and organized everything is. The living room is minimalistic, with a modern, low-profile couch in a soft gray color that faces a sleek wall-mounted flat screen monitor. Despite the muted tones, the couch looks comfy and cozy, lived in. A glass coffee table sits in front of the couch, with a few neatly arranged books on top. My gaze snags on framed prints of space-themed artwork and some of his own spaceship designs, giving the room a personal touch. There are a few photos too of people who look like his parents and another of his sister who works in fashion design in the capital.

Max approaches his bed on the far side of the living room, gets in, turns around three times, and lies down with a sigh. He’s such a quiet thing, unlike mouthy and grumpy Ivan. I approach him and squat down to scratch his head. He leans into it for a moment and gives me one solitary lick before closing his eyes and setting his head back down.

To the right of the living room is an open-concept kitchen, separated from the living area by a polished wooden breakfast bar. The kitchen itself is compact but well-equipped, with state-of-the-art appliances and organized countertops. He placed a few potted plants on the windowsill, adding a splatter

of green and life to the otherwise monochromatic space. I like it. His place exudes a sense of calm and order with all the meticulous details I would associate with him.

I set my bag on his couch and stare out the window at the campus of apartment buildings for I.A. employees. It's nighttime and only a few people walk the grounds between buildings. Lights are on in other apartments, and the smells of cooking waft through the open window. I may be able to live here someday soon.

Kaito returns, a bottle of champagne in hand and two glasses hooked on his fingers. "I've been saving this for a special occasion. I believe exoneration and public vindication counts, don't you?" He grins, popping the cork to pour bubbling golden liquid.

I accept a glass, returning his smile. "I'll drink to that." We lift our glasses in a toast, eyes locked. "To justice, truth, and new beginnings."

"To chasing horizons side by side once more." He clinks his glass to mine, warmth and affection written in every line of his face.

We each take a drink, relieved laughter spilling out to mingle with the champagne bubbles. The sorrow of recent days fades into shadow, and I consider for a long moment how far I want to go with Kaito. I have long been without friends or a romantic partner. Do I dare try again?

I think I should.

I lean into Kaito's side as one coming home at last, finding again the place where I always longed to be. His arm slips around me, pulling me close to his chest, and his heartbeat pounds a steady rhythm against my cheek. I rest my head on him, feeling the warmth of his body seep into mine, and let out a contented sigh.

Yes, let's definitely do this.

Kaito looks down at me, and I smile up at him. "I know how we can end this day on a high note," I say, lifting one eyebrow.

I almost laugh at myself because this is so out of character. I haven't slept with anyone in years.

Kaito's hand moves to my hair, fingers tangling in the strands as he tilts my face up to his.

"I watched us on that video while you looked at the floor. We were hot. We should continue that scene."

His lips brush against mine, tentative at first, before deepening into a hungry kiss. I respond in kind, my hands moving to his shoulders as I pull him closer, tangling my free fingers in his hair.

We break apart, gasping for air and stare at each other, the heat of passion burning in our eyes. We both know where we want to take this, and I am far from afraid. I'm excited to finally have someone by my side who understands me and accepts me for who I am.

"I don't want you to think I'm some great lover or anything," I confess, looking away. "I know I'm not. My siblings think I'm sweet, but it's because I'm loyal until I get burned. Everyone else has abandoned me." I press my forehead to his chest for a moment. "But you... I have faith in you."

He squeezes me. "Where is all this coming from?" His tone is comforting, not at all offended.

"I want to be honest with you, like I've never been honest with a... a partner before." I tip my face up. "I want you to know all the flaws before we go any further."

He shakes his head. "I don't see flaws. I see an amazing human being. A person I want to spend my days and nights with." His smile is soft. "No more of this. We're celebrating, yes?" I nod. "Leave these here," he says, taking the glasses from our hands and putting them on the breakfast bar.

He holds my hand and leads me towards the bedroom, and I follow willingly. The room is just as minimalistic as the living room, with a large bed in the center of one wall and a few more prints of space-themed artwork hung around it. But it's not the decor that catches my attention; it's Kaito.

He stands before me, his eyes dark with desire. Moving his thumbs in small circles over my palms, he sends a flurry of sparks up my arms and into my chest. My heart skips a beat as he looks into my eyes, holding my gaze with an intensity I've never felt from someone else before.

Without breaking eye contact, Kaito steps closer and slides one hand around to the small of my back. His other hand moves up my arm until it rests against the side of my neck. He begins to hum softly as his fingers trace delicate patterns on my skin. In the darkness of the room, we are completely alone, no one else sharing this moment with us but the stars above through the window. It's been a long time since I've last done something so slow and simple with a man. Kaito's attention is addictive. I want more, more, more.

Slowly, he unbuttons my blouse, his fingers tracing the outline of my bra beneath the fabric. I let out a soft moan as he leans in to kiss my neck, his hands sliding down to my waist, pulling me closer to him. His arousal presses against me, and I move against him.

More, more, more.

Kaito hums, his hands moving to my back, unhooking my bra with practiced ease. I gasp and close my eyes as he takes one of my nipples into his mouth, sucking and licking it until it hardens under his touch. He moves to the other nipple, giving it the same attention, and I'm left panting and aching for more.

I push him back onto the bed and straddle him, my hands moving to his shirt, desperate to feel his skin against mine. We break apart for only a moment to quickly divest each other of clothing, and then we're back to kissing and touching, our bodies moving without thought, only instinct.

It's like we've been doing this for years, like we already know each other's bodies. And in a way, we do. We've been through so much together recently, and this feels like the last piece of the puzzle, the missing connection that brings everything together.

His lips find mine again, and I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer. He moves down my body, kissing and

nibbling at my skin as he goes. When he reaches my underwear, he looks up at me, a question in his eyes. I can only nod in answer, and he slides them off with a satisfied smile.

I arch my back as he finds his way between my legs. His tongue and fingers take me higher, and my body tenses. I moan and grip the sheets, lost in a blissful haze that I never want to end. I'm ready to go over the edge, and he's right there with me, pushing me higher and higher until I'm screaming with pleasure, and my body shakes with the force of my orgasm.

Kaito follows shortly after, his body gliding over mine. Yes, yes, yes. I press my head against his as he finishes, letting out a moan that brings goosebumps along my chest. He is so fine, so very mine.

This is better than I imagined, and I imagined quite a bit.

We collapse next to each other, both of us panting and sweaty. We stay there for a few moments, savoring the afterglow, before Kaito straightens the sheets and throws them over us. He wraps his arm around me and pulls me closer.

"We should definitely do this again," he murmurs, and I can only nod in agreement.

Yes, definitely.

"How about now?" I murmur against his chest, my fingers tracing circles on his skin.

He chuckles, his chest vibrating against mine. "So soon? Aren't you hungry? We didn't eat dinner."

I prop myself up on my elbow and look into his eyes.

"I'm hungry for my life to start, my real life that's been on hold for eight years."

My second chance is here. Right here.

He rolls over and presses his body to mine, looking at me with a satisfied expression before leaning in for a passionate kiss. He traces the outline of my face with his hand, and my heart aches at his gentle touch.

“Then let’s get started on phase two.”

When his lips meet mine, my life starts over — a new life, one I can truly look forward to. A life doing what I love with Kaito by my side.

Sounds perfect to me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ALSO BY S.J. PAJONAS

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SHATTERED ECHOES

TELEPATHIC SPACE PIRATES
BY CARYSA LOCKE

DESCRIPTION

An outlawed telepath, Iona survives as the best corporate thief in the galaxy, but she's trapped between the lost memories of her past and the corporate contract that owns her future. She'll do anything to find out who she really is and where her abilities came from. Together with Miko, an empathic ferret-like creature who refuses to leave her side, Iona takes a dangerous job that might hold the answers she seeks.

When Iona's mission intersects with Zephyr, a rival who claims to be more than a mere stranger, her world is shattered. Zephyr's powers surpass Iona's, presenting an alluring yet treacherous proposition that could unveil the truth or plunge her into unending darkness.

As the line between trust and betrayal blurs, Iona must navigate a treacherous game of secrets. With each step closer to the truth, the shadowy forces controlling her fate tighten their grip.

In a galaxy teetering on the edge of chaos, Iona's quest for self-discovery becomes a battle for liberation and survival. Will she have the strength to defy the corporate chains that bind her and forge her own path, or will she succumb to the perils of her own forgotten past?

CHAPTER ONE

IONA'S PULSE quickened as she approached the entrance to the ballroom. She couldn't tell if the way her stomach flipped was due to anxiety or the thrill that came with every new job. She let out one slow breath, then counted two more, willing her nerves to calm. This was just like every other heist she'd done for Aesir, she told herself. Get in, mingle, pull a little corporate espionage, and get out.

Easy.

In the last year, Aesir's stock had risen a staggering twenty-eight percent on the galactic market, in no small part due to her efforts. They'd leaped right past three other megacorps in value, practically overnight. Only their biggest rivals, VoidTech, continued to pull ahead, and tonight's efforts could very well be the end of that. The powers that be had made it *very* clear that this job was crucial.

She had a feeling they were beginning to suspect exactly why she was so successful. The threats hadn't even been all that veiled this time, and with Talented being actively hunted down across the galaxy, Iona couldn't take any chances. Her bosses at Aesir had no idea she was anything other than a highly skilled, very lucky thief.

Another little stab of what she was pretty sure was anxiety had her clearing her throat.

Well, nerves were nothing new. They usually faded once she was actually *doing* the job. It was just this anticipation right beforehand that sucked.

Something brushed against her skirt, soft fur briefly rubbing against her leg. A feeling of calm washed through her. *Miko*.

She glanced down, knowing she wouldn't see the red-furred Ailurus that was her constant companion. Like Iona, Miko was a product of experiments conducted during the Ascension Wars. Smarter and smaller than the original species of animal she descended from, Miko was also gifted with special abilities, like being able to communicate empathically and camouflaging herself. The cute, furry creature with her striped tail and tufted ears was more like a partner in crime than a pet, and she wouldn't be seen unless she wanted to be.

Iona caught a faint shimmer in the air, the diaphanous layers of her skirts moving as if with a gentle breeze. Another brush of fur, accompanied by a feeling of pride. Miko was telling her that *she* was confident about tonight's mission, so Iona should be, too.

Just that small interaction was enough to quiet her nerves. Iona made a conscious effort to relax and focus on the mission.

Tonight's banquet location, Lancer Station, was notorious for their tight security, and given the guest list, they'd spared no expense. They didn't just have bio-linked invitations that had to match the person they were intended for, a gauntlet of perimeter gates to pass through, and a state-of-the-art body scanner with more bells and whistles than a corporate spaceport. They'd also hired the gold standard in private security, Nova Knight.

Even people outside the field knew their name. They loved to hire ex-military, and with the war finally over, there was no shortage of well-qualified applicants. They'd have plainclothes security everywhere, in addition to the obvious handful posted at the door and inside among the guests; all of them would be well briefed on who should, and shouldn't be in attendance.

Iona was sure to be on a watch list. With Aesir openly challenging them, there was no way VoidTech didn't have a full dossier on her.

Of course, that didn't mean they knew *everything*.

The line of orderly guests edged slowly forward. Around Iona, men and women with enough wealth to buy and sell small planets chatted about their latest boardroom victories, favorite vacation spots, and what irritated them most about the recent union negotiations with the Spacefarer's Guild.

Iona pasted on a smile as real as the lab created diamonds at her throat, and lowered her shields just enough to let her gift stretch out around her. Everyone here was looking at everyone else. Judging fashion choices, looking for old friends or enemies, and generally seeing who had been invited, and who hadn't. VoidTech was unveiling a new project tonight, and everyone wanted to know what it was, making this more than just another banquet.

In normal circumstances, Iona would stick out as someone who didn't belong. Mega-corporations were the top one percent of the galaxy. They owned entire planets, and the people who worked in their upper echelons were either in bed together or mortal enemies. Either way, everyone knew everyone else. It made sneaking into an event like this a dangerous affair.

But not for Iona. Instead, as those around her glanced her way, her Talent touched their minds, offering a suggestion as to who they saw. Instead of a stranger, they'd see someone who fit her basic body type and description, but who was only vaguely familiar to them. A face they'd passed in the hallway at work, or seen in a board meeting once.

Dark hair, dark eyes, a lithe, athletic frame, and narrow face with sharply defined cheekbones and jawline. Iona had heard others describe her as striking or attractive, but never as a great beauty or otherwise remarkable. People didn't find her particularly memorable, and that helped, too. No identifying marks, scars, or tattoos, at least not readily visible. She had plenty of scars, they were just hidden.

The woman in front of her glanced back at Iona, and offered a vague smile of recognition before turning back to her

companion. *Perfect*. Everything was working exactly as it should be.

Not for the first time, she sent up a silent thanks to the universe for her unusual gifts.

Psychic abilities had been developed as a weapon during the Ascension Wars, and the people who had them were called Talented. It took on many forms, the most basic being telepathy or telekinesis. Iona didn't know *everything* her abilities were capable of. That knowledge had been taken from her, along with the rest of her memories. But she knew enough. She could easily do basic things like shield her mind, read the surface thoughts of the people around her, and even move small objects with a wave of intention. She knew on some deep level that these things were merely scratching the surface of what she could do, like being able to pilot a shuttle, crack a door lock, or the easy way she ran ten miles every morning. They were automatic.

She was sure that at some point in her past, she'd had extensive training. Maybe, she'd even been one of the Talented soldiers during the war. People were afraid of them now, but the Talented had brought an end to the decades of constant, terrible fighting that had engulfed the galaxy for generations.

One Talented soldier was said to be worth a hundred regular troops. Some even claimed a thousand. Iona didn't know about all that, and she tried not to think too hard about it. Right now, the only important thing was that her Talent made her the best corporate thief in the galaxy. She'd signed that contract with Aesir out of sheer desperation. She had no memory of her life, no friends, didn't even know her own name. "Iona" was a fake identity she'd purchased on the black market.

That was something else she'd somehow known how to do, without understanding *how* she knew. Whatever she'd been before these past two years, it had certainly been something colorful.

Shaking off thoughts of her past, Iona took a deep breath, grateful the bodice of her dress was comfortable, despite the sculpted fit that hugged her body. Sheer lace traced over her shoulders and collarbone, flowing down her arms into long sleeves. A classic silhouette in dark navy, the dress was adorned with a subtle overlay of beadwork and crystals that glinted like stars when she moved. From the cinched waist, the skirt flowed down in graceful, weightless layers of fabric that rippled with each step.

“Looking good, gorgeous,” Ansel’s voice came over the subvocal comm inserted into her earlobes just behind the glittery fall of gemstones swinging at her ears.

Iona sighed. “No flirting.” She didn’t have to speak aloud. Subvocal comms picked up the vocalizations people *thought* and then transmitted those words as audio or digital readout. Ansel’s voice could be heard by her, but couldn’t be detected by anyone else around her, and vice versa. It was the closest a null — or regular human — could get to real telepathy, though it had much greater limitations of range and scope. It had been widely used by every military who’d participated in the Ascension Wars.

Despite that, the tech was getting harder, not easier to find. People were too afraid to use it, terrified of being mistaken for one of the Talented, those who really *were* gifted with telepathic abilities.

Shortly after the war’s end, the newly formed Commonwealth of Sovereign Planets had ratified the Inter-Planetary Safeguard Accord, or IPSA, and suddenly the Talented were outlawed everywhere. Any use of so-called psychic ability was declared assault with lethal intent.

What absolute bullshit.

“Jeez, sorry. I won’t call you gorgeous anymore, all right?” Ansel’s aggrieved apology had Iona wincing.

She hadn’t meant to think with so much intent. That was the problem with subvocal communications: sometimes they picked up more than you wanted them to. Ansel could be

sensitive at times. She hoped he wouldn't choose to be hurt and sulk.

“Sorry, Ansel. That wasn't really meant for you.” Iona absently rubbed at the small scar on her right wrist, feeling the ridge of it behind the lace of her sleeves. “You know how much I hate playing dress up.”

He didn't answer immediately, and Iona carefully controlled her thoughts so none of her exasperation would get through.

“How you feeling?” he asked finally. Iona could detect the undertone of nerves behind his words; like her, Ansel was often anxious going into a job, but he calmed down immediately once they were in it. Aesir had introduced them on her very first job, and they'd worked together ever since. In many ways, he was the closest thing she had to an actual friend. If a woman in her thirties could call a teenager a friend.

“Good,” she told him, looking over the crowd as they shuffled forward, identifying those she was pretty sure were part of Nova Knight among them.

“The dress working out?”

“It's perfect. Exactly what I asked for.”

“Shopping's part of my skillset,” Ansel said, pride in every word.

“I'm sure it wasn't easy to find within our limited budget. Thanks.” A little flattery never hurt. Plus, it was the truth.

The dress was designed to fit in with the wealthy crowd of corporate elite attending tonight's event, without standing out too much. Beautiful, classic, but nothing daring or memorable. However, the best part of its design had nothing to do with how it fit or looked. Concealed within the layers of the gown was a series of delicate, yet resilient, micro-actuators that responded to the wearer's movements. Originally meant for fancy holo-stars, the dress would automatically adjust its length, flaring out and cascading in a dynamic display as the wearer walked or posed. Iona took those actuators a step

further, and the entire dress would change to suit her needs in the moment.

Tonight's goal was to avoid conflict, but in the event everything went to hell, she'd have the freedom of movement not to get hung up and killed by her clothing choices. Ansel had to have scoured his dubious market sources to find something this unique and expensive, when their budget was more suited to mass-produced synth-weave.

As the line edged closer to the entrance, Iona called up her invitation. The holo-invite was numbered and bio-marked to the daughter of a high-tier corporate family. One who was halfway across the galaxy tonight, on a tryst her family didn't even know about.

"Are you ready?" she asked Ansel.

"I'm offended you're even asking."

Fooling the machines was his job. At fourteen, he was the best slicer she'd ever seen, nearly mystical in his ability to hack into any system. Only once had he been defeated, to her knowledge. He was still bitter about the failure. She had no doubt he'd succeed tonight. Well, maybe a tiny, infinitesimal sliver of doubt. After all, if it had happened once, it could happen again, right?

Not that she would ever tell Ansel that. He was mature for his age, but he still had the emotional regulation of any fourteen-year-old.

She slowed with the crowd as she approached the last gate. The couple in front of her presented their invitations, and then each submitted to a molecular bio scan. A beefy security officer with slicked back hair confirmed their scans and waved them through. His suit jacket didn't quite hide the fact that he was armed.

Iona *pushed* with her Talent as she stepped forward, handing over her invitation. The security officer gave her face a long study before turning his attention to her invitation. He inspected it quickly and then gestured for her to step into the scanning booth. She did so, holding her breath as the beams of

light passed over her body. If Ansel had done his job...The scanner beeped, and a brief flash of panic shot through her, but then it cleared and the officer waved her through.

“Have a good night, Ms. Truex.

“See? All good,” Ansel said over the comm.

Iona slowly breathed in and out, her pulse evening out as she relaxed and joined the rest of the crowd being ushered inside. A server with a tray of glasses filled with sparkling wines in a range of colors greeted her at the entrance. Iona picked one at random just to fit in. She never drank on a job.

The ballroom was grand and opulent, with high, domed ceilings and chandeliers that sparkled like constellations. Iona made her way through the crowd, her dress adjusting automatically to each step she took, the micro-actuators responding to her movement like magic. She scanned the room, looking for any signs of danger, but everything seemed peaceful. The guests were all dressed in their finest, sipping their drinks and chatting amicably with one another. Ansel was already inside the system, working his magic to gain access to the secure servers.

Somewhere, Miko would have slipped inside as well, weaving her way through the crowd. The Ailurus was excellent at sniffing out secondary targets, whether that meant stealing valuable information, or finding out who was making private deals they didn't want anyone else to know about. These sorts of gatherings were rare occasions when multiple mega-corp families, top executives, and investors were all together in one place. The perfect atmosphere for changing alliances and big money deals.

“All right, I'm in,” Ansel said. “I'm gonna have to keep ahead of their security system, so I'm not sure for how long.”

“Just find out if I'm stealing a prototype, or a research database.” Iona pretended to take a sip of wine. The bubbles tickled against her lips, and she lowered the glass again. A woman passed by on the arm of a man who looked old enough to be her grandfather, leaving a cloud of expensive perfume in

her wake. Iona grimaced. “I’m already getting a headache,” she told Ansel.

“I’m working as fast as I can. Aesir didn’t exactly give us a lot of info to work with this time.”

That was an understatement. They didn’t even know exactly what their target *was*. VoidTech had locked down their R&D division so tight, no one knew what they’d be unveiling tonight. But it was widely understood that whatever it was, it would change the tech landscape and disrupt the markets.

“Mother take you, you fucker!” Ansel’s sudden exclamation made Iona startle, her glass jostling in her hand and almost spilling bubbly wine down the front of her dress.

“What the hell, Ansel? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Mother damn it, this security bot is a *bitch*. It’s already on me, what the fuck?”

Forcing herself to relax and smile again, Iona made her way through the crowd, towards the bar. “What have I told you about swearing in my ear, Ansel?”

“Sorry, it’s just...damn it!”

Her pulse started racing. If Ansel couldn’t even stay in the system long enough to get the info they needed, her mission became exponentially more difficult. She’d have to wait here, mingling in this crowd of bloodthirsty predators until VoidTech did their grand announcement, at which point she’d have to improvise something in front of a room full of the most powerful people in the universe.

“Is this going to be a problem?” she asked.

“No—maybe—give me a minute here.”

Iona stepped near a server with an empty tray and set her still full glass on it as she moved past. No one glanced twice at her. These people thought nothing of wasting thousand-credit-a-glass wine while the galaxy had millions of war refugees starving across a hundred different worlds.

This isn’t why I fought a war.

The thought bubbled up from the recesses of her brain, from somewhere in that dark void of *nothing* that had become her memory. She froze, stunned as it registered. Confusion swept her. Was it real? Like a real thought based on an experience she'd lived? Or something else...like a quote from a book she didn't remember reading. She focused on it, on the moment it had appeared in her mind, the emotion behind it.

Nothing. No matter how hard she strained, nothing else was forthcoming. Someone bumped into her, apologized, and moved on. Iona stood in place, still frozen. A rush of emotion came to her. *Worry, love, curiosity.* Miko. She must have sensed Iona's turmoil from wherever she was in this place. A questioning feeling came next. *Do you need me to come to you?*

Iona sent back a firm feeling of reassurance. *No. Stay.*

"Are you all right, Miss?" A man she'd never seen before was at her elbow.

Iona startled, her hand flying to her earlobe where the subvocal comm was. At the last second, she changed the trajectory to pat at her hair, lightly touching the complicated updo like she was checking to make sure it was still in place. "Sorry?" she asked.

The man repeated himself, his voice carrying a hint of concern. He was young, with a hard face, and dark eyes under a wide brow. His hair was cut short, and there was solid muscle under the expensive suit jacket he wore. *Nova Knight.* "Are you all right? You looked like you were about to faint."

"Oh. No, I'm fine. Thank you." Iona shook her head quickly, her nerves frayed. She needed to focus. She needed to keep her cool and get through this party. "Just a bit lightheaded, that's all. It's a little close in here."

The man nodded, but his eyes lingered on her face for a moment more. "Do I know you?" he asked with a frown.

"I don't think so," she said. "I'm sure I'd remember if we had met." She forced herself to smile easily, while she frantically checked to make sure her Talent was still doing its

job. To her relief, it seemed to be. And this man might be security, but he was still a null, a human with no psychic Talent whatsoever. He had no mental shields at all, and she could sense her Talent clouding his view of her.

She couldn't linger, though. He was clearly a veteran at his job; he might not be satisfied with vaguely recognizing a face he thought he knew.

"Oh!" she said suddenly. "I think I saw you at the race CyberNex sponsored." Six months ago, Nova Knight had provided security at that event, too. It was a risk; she didn't even know if he'd been one of the guards assigned there. But she didn't like the way he was studying her so closely.

"Ah," he said. "That's probably it." His focused expression eased. "Please be careful." He gestured toward the far wall. "The balconies are available if you need some fresh air."

"Thank you." She gave him another empty smile, and finally he moved on.

Iona took a deep breath and forced herself to continue toward the other end of the room.

"What's going on?" Ansel asked. "Who was that?"

"Nothing. I don't know." She reached the bar and joined the line there, struggling to get her emotions back under control. "It doesn't matter. Just focus on your job."

"I'm all good. I tied that security bot up in an infinite loop. I mean, it's not *really* infinite, it'll figure it out in the next ten minutes or so, I just—"

"Ansel." Iona really could not handle his babbling right now.

"Right, right. The mission."

The bartender reached the portion of the rosewood bar Iona stood against.

"What can I get you, Miss?"

Something strong. Alas, it was not to be. "Water with a twist of lime, please."

Maybe she could pretend it had actual alcohol in it.

A sudden burst of joy moved through her, making Iona catch herself against the bar. *Oh no.*

“Ansel, do you have eyes on Miko?” Iona tried not to be too worried; her companion had been to many of these affairs in the past. While she loved to explore, she almost never got caught. It was the *almost* that gave Iona a wisp of doubt.

“Uh...do I ever? Miko goes where Miko wants to, and most of the time I have no idea until the damage is done.”

“That’s not helpful.” Sweeping the room with her gaze, Iona found no sign of her animal friend.

Miko. Iona sent a questioning feeling down the link. A burst of happiness and anticipation bubbled back. *Mother damn it.*

“Best be prepared,” she muttered through the sublink to Ansel.

“Prepared? For what?”

Disaster. “Anything.”

As the bartender placed a cold glass with a wedge of lime in front of her, Iona’s gaze snagged on a familiar figure in the crowd. Tall and lean, with short dark hair and piercing chestnut eyes that seemed to see right through her, he was dressed impeccably in a black suit that hugged his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

Oh no. No, no, no, no, no.

As she watched, he glanced down at something by his feet.

Miko. The little traitor. Iona could still feel her friend’s joy.

“What? What’s happening?” Ansel’s panicked question made Iona realize she was broadcasting across the comm.

“Nothing. Shit.” *Fuck.* Why now? Why this mission? She picked up her glass of water, tempted to press it against her face, which was now flushed with warmth as panic raced up her spine. “Mother damn him.”

“Who are we damning?”

“Zephyr is here.”

“Fuck me.”

“Ansel, language.”

“You were just cursing!”

Iona didn't respond. She was too busy calculating all of her options. Zephyr's gaze was already fixed back on her. Slowly, he raised one dark brow along with his glass, as though offering her a toast. He smiled, and a woman standing five feet away fanned herself, doing a double take.

Iona rolled her eyes. Zephyr was stupidly handsome, and he knew it. He possessed a magnetic allure, with chiseled features, a sharp jawline, and dark, expressive eyes framed by long lashes. His high cheekbones, dusted with a hint of sun-kissed warmth, lent him an air of regal nobility that fit right in with this crowd.

Just looking at him filled Iona with the desire to punch him in his perfect nose.

Everything was about to go to hell. Zephyr wasn't one of these wealthy mega-corp wheelers and dealers. He was like her, a corporate thief, no doubt here to steal the exact same thing she was. And now he knew she was here, and there was no way her little trick with Talent fooled him.

Zephyr was exactly the kind of telepath the Commonwealth was terrified of. A veteran of the battlefield with powerful gifts that could rend through an army of nulls.

“Who do you think he's working for?” Ansel asked, his voice anxious.

“It doesn't matter.” Iona downed her glass of water in three huge gulps, leaving it on the bar.

“What do you mean? How could it not matter?”

Iona pushed back into the crowd, moving with determined steps. “Because no matter who it is, it's not Aesir. Which

means, he's working against us. That clock we're trying to beat just started moving double time, Ansel."

"I mean—he likes you, right? Maybe you could—"

"Do not finish that sentence if you want to keep breathing."

"I'm just saying—"

"Ansel." If Iona could have, she'd have reached through the comm to shake him. "Zephyr doesn't *like* me. We aren't kids. He's a professional who knows he's good looking, and he's used to using those looks as part of the job."

"So?"

"So, he'll flirt with anyone and everyone to achieve his goal. Anything he's ever said to me has been a lie designed to screw us over and beat us to the prize."

The voice that slid into her head was smooth, masculine, and familiar. *Are you so sure of that?*

Right past her shields, like they weren't even there. So damn cocky.

Get out of my head, Zephyr. You aren't welcome.

Miko is happy to see me.

Miko is a little traitor. Her ongoing affection for you is a mystery to me.

He didn't respond, but she swore she could feel him smile. Her teeth ground together.

"Ansel, I need that intel *now*."

"Oh, yeah. Sure. I've got it."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Well, you were busy freaking out about Zephyr. I didn't want to interrupt."

"Ansel." If she could have, she'd have growled at him.

"I'm — oh fu—I mean, uh, damn it."

That headache she'd barely felt earlier began to pound behind her eyes. "What now?" If anything else went wrong, she might just have to scrub this entire mission.

"A security alert just came through Nova Knight channels. I think someone's trying to crash this party."

"So?" Nova Knight was the equivalent of a small, private army. Surely, they could handle it.

"It's an IPSA Enforcement unit."

Aka, telepath hunters. She was so screwed.

CHAPTER TWO

SHIT. Were they here for her? Or for Zephyr? Someone else? Nova Knight employed a lot of former military. It was highly possible they had Talented in their crew.

Seriously, this night could not get any more complicated.

We should work together, firefly.

Do not call me that. And no.

Iona tried to push Zephyr out of her mind, but he was persistent. She could feel his presence lingering, like a shadow that refused to leave. Despite her best efforts to block him out, it was like pushing at a plasteel wall. She also couldn't deny the fact that he was powerful and skilled, and he just might prove useful.

Wait, was he manipulating her thoughts?

A soft chuckle in her mind. *Nice to know you at least find me useful, firefly. Now, we have about five minutes before that enforcement unit pushes past Nova Knight's efforts to keep them out of this banquet hall. Let's grab that Quantum Neural Interface prototype and get the hell out of here.*

"The Quantum Neural what?"

Ansel's voice came over her comm, sounding confused. Of course, he couldn't hear her conversation with Zephyr. "How did you know? The Quantum Neural Interface. The good news is, it's a prototype. So, you can just grab it and go."

Sure. Just *grab it*. Any prototype VoidTech had developed was sure to have a staggering amount of security measures around it.

Iona weighed her options. She could try to go after the prototype alone, but that was risky. Or she could reluctantly team up with Zephyr. He was her best bet at getting the prototype and getting out of here safely. For now, she'd have to put her issues with him aside and focus on the mission.

Fine, she sent to him, *a temporary truce*. “Ansel, we’re going to work with Zephyr. For now.”

“What? How is that — the boss isn’t going to like this.” Like her, Ansel had a contract owned by Aesir. They weren’t just employees. Mega corporations had fleets of lawyers, and when they bought someone’s personal contract, the legal verbiage was as binding as a set of gravity restraints. Until Aesir saw fit to let them go, or the contract duration was fulfilled, the corporation basically owned them.

“Yeah, well, if *the boss* wants that prototype, we don’t have a choice.”

“Um, I’ll let you explain that when the time comes. Also —” Ansel’s voice dropped to a whisper, even though no one could hear him but Iona. “—he’s going to try and double cross us, right? Zephyr has a reputation, you know? He never fails a mission.”

“I know.” Iona’s reasons not to trust Zephyr were many layered. Their professional rivalry was only one aspect.

Suddenly, the man in question was right beside her. Iona hadn’t seen him cross the room, but then again, she’d also been paying more attention to the entrance where the enforcement unit was likely to come barreling through at any moment.

“Listen, firefly.” Zephyr leaned in close, his voice low next to her ear. “I don’t want to interrupt whatever frantic argument you’re having with Ansel about my involvement, but we’re running low on time here.”

“Wait, is that him? *He knows my name?* What the hell, Iona?” She winced. While she spoke to Ansel in subvocals, he wasn’t on site, but hidden away somewhere with his array of

tech. He was speaking to her normally, and right now, his voice had risen to a high pitched screech.

“Calm down, Ansel.”

“Calm down? *Calm down?* What else does he know about me?” Like most slicers, Ansel was intensely private. He used aliases and camouflaged everything about himself with a trail of fake data.

Iona stared up into Zephyr’s ridiculously beautiful face, inches from hers. “Thanks,” she said, the word heavy with sarcasm.

He smiled, and she had to work not to react. Up close, he was even more overwhelming that she remembered. *Ugh.*

She placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back a step. “Personal space, please.”

His smile didn’t dim. “I think right now, our best bet is leaving this room before they lock it down. Come on.” His fingers closed around her arm, warm and firm through the thin lace of her dress.

He started through the crowd, pulling her along with him. People smiled at him as he passed, nodding like he was an old friend. Was he using his Talent like she used hers? Making himself seem familiar to them?

Iona pulled her arm free of his grip. It was better if he didn’t touch her. “I can walk myself,” she muttered.

Zephyr raised an eyebrow. “Suit yourself.” He turned and strode forward, weaving his way through the crowd with ease. Iona followed closely behind, trying to keep up with his long strides.

As they reached the edge of the room, the sound of a commotion started near the entrance. Iona could see a group of men in black tactical gear, all wearing shielded helmets pushing their way inside. The IPSA Enforcement unit. They were here.

A murmur rose through the throng of people. One of VoidTech’s executives approached them. “What is the meaning

of this? Who are you?”

The man in the lead flashed some kind of ID at the executive. “IPSA enforcement, who is in charge of this event?”

People gasped, the noise of the crowd growing louder as the information moved like fire through the room. Rich, poor — no one got in IPSA’s way. The enforcement units weren’t just regular soldiers. The only effective way to hunt down Talented individuals was with other Talented. The crowd’s curiosity and alarm had an undertone of fear as people instinctively clustered together.

VoidTech’s chairman, Malik Khan stepped out of the crowd. Iona knew all about him. The man was over a hundred years old, but had employed every anti-aging tech out there and looked no older than forty. He was smart, ruthless, and a narcissist. Fit and charming, he smiled at the IPSA soldiers like they were party guests. “How can I help you gentlemen?”

“Under article seventeen of the Inter-Planetary Safeguard Accord, we are seizing any and all tech on the premises.”

Tech? They weren’t here hunting telepaths? What the hell was going on?

Zephyr grabbed her hand and pulled her towards a side door. The servers standing beside it were craning their necks to get a look at the enforcement unit. No one even glanced their way as they slipped through the door, and Iona could feel a faint *something* in the air around them. Zephyr was doing something subtle with his Talent to cover their escape.

“Iona? What’s happening?” Ansel asked. “I’ve can see IPSA talking to Mr. Kahn, but I don’t have any sound. It looks like they’re arguing.”

“They want to seize all tech in the building.”

“Oh, shit. They’re after the prototype, too!”

Yeah, Iona had been afraid of that.

She and Zephyr were standing in a staging area, the place lined with countertops filled with trays of food and drink,

servers changing out trays as needed. Zephyr started to pull her past them, but Iona resisted. She didn't pull her hand free this time, because she wasn't sure if the physical contact was necessary to whatever he was doing to cover them.

Wait, she sent, keeping the thread of telepathy very tight. *Miko. I can't leave without her.*

Don't worry, I've got her.

What did that—? The air over Zephyr's right shoulder shimmered, and suddenly Iona could see her friend perched on his shoulder, her striped tail hanging around his neck like a particularly puffy scarf. She cocked her head at Iona and gave a high pitched chitter.

Relieved and annoyed at the same time, Iona sighed. "Fine." A sense of warmth and happiness filled her as Miko communicated her feelings at riding around on Zephyr's shoulder. Iona rolled her eyes.

"Yes," she muttered, "I know you like him. For some inexplicable reason."

Zephyr gave a soft chuckle. "We need to keep moving. Enforcement will have this entire place under lockdown soon."

Iona followed Zephyr through a maze of back hallways and service areas until they reached a service elevator locked by a keypad. Zephyr pulled out a small device from his pocket. He pressed a button, and the elevator doors opened. They stepped inside, and Zephyr eyed the touchpad.

"What floor?" he asked.

"How would I know?"

He gave her a pointed look.

She sighed. "Fine. Ansel, what floor?"

"The heaviest security seems to be on the basement level. Best bet is they're keeping it down there."

"Basement," she told Zephyr. He hit the button, and they started to move.

Iona leaned up against the wall as far from him as she could get. The space still felt too small.

“How have you been?” Zephyr asked. “It’s been about three months since we last crossed paths.”

Ugh. “I’m not interested in making small talk with you,” she said.

“I’ve been good,” he said. “So kind of you to ask.”

“I didn’t.” Why couldn’t she keep herself from responding to his stupid quips?

“Any new memories surface?”

She hesitated, remembering that moment earlier tonight. “No.”

“I feel like that’s not true.” He eyed her. “What was it?”

“Nothing.” Frustration bit at her, both at him and the black nothingness of her past. “Absolutely nothing.”

The smooth movement of the service lift came to a grinding halt so suddenly, she staggered forward, thrown off balance. Zephyr caught her elbow as she fell against him. Miko squeaked at her in alarm as Iona lay pressed against Zephyr’s chest. His breath ruffled her hair and his warmth radiated through the thin fabric of her dress.

“What the hell?” Iona scrambled back, pushing away from him as though the contact burned. She could feel her face heating with embarrassment. *Why?* It wasn’t like she’d *wanted* to throw herself at him.

The lift doors remained closed.

“Uh, Iona? VoidTech has shut down all lift access, probably on orders from enforcement.”

“Well get it back. Get this thing moving again!”

She glanced at Zephyr. “VoidTech’s locked everything down.”

“Not surprising. Can Ansel take control back?”

“Maybe.”

A stream of expletives came from Ansel.

“And maybe not. Ansel?”

“Remember that security bot I put on a loop? Well, it’s back, and it has friends.”

Iona cursed, taking a ragged breath. They were stuck in a small space with no way out, and IPSA enforcement was closing in. She could feel the small threads of panic starting, her heartbeat thrumming in her ears, a feeling of suffocation clawing at her throat. She did *not* like small, enclosed spaces.

She couldn’t remember why, of course, but that didn’t seem to matter to her body.

Zephyr moved to stand in front of the doors, his hands pressed against the metal. “I’ll see what I can do to force them open.”

Iona watched as he closed his eyes, his fingers spreading across the surface of the doors. She felt a faint hum of energy in the air, and then the doors began to shake and rattle.

“Careful,” she warned. She’d seen firsthand how much power Zephyr commanded. A memory flashed in her mind of an entire seventy floor building crashing down around them, huge chunks of plasteel thrown safely away by the bubble of telekinesis Zephyr used to protect them. He’d held her in his arms, his hand covering her head protectively. She remembered his breath on her face, the steadiness of his heartbeat beneath her hands. His calm had suffused her and kept her from panicking.

He glanced at her now, a flash of concern in his expressive eyes. “You doing all right?”

“Sure. Never better.” Iona concentrated on each breath, keeping it slow and steady.

She couldn’t afford to lose control now, not when they were in such a dangerous situation. She needed to focus on their escape.

Zephyr’s attention returned to the doors, and a ripple of energy coursed through the metal. They shuddered, then

popped open with a groan. They'd stopped between floors. They were going to have to crawl out of here.

"Let's go," Zephyr said, motioning for her to go first.

"Ansel, make sure power does *not* come back on to this lift."

"What? I thought you wanted me to get power back!"

"Well, now I'm going to be climbing out of this thing, and I'd really prefer it didn't suddenly drop in the middle of that, cutting me in half."

"Oh. Right."

Iona stepped forward and reached up, gripping the hard metal of the floor hanging in the middle of the doorway in front of her. She started to pull herself up, and suddenly Zephyr's hands closed around her waist and she found herself boosted up almost effortlessly.

"Thanks," she said, pulling herself the rest of the way free. Her dress shortened itself so that the knee-length leggings she wore beneath it were longer than her skirts. Thankfully, she always dressed with anything in mind for these jobs.

Zephyr easily pulled himself out of the lift behind her as Iona regained her feet. Her heart was still pounding, but she could feel the sharp edge of panic receding, and took a grateful breath of the stale air. Wherever they'd stopped, this level didn't seem to get a lot of use.

They were in a dimly lit hallway, with a faint smell of mold and dampness. There were no windows, and the only light came from flickering emergency lights above, barely illuminating the area.

"Where are we?" Iona asked.

"Looks like you're in a sub level, about six levels above the basement," Ansel said.

"This place has seven underground levels?"

"Twelve, actually, but you guys already bypassed the first half a dozen in the elevator."

“Where’s the nearest stairwell?” she asked.

Zephyr reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small device. He pressed a button, and a small holographic map appeared in the air in front of him.

“This way,” he said, pointing to the left. “There’s a stairwell about twenty meters down this hallway.” He smiled at Iona’s arch look. “What, you didn’t think I came here without my own intel, did you?”

“Iona, there’s a stairwell—”

“Zephyr’s already on it,” she interrupted Ansel.

“Oh. Well good, I guess.”

They began making their way down the corridor. As they walked, a feeling crept up Iona’s spine, like an odd awareness. Goosebumps raised along her arms. Miko gave a soft chirp from Zephyr’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I feel it, too,” Iona told her.

“Something wrong?” Zephyr asked. He reached up a hand and gave Miko’s head a reassuring pat.

“I don’t know. It’s just...” Iona shrugged, trailing off. *It feels like someone is watching us*, she finished her thought telepathically.

I don’t sense any other minds nearby, Zephyr sent back. *The closest people are above us by at least a few levels.*

That should have been more reassuring than it was.

I don’t know. Maybe someone is watching us on a security feed.

They reached the stairwell.

The door creaked as Zephyr pushed it open, revealing a dimly lit staircase that spiraled down into the depths of the building. Iona could see the glint of metal rails as they descended, and the steady beat of her heart quickened. She was glad to be out of the elevator, but the thought of descending further into the bowels of the building was somehow almost as unsettling.

“Let’s go,” Zephyr started down.

Iona hesitated, her eyes flickering around the darkened stairwell. She reached out a hand, feeling for the cold metal of the railing. With a deep breath, she began to make her way down.

As they descended, the air grew colder and the light grew dimmer. Iona’s nerves began to fray, and the feeling of being watched grew stronger. She could hear the soft padding of their feet on the metal stairs, but all else was silent.

They continued on for what felt like forever. How many steps was it for each floor? Twenty? A hundred? She wished she’d given Zephyr’s holo map a closer look when she’d had the chance. How had he gotten that, anyway? Ansel had told her intel on the building was locked tight and wouldn’t be possible until they were on site. Was Zephyr working with a team? Someone like Ansel who could hack into the system and then somehow transmit the map?

“Ansel,” she subvocalized. “Have you seen any sign of another slicer?”

“Hell no, and even if I did, they couldn’t come close to catching me.”

Sometimes his smug teenage arrogance was grating. Iona pushed aside irritation. “Well, even so, keep an eye out. I doubt Zephyr is working alone.”

“Sure thing.”

Suddenly, a soft whisper echoed through the stairwell. Iona froze, her heart pounding in her chest. She couldn’t make out what it was, but it sounded like it was coming from somewhere below them.

Did you hear that? She sent the question to Zephyr.

Zephyr paused, his head tilted as he listened. *Yeah, I heard it. Let’s keep moving.*

Iona nodded, her grip on the railing growing tighter as they continued their descent. The whispering grew louder, and soon they could make out words.

“...they’re coming...”

Iona’s breath caught in her throat. There were definitely people down here. Carefully, she reached out with her Talent, looking for their minds. It took longer than it should have, as close as they had to be for their words to carry.

Shielded. Their minds were shielded, which could only mean one thing.

Zephyr, those are Talented below us.

I know, came his grim reply. Nulls were easy to deal with, but fellow Talented was something else altogether. This also explained that feeling she’d had earlier. Some Talented could see things far away, through walls and into other buildings.

She felt a surge of something, the hair on her arms raising.
Zephyr?

They won’t be able to watch us anymore.

Well, that was something.

We need to hurry, she said urgently. Yes, hurry, hurry, and walk right into the trap. Why was this mission such a headache from start to end?

I know, he replied, picking up the pace.

They reached the bottom of the stairwell and emerged into a dimly lit corridor. The walls were lined with pipes and wires, and the air was thick with the scent of rust and mold. Ahead of them, a single door was ajar. Iona could no longer hear the whispered voices.

They must have nulls with them, she thought on a tight thread to Zephyr. Telepaths would have had no need to speak out loud.

Where was this place? Was this the basement where the prototype was being kept? Why did it seem like a dank cellar compared to the upper levels of this building? Where were all of the security measures they’d been expecting?

“Ansel,” she subvocalized. “Where in the *hell* are we?”

A hesitation before he answered. “Ah, I don’t have eyes down there, Iona. You’ve passed below the schematics. My information has the prototype on the floor above you.”

That didn’t make any sense. In fact, now that she thought about it, they’d only passed three doors coming down, but Ansel said they were moving through six floors. *What the hell?*

“Ah, I see,” Ansel said. “Looks like VoidTech has a private elevator that leads from the Chairman’s office to the level you want.”

What? How was that going to help them? There was no way they had the time to make their way back up to probably the top floor of this building, and take an elevator from the Chairman’s office back down.

“I’ll keep looking. There has to be another way.”

Zephyr motioned for Iona to stay back. He lifted Miko down from his shoulder and quietly set her on the floor. The air shimmered around her and the Ailurus disappeared as she bounded toward the open door. A few silent seconds passed, and a pulse of feeling came down the empathic bond between Miko and Iona. *One, two, three, four...*

Iona held up four fingers to Zephyr and pointed to the door. She kept her shields tight. If they were other Talented down here, the only reason they hadn’t sensed them yet was because they weren’t actively looking.

Zephyr slipped through the door.

Iona watched him go, moving with practiced stealth. A surge of Talent exploded out, and sweat broke out on the back of her neck. Were they far enough down that the enforcement unit wouldn’t have felt that? She could hear the sounds of a scuffle and the thud of bodies hitting the ground. A moment later, Zephyr emerged, dragging a figure behind him. Miko, visible again, bounded out after them and came straight to Iona.

“What happened? Who is it?” Iona asked, her voice low.

Zephyr turned the figure over, revealing a young woman with short, spiky hair in a deep auburn shade, with a tattoo of a snake winding up her arm. Her eyes widened when she saw Iona and Miko. The Ailurus gave a happy chitter as she reached Iona's side.

"Eve," Zephyr said, his voice cold.

Iona drew in a sharp breath. Even she knew that name.

"Eve, as in *that* Eve?" Eve was a well-known Talented criminal, with a reputation for being ruthless and cunning. Even so, she wasn't a corporate thief like Zephyr and Iona. Her crimes tended more toward murder. What was she doing here?

"Why would someone like Eve be involved in this?" Iona asked, her confusion evident in her voice.

"Eve? Why are you guys talking about someone named Eve?" Ansel wanted to know. "Wait, wait, wait. You don't mean IPSA's top ten list of most wanted Talented, do you? The pyrokinetic arsonist with a tendency for murder? *That* Eve?"

"That's the one," Iona told him.

"I don't know what she's doing here," Zephyr answered Iona's original question, his eyes hardening. "But we need to find out." Eve glared at him, and if looks could kill, Zephyr would have been in bloody chunks around the hallway. Clearly, his usual charm had no effect on her.

They needed to move quickly. If Eve was here, it meant that they were dealing with something bigger than either of them had counted on.

"Ansel says we're below the schematics of the building. Does your map show anything down here?"

Zephyr shook his head. "No. I have no idea what this level is." But he pulled the holo device out of his jacket again and fiddled with it for a moment before letting it go in front of him. It hovered for a few seconds, and then took off down the hallway.

"It'll scan the rest of the level for us," he said.

“We need to find our way back up.” Iona didn’t add *so we can get the damn prototype and get out of here*. But as they made their way through the sub level, Iona couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched again. It was like an itch beneath her skin that she couldn’t scratch.

Suddenly, the lights flickered and went out completely. Iona’s heart leaped into her throat as she heard the sound of footsteps coming closer.

Zephyr, she sent. *Someone’s coming*.

Zephyr didn’t reply, but Iona could feel the faint hum of his Talent as he prepared for a fight. Miko let out a low growl, and Eve laughed in the darkness. The footsteps grew closer, and Iona could make out the sound of more than one person.

She brought up her Talent, scanning the area for any sign of life. There were at least four people, all of them shielded. They were good, their shields solid. She couldn’t seem to find any flaws to get a mental attack past them.

The first person came into range, but before Iona could strike, Zephyr raised his hand and closed it into a fist. The person went down with a gurgle, his throat crushed.

The others hesitated for a moment, and Iona took the opportunity to strike. She unleashed a wave of telekinetic energy, knocking them off their feet. Miko leaped into action, sinking her sharp teeth into one of the fallen attackers.

Interesting. They didn’t have a very strong telekinetic with them.

Eve darted forward, her own Talent flaring to life as she sent a wave of fire rushing towards them, lighting up the corridor. Zephyr threw up a barrier just in time, the flames licking harmlessly against it. Iona could see the sweat on his forehead as he struggled to maintain the shield against the intense heat.

The attackers recovered quickly, rising to their feet with a speed that was almost inhuman. Iona could sense their anger, their determination to take them down. A telekinetic shield finally flickered to life in front of them. It was like these guys

were physically enhanced with some Talent thrown in as an extra measure.

Zephyr let out a growl, his eyes flashing with a dangerous light. He charged forward, his own Talent flaring as he sent a blast of air rushing towards the attackers. They were knocked back, their shield shuddering under the force of the attack.

Iona took advantage of the moment, lashing out with her own telekinetic powers. Their shield cracked under the force of the dual attacks.

Eve chose that moment to act, her arms raised as though she was drawing on something powerful. Suddenly, a wave of psychic energy washed over Iona, causing her to stumble backwards. She could feel her shields quivering, her mind struggling to resist the force of Eve's attack. A crack formed, and then another. Her shields were about to fall, and if that happened, nothing would stop Eve from killing her with a mental assault.

A barrier sprang to life around Iona and Miko suddenly, shielding them from the worst of it. The Ailurus let out a series of panicked yowls, her fur standing on end. Behind them, Iona could see Zephyr still engaged with the other three attackers, who were still fighting. As she watched one crumpled to the ground and didn't move again. But the other two were still standing, still coming at him with a ferocity that Iona had never seen before. They were well-trained and well-prepared.

Eve was closing in, her eyes burning with an intense fury. Iona knew they couldn't keep this up for much longer. They had to find a way to take her down, fast.

With a grunt of effort, she summoned all the telekinetic force she could muster and sent it hurtling towards Eve. The Talented criminal stumbled, her shield wavering. In that moment of vulnerability, Miko leaped at her throat.

Startled and acting instinctively, Eve threw up her hands and a gout of flame arced toward the Ailurus.

Miko, no! Iona lunged forward, outside of the barrier Zephyr had erected around her, grasping her friend

telekinetically and bodily throwing her free of the flame's path. Eve laughed, a vicious sound, and drove both hands at Iona, more fire pouring out of her to fill the hallway. There was no where to go to escape it.

Iona braced herself for the impact, but instead of flames, she felt a powerful gust of wind, strong enough to knock her off her feet. Zephyr had managed to finish his own fight and had joined her, his blast of telekinesis fighting back against the flames and knocking Eve off balance.

Iona used the opportunity to strike. She launched a mental assault at Eve, using every ounce of her power to break through the woman's shields. Eve screamed, her hands flying to her head as she tried to fend off the attack. But Iona was relentless, pouring all of her anger and fear and frustration into the assault until she felt the woman's shields shatter.

Eve fell to the ground, her body convulsing as she tried to fight off the mental attack. But it was too late. Iona had already gained access to her mind, sifting through her memories until she found what she was looking for.

To her frustration, Eve didn't know who had hired her. She was here for the same thing Iona and Zephyr were. It seemed everyone in the corporate world was after whatever VoidTech had created, this Quantum Neural prototype.

But, what Eve did have was a set of coordinates. It was a location she'd been given for meeting with someone once she had the device, and once she'd killed anyone else who knew about it. Iona memorized the numbers, understanding now why someone had hired an assassin for this job.

Leaving Eve's mind, Iona staggered backwards, her own head reeling from the effort of the psychic combat. Zephyr was at her side in an instant, his arms around her as he helped her to stand. Miko let out a worried mewl, nuzzling against Iona's leg. Concern flooded Iona, and she spared a moment to pet her friend in reassurance.

"I'm all right, Miko." Just mentally exhausted. Did she have any reserves left?

“We need to get out of here,” Zephyr said. “In case more of them show up. Or worse, IPSA.” He glanced down at Eve, who was now unconscious. “She’ll be out for a few hours. Maybe IPSA can do something actually useful and get this psychopath off the streets.”

Iona nodded, still feeling shaky from the mental strain. “Ansel, there has to be a way to reach the level we need.”

“I’ve been working on it, and I think I have something. There’s an access hatch on the schematics that seems to lead to nowhere. It might connect to whatever sub level you guys are on. I think it might connect to old tunnels from a few decades back in the Ascension Wars, used for moving troops around the city unseen. Pretty sure this building was built on top of them, and meant to use that level as a secret escape hole if they ever needed it.”

Which meant someone might be planning to use it tonight, to escape from IPSA with the prototype. They’d better hurry.

Iona pushed away from Zephyr, her face burning as she realized she’d been leaning gratefully against him. He let her go without comment. She explained what Ansel had told her about the old tunnels.

“Ansel has an access hatch for us. Maybe,” she finished.

“Are you up for this? You look like a strong wind could knock you over.”

“I’m fine.” She sure as hell wasn’t going to let him get the prototype without her.

After a moment, Zephyr shook his head. “Whatever you say, firefly.”

Iona didn’t have the energy to argue about his nickname for her. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER THREE

THEY FOLLOWED ANSEL'S DIRECTIONS, but when they reached the access hatch, there was nothing there. Iona stared at the blank walls covered in rusted tubing and old wire.

“Uh, Ansel. There's no hatch here.”

Zephyr stepped past her, tracing his fingers along the wall.

“Yes there is,” Ansel insisted. “I swear, you're right on it.”

A tiny noise made Iona look up, just in time to see Zephyr's drone make its way back to him. He held it out between them and a holo map appeared. He scanned through it quickly. “Tell your friend, there's no door on this scan, either.” He frowned. “Looks like Ansel was right, and this does connect to those old tunnels, though. Interesting.”

“No, no,” Ansel insisted when Iona had relayed Zephyr's words. “There *is* a hatch. It's meant to be hidden, you just have to look for it.”

“It's supposed to lead to the floor above us, right?” Zephyr asked. He cast his gaze upward, to the ceiling above them. It, too, appeared like solid stone. No visible lines for an opening.

Iona's heart sank. They *had* to get up there. She frowned, something teasing at her senses. She stepped closer to the wall, laying her hand flat against it. Her Talent stirred, sluggish and slow, like trying to run through deep water.

Good thing she didn't need to hide her appearance anymore. She was pretty sure she no longer had the energy to maintain that trick. She closed her eyes, probing solely with

her mind. It felt like there was something just on the edge of her perception, ephemeral and elusive.

“Iona?” Zephyr asked.

She shook her head, not ready to explain yet. She *pushed*, her earlier headache lancing through her skull with the effort. Something deep in the wall gave a *click* she could feel.

Iona opened her eyes, head throbbing. She could see it now. She stepped back, her hand shaking as she pulled it free of the wall. A hairline crack made its way through the layers of grime and old rust in the faint outline of a door. She held out her hand, calling on her powers and focusing on the outline. Slowly, it began to shimmer and grow more defined.

“There,” she gasped, letting her hand fall.

Zephyr gaped in amazement. “How did you do that? Even with all of my telekinetic strength, I couldn’t sense a thing.”

“I don’t know,” Iona admitted. “It just seemed like the door wanted to be opened.” She winced, the pain in her head increasing sharply.

Her vision blurred, greying around the edges. She sagged against the wall, the strength abruptly leaving her limbs. She heard Zephyr call her name, but it sounded distant, like an echo inside a cave. Other sounds overtook it. Explosions. Screams. Smoke wafted around her, accompanied by the scents of death and blood.

A battlefield. She was standing in the middle of a battlefield. A broken city rose all around her, jagged remains of buildings cutting into a skyline obscured by a thick haze of smoke hanging in the air.

All around, soldiers fought. Some in powered body armor, others in civilian clothes. She saw glimpses of many faces: young, old, women, and children. This wasn’t a battle anymore. It was a slaughter.

“Captain,” someone said to her left. “Orders?”

The answer floated through her mind; orders were to take back this outpost at all costs. The spaceport here was a

strategic jump point for the fleet. She opened her mouth and spoke. “Protect the civilian population.”

“Yes, sir.”

Around her, Talented soldiers spread out. A powered body suit rose into the air ahead of her, legs kicking, his weapons still firing blindly. It crumpled like a crushed can and fell back to the ground with a heavy thud that shook the earth and knocked down the closest combatants.

Someone screamed. “Talented on the field!”

The armored soldiers turned away from their civilian targets and began firing on Iona and her unit. Plasma splashed harmlessly against a telekinetic shield and dispersed in a shower of bright light. Chaos erupted. The civilians who had been fighting a vicious, losing battle only moments before, while refusing to surrender, were now in full retreat, scrambling back. Iona’s unit marched forward in slow, merciless steps, a telekinetic shield protecting them from harm while they tore into the armored soldiers. The minds of nulls were snuffed out in seconds, or their battle suits were crushed around them. The fight was as one-sided as the powered suits fighting unarmored civilians had been.

But Iona didn’t feel any sympathy for soldiers who had been slaughtering noncombatants so carelessly.

Above, the glow of ship engines cut through the black smog, a unit of fighters flying past in a scream of sound that reverberated through the air and into her bones. Awareness cut through Iona.

She knew this place. She knew what was about to happen — where those fighters were going, what they would do. She flung out a hand, sending her Talent spiraling out in a wave as the fighters turned back for a second pass. One that would come with fire and death.

“Bombs incoming!” she screamed. The enemy was willing to take out their own troops if it meant destroying Iona and her unit as well. The ships closed in, their payload released. Iona threw all of her strength into a telekinetic shield as big as she

could manage in a full bubble around her unit. It wasn't going to be enough. The explosion felt like the end of the world, heat and energy tearing through the earth and everything else in its path in a deafening blast. She heard herself screaming, raw and pain-filled as she struggled to hold off the wave of destruction.

“Iona!”

Her name on Zephyr's lips felt like a part of the memory. Iona blinked, the scene before her flickering like a failing hologram. When it cleared, she was back in the present, leaning against the wall. Zephyr gripped her shoulders in his hands, his face inches from hers. She stared at him, unable to make sense of where she was for a moment. She swore she saw him covered in soot and dirt, blood smeared across his temple as he leaned over her with black smoke behind him. The image flickered again, and his face was clean and unblemished, too beautiful to be real.

“Where...what's happening?” she asked, the words slurred.

Zephyr's fingers flexed where they held her, as if he might shake her. “Iona, are you with me? Do you hear me?”

She shook her head trying to clear it.

“Iona.” Zephyr's voice was gentle. She felt his grip on her relax, as though he'd suddenly realized he was bruising her.

She lifted a hand and touched the side of his face. Surprise flashed in his eyes; she never willingly touched him, putting up barriers and distance between them whenever they crossed paths.

“Too pretty,” she heard herself say. Why was he so clean and beautiful? Where was the soot? The blood? The pain in his eyes as he surveyed the destruction around them?

“Iona, what the hell is happening?” Ansel's panicked voice cut through the haze clouding her mind.

A moment later, she realized she was staring up at Zephyr as though mesmerized, holding his face cupped in her hand

like a lover. She blinked and pulled back so abruptly, she banged her head against the stone wall behind her.

“Ouch.” She hissed out a breath, gingerly feeling at the back of her head.

“Iona?”

She ducked away from Zephyr’s searching gaze, pulling into herself as she straightened away from the wall and tugged free of his hands. At her feet, Miko pressed against her leg, chittering softly. Warm reassurance moved through Iona, helping to calm her nerves.

“I’m... fine,” she said. Even to her own ears, her voice lacked conviction.

“What in the hell was that?” Ansel squawked in her ear.

Zephyr unconsciously echoed him. “Iona, what was that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “It felt like a memory.”

Zephyr’s eyes narrowed, and he scrutinized her closely. “A memory? From where?”

She glanced at him, but hesitated. From the moment they’d first met over a year ago, Zephyr had been interested in her lack of a past. Once she’d realized he was a powerful telepath, she’d asked him to help her recover her memory. She’d even offered to pay him, but he’d refused. He claimed it was dangerous to meddle in the mind when it was protecting itself, and that it was best to let memory return on its own.

Still, every time they met, he asked her about her memories, questioned if she’d started regaining them. She couldn’t shake the odd belief that somehow, he held the key to giving her back her past. And she resented the hell out of him for refusing to help her.

“I’m not sure,” she said vaguely. Iona rubbed at her temples, trying to shake off the remnants of her vision. It was like nothing she’d ever experienced before. The battlefield had been so vivid, so real, that she could practically feel the heat of the explosions and the spray of blood on her skin. And Zephyr,

why did he look so different in that memory? Was it really him? Or had her mind placed him there because he was with her right now? Either way, the image was burned into her mind.

“A... battlefield,” she said finally, watching him closely to gauge his reaction. But he merely frowned, his piercing gaze never leaving her face. She couldn’t detect any recognition there.

“Guys, I don’t know what’s going on, but you need to get moving,” Ansel cut in.

“We should go,” Iona murmured, looking away from Zephyr. A beat of silence hummed between them.

“Right,” Zephyr said finally. He stepped forward, his telekinetic ability making quick work of the door. The stone shuddered as it slid inward and then aside, revealing a metal staircase leading up.

They ascended the stairs, metal creaking beneath their feet. The air grew warmer, and the light brighter as they climbed.

The top of the stairs spilled out into a hallway.

“Ah! There you guys are. You’re back on my holo screens.” Ansel sounded relieved. “IPSA enforcement are headed down to you, by the way. Pretty sure VoidTech lost the argument.”

“I don’t think I have another fight in me,” Iona said. Even her dress seemed to have lost its energy, the actuators no longer changing its length and fit with quite so much enthusiasm. Her jobs didn’t usually end up in actual confrontations, especially with other Talented. It was most often sneak in, get the info or items, and sneak out. By the time anyone realized something had happened, she was long gone.

Tonight had been an epic exception to her usual operation almost from the start. Her eyes narrowed at Zephyr.

“What?” he asked, noticing her look.

“Nothing,” she said darkly. *Why do things never seem to work out for me when you’re around*, she thought, but kept it to herself, careful to allow none of it to seep past her shields, or through the subvocal comm.

“Sure,” Zephyr said with a sigh. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Ansel, which way to the prototype?”

“It’s in a room at the end of the hallway. But security is a real bitch.”

“Can you get us past it?”

“In the time we have? Not so much. But listen, I have an idea. VoidTech is going to be shutting down security measures as they come down with the enforcement unit. If we time this right, this could work out really well for us.”

“They won’t shut *anything* down until right before they plan to walk in.”

“Maybe. They’ve already shut down the hallway security. That’s why I let you guys just step right into it. A few minutes earlier, and you’d have been fried.”

“Uh—” Iona didn’t know how to even respond to that. “Thanks?”

“You’re welcome. The timing on this is going to be really tight. I think either you or Zephyr should be prepared to fight a running retreat, and then use some of those special skills of yours to disappear. I might be able to delay them with some creative bugs in the system, once you have the prototype. Security is a lot easier to bring back online than it is to shut down. By design, you know.”

Hmm. It had definite possibilities. A chitter drew her eye to Miko, who was standing up on her hind legs, front paws dangling before her. Her ears were perked up and an inquisitive feeling thrummed through Iona.

“Ansel, how big is this prototype?” she asked.

“Mm... about the size of an apple, I guess? But shaped more ergonomically. It’s designed to be handheld.”

“What are you thinking?” Zephyr asked.

Quickly, Iona explained her plan. Honestly, she expected him to argue, but he didn't. He just nodded calmly, like he wasn't even surprised.

“Yeah,” he said. “That could work.”

It wouldn't be the first time she'd used Miko's unique abilities for a heist. She knelt down in front of her friend, visualizing as hard as she could what she wanted from her. Miko's head tilted, her whiskers twitching as she considered Iona. The white around her muzzle and ears gave her an almost wise look. She blinked her round eyes, and then nodded slowly. A confident feeling passed between them.

“Miko is sure she can do it.” Iona regained her feet. “Ansel, there better not be any last minute surprises for us that get Miko hurt.”

“Don't worry. I won't give you the go ahead until I'm sure. Plus, you'll be running interference, right?”

Iona looked at Zephyr. “How do you want to play this?”

He gave her a long look. “You're out. You do much more, and you might risk burnout. I don't know what that memory thing was, but it did a number on you.”

Her spine snapped straight. As usual, the urge to argue with him was almost overwhelming.

“Firefly, I see that stubborn tilt to your chin.” He reached out a hand, softly brushing her cheek with his thumb. “You can't see yourself, so I'll tell you. You're so pale, your skin looks almost translucent. I can see the strain around those beautiful eyes of yours. I know I can fight my way out of here. But carry you *and* fight my way out?” He shook his head. “That, I'm a lot less sure of.”

She struggled with herself for a moment, but he was right, and she knew it.

“Fine,” she said. “I'll get out with Miko.” She hesitated. It would be the perfect opportunity to ditch him and run with the prototype back to Aesir. But even the thought of that after he

had just volunteered to cover her retreat with his own life felt really shitty. “Miko grabs the prototype, I’ll get our escape vehicle. You get out as quick as you can and I’ll pick you up.”

“No,” he said. “You get out and get away. I’ll find you on my own.”

“How, exactly?”

“I have my ways.”

Miko gave a sudden chitter and leaped from the ground to Zephyr’s shoulder. He grunted as he caught her weight, and the Ailurus continued her squeaky chattering at him. It sounded like she was scolding him. He gave a chuckle, and stroked the fur along her back with one hand.

“I promise, I’ll be careful,” he said.

Iona marveled at the two of them. “I swear, she likes you even more than she does me,” she said, hating herself for the little squirm of jealousy she felt.

“Well, aside from you, most people find me charming,” Zephyr said, still smiling at Miko, who was now actively rubbing her head against his fingers, eyes closed in bliss.

“Miko isn’t a *person*, exactly.”

He shrugged. “Close enough.”

“Miko, come on.” The little Ailurus nudged his hand once more, and then turned and leaped from his shoulder to Iona’s.

“Be careful,” Iona told Zephyr. “Don’t die.”

That stupid, charming smile that turned his handsome looks blinding spread across his face again. “Firefly, are you worried about me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Worried about you covering my escape. If you go down, I go down. So don’t die.”

“You keep telling yourself that’s all it is,” he said with a wink.

Ugh. And now she was back to wanting to punch him.

Iona spun on her heel and started down the hallway. She couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled in her stomach. She didn't like leaving Zephyr behind. But she knew he was right; she was already on the edge of burnout, and pushing herself any further could have consequences she didn't want to face. She couldn't help but think about what Zephyr had said. He was right — she was pale and exhausted, and her body ached from the fight. But it wasn't just physical exhaustion that she felt. The memory thing had taken a toll on her mentally as well. She had always prided herself on her strong shields and her ability to compartmentalize. But now, she wasn't so sure.

“Ansel,” she said. “How far down is safe to go?”

“All the way, *firefly*.”

Mother damn it. He must have heard Zephyr call her that at some point. The subvocal comm could pick up some spoken words if they were said close enough to it.

“Do you want to die?” she asked him calmly.

“Nope. I definitely do not.”

“That's what I thought.”

“All right then. Uh, how is Zephyr going to know when the enforcement team is getting close? Because they are.”

“Don't worry about him. Zephyr can handle himself.”

“Right, right,” Ansel said, followed by a long pause. It felt weighty, like he was really holding himself back from saying something. “So, you're not worried at all?”

“Nope. Not even a little.”

“Wow. That's harsh.”

It was also a lie, but she was not going to be telling Ansel that. “Stay focused.”

“Yep. Focused. Mission. On it.”

Sometimes, working with a teenager was so hard. Iona barely kept herself from snapping at him to talk in complete

sentences. But it wasn't Ansel's fault she was tired, cranky, and worried.

She reached the door at the end of the hallway and took a deep breath, steeling herself. This was going to hurt.

"Ansel, tell me when. I'm not going to be able to hold this for long."

"In... five... four... three... oh shit, one! One!"

She closed her eyes and let her Talent leech past her shields. *Miko*. She was going to need the help on this one. A paw touched her hair, almost petting it where Miko still sat on her shoulder. A small surge of strength flowed between them, and Iona felt her Talent snap into place. She opened her eyes.

At the other end of the hall, Zephyr was gone. Everything looked empty. She could just make out the sound of booted feet at the end of the corridor, and then they rounded the corner. Five men in suits, one of them Malik Kahn himself, and half a dozen more in tactical gear. Her stomach twisted. *Oh, Mother*, there were a lot of them.

She could hear the low murmur of their voices as they drew closer, but not the words they were saying. It sounded argumentative, though. VoidTech was still fighting to keep their precious prototype. She tried not to fidget. Making herself disappear in the minds of others worked best if she didn't do anything to call attention to herself.

The group halted about twenty meters away from her, not too far away from the access hatch she and Zephyr had come through earlier. It was closed now. One of the enforcement unit lifted a hand and pointed a single finger at Malik Kahn's forehead. Malik stared back, mouth agape.

"Are you *threatening* me?" the Chairman asked, clearly unable to comprehend such a circumstance.

"You have the order from the Council. Bring us the Neural Interface, or we will take it, and remove anyone standing in the way. Starting with you, Chairman."

Malik's eyes darted to one of his security team. The man confronting him laughed. "Don't look at him. I could kill you

all before he could even draw his weapon.

Iona could feel the tension in the air, the weight of their impending confrontation. Sweat slowly trickled down her temple. The strain of holding her Talent so she would remain unseen was starting to take a toll.

Slowly, Malik raised his wrist in front of him. A holo appeared above it, a man sitting in a security office. “Lower the security measures around the QNI,” he said, bitterness in every word.

“Yes, sir.”

A moment later, Ansel’s voice was in her ear. “It’s down. Go.”

In the same instant, one of the security personnel accompanying Malik suddenly drew his weapon. He’d barely cleared the holster inside his suit jacket when he screamed, telekinesis crushing his hand and wrist, the weapon falling uselessly to the ground. Chaos erupted as the tension spilled over.

Iona didn’t wait to watch what happened next. She and Miko were inside the room in less than two seconds. They found themselves in a wide chamber, filled with rows of machines and cables. In the center of the room, a glowing orb floated, surrounded by a protective shield. Miko jumped down and started a circuit of the room, exploring every nook and cranny.

“Be careful,” Iona warned her. “This glowing thing has to be it, right Ansel?”

“Is it round, and kind of floating?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s the security prism *holding* the prototype, but yeah, that’s it.”

“Will it do anything to us if we touch it?”

“No. It’s meant to keep what’s inside it safe. You know, from being dropped or broken.”

Iona approached the orb. “The shield, Ansel.”

“Oh, yeah. One second.”

A moment later, it dropped. Only hesitating for a heartbeat, Iona reached out and palmed the orb. It fit comfortably into her hand, not unlike an apple.

“Well, I guess we got what we came for.”

“Excellent. Now, get the hell out of there. Zeph has the bad guys good and distracted, but if I were you, I’d hurry it up.”

“Miko!” A flash of red fur, and then she was sitting in front of Iona, her paws in front of her. Iona reached out and touched a groove on the harness Miko always wore. A pouch opened up, unfolding from the strap it was connected to. Iona plopped the priceless prototype inside, and then tied it securely shut. She gave Miko a nod. “Go!”

Her friend darted for the door, disappearing as she ran until only a shimmer remained to hint at where she might be. The prototype would be safest with Miko. If Iona was captured, she wouldn’t have it on her, and Miko knew Ansel. She’d find him with it.

Iona started to follow her. The world tilted sideways and she stumbled. She had to catch herself on one of the many machines in the room.

“Whoa, you all right there?”

“Great,” Iona lied, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Yep, with Miko gone, the strength she’d lent her left, too. Iona had no choice but to stop using her Talent. If anyone glanced at Iona now, she’d be perfectly visible.

“This mission sucks,” she muttered. She had no weapons, just a fancy dress and a Talent she couldn’t even use.

She pushed away from the console she was leaning over, and managed to walk a mostly straight line to the door. She took a quick look down the hallway. Bodies littered the floor. All of the suits were down, and Zephyr was fighting the entire enforcement squad all by himself. The walls and floor were dented and crunched in places, destroyed by the powerful

waves of telekinesis being thrown around. Dark streaks marring the light grey plasteel indicated some other Talents at work as well, and as she watched, one of the enforcement squad threw a hand out toward Zephyr, electricity crackling from it.

Iona's heart leaped into her throat as she watched the electricity fly towards Zephyr. Without thinking, she lifted her arm and aimed her palm in the direction of the attack. Her vision swam as a burst of force shot out of her hand and collided with the electricity. It arced away from Zephyr and struck one of the other enforcement squad members. He gave a cry and stumbled back, clutching his chest where it had struck him.

Zephyr turned to look at her, and for a moment, their eyes met. *Get. Out.*

The command could not have been anymore clear.

You're welcome, she sent back, but she didn't have the energy to imbue the words with the sarcasm she wanted to use.

Instead, she did as she was told, using the wall to support her as she stumbled toward the access hatch. It was open again. Clearly, Zephyr had been hiding in there when the team had first come into the hallway. The opening stood about three meters from where Zephyr was fighting the enforcement unit. Giving up on any sort of stealth, Iona ran for the hatch, trying not to stumble over her own feet. Luckily, her dress seemed to sense her needs once again and hung to mid-thigh. At least she wouldn't be tripping over the hem.

A body skidded across the floor toward her, the helmeted head twisted the wrong way. It came to a stop, nearly colliding with her right in front of the hatch, and Iona dove over it and into the stairwell without stopping.

"Ansel, do you have any idea where I'm going?"

"Yeah, sure. I hacked Zeph's drone and stole the scan it took. I'll guide you to where that basement meets up with the city catacombs."

"And from there? I've heard they can be a maze."

“I have an old blueprint from City Hall. It’s probably mostly accurate.”

“Probably? Mostly?” Iona asked incredulously.

“Like, seventy percent sure.”

She grit her teeth, wondering if she could manage not to pass out before Ansel got her out of here. “Awesome,” she said.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT WAS A CLOSE THING, the not passing out. By the time she climbed up a rickety metal ladder and out a rusted iron gate that had to be over a century old, she wasn't sure she could keep going. She slumped against a trash receptacle that reeked of rotten food and wondered if Zephyr was going to come find her unconscious in a pile of trash.

It seemed like so much time had passed, and yet a flashing sign across the street claimed it had been less than an hour since she'd entered the banquet. Really? Was that even possible?

An aircar dropped out of the sky above and slid to a sleek stop right in front of her. What the hell?

"Your getaway car," Ansel said. "It's clean. I wiped its registration and removed the tracer on it. I've keyed it to you, so, you know. Keep it if you want."

"Um, thanks." There was no way she was keeping a stolen vehicle. Registration wiped or not, it looked expensive, and someone would come looking.

Iona climbed into the driver's seat and took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. She'd never been one for high-speed chases or thrilling escapes, and she hoped she wasn't about to break that streak. As she started the engine, the car hummed to life, and she felt the full power of the vehicle as she lifted off the ground and into the air. The city stretched out before her, a blur of neon lights and towering skyscrapers, but she didn't have the energy to take it in.

Instead, she focused on getting as far away from the mission site as possible.

“Okay, Ansel, where am I going?”

“I’ve programmed it to take you to a safe house.”

Oh, thank the Mother. Iona relaxed back into her seat, letting her shaking hands fall into her lap. She was exhausted.

“Do you have any weapons in this car?” she asked Ansel.

“No, sorry. I didn’t want to attract any extra attention. But I do have some contacts who could hook you up if you need them.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll find my own way.”

Iona couldn’t help but glance in the rearview mirror every few seconds, half-expecting to see the enforcement unit hot on her heels. But no. They were still back with Zephyr.

“Ansel? Are you still plugged into VoidTech’s security?”

“Uh, no. The fight triggered an alert and I had to bail. Plus, I needed to focus on getting you out safely.”

Iona didn’t say anything.

After a while, Ansel spoke again, the words so soft she almost didn’t hear them. “I’m sure he made it out.”

Iona didn’t reply. She stared out at the city for a while. Finally, she felt the car start to descend.

“It might take Miko some time to find me,” she said. I’ll be in contact once I have her and the prototype back in my possession.”

“I’ll let the boss-man know. Mission successful.”

As the car touched down in front of a nondescript building, Iona couldn’t help but let out a small sigh of relief. She had made it out alive. But as she climbed out of the car and made her way to the entrance, she couldn’t shake a feeling of unease. They might have successfully stolen the prototype, but she knew things were far from over.

The safe house was small and sparsely furnished, with only a few pieces of plain furniture and a single bed. But she did find some basic sweats in the sad looking wardrobe against one beige wall, and there was a shower with lukewarm water. Grateful to finally get out of a dress that had lost its appeal sometime back tonight, Iona quickly showered and changed. She only stayed under the spray of water for a few short minutes, not trusting herself to stay upright.

Her hair still damp, Iona collapsed onto the bed with a groan of relief. She closed her eyes and let out a long breath, trying to quell the trembling in her limbs. She had never felt so drained, both physically and mentally. The events of the evening had taken a toll on her, and her mind was still trying to make sense of what had happened.

Her thoughts kept drifting back to Zephyr. Was he okay? Had he made it out safely? She couldn't shake the worry that he had sacrificed himself to save her.

Iona shook her head and pushed the thoughts away. Zephyr had made it clear on multiple occasions just how powerful he was. He could take care of himself. His face swam into her mind, but it was the version from that weird vision she'd had, soot streaked and beat up.

She focused on that memory, or whatever it had been, playing every moment over again and wondering if it had all been real. Had she really been a soldier? What had happened on that battlefield? How had she survived?

She drifted off to sleep still thinking about these questions, and wondering if she would ever find answers.

A noise woke her from a deep sleep sometime later. It had been the kind of sleep that felt like only a moment, because there had been no dreams, just black oblivion between the moment she closed her eyes, and opening them again. She lay sprawled on the bed, facing the bathroom. The light was on, the door open, and she glimpsed in the cracked mirror Zephyr's face, his head tilted down so that all she saw was his hair hanging over his brow and his dark lashes against the curve of his cheek.

Relief rushed through her. *He made it out.*

She parted her lips to call out a greeting, when he turned to pick something up and she saw the flash of a muscular arm and sculpted chest right before he pulled a sweatshirt over his head.

She stared dumbly, caught completely off guard. Not like she hadn't known it before, but all right, Zephyr was built. No one was that cut without some serious devotion to working out. And now she would forever have that image burned into her brain.

Ugh. As if the man was not already good looking enough.

She had the childish urge to close her eyes before he stepped out of the bathroom, but that was just foolish. There was no way a telepath of Zephyr's caliber didn't already know she was awake. She sat up.

"You made it out," she said aloud, running a hand through her hair. It was dry now, and probably looked about as appealing as a rat's nest. She pulled her fingers through it, trying to comb it into some semblance of order.

Zephyr nodded, his dark eyes meeting hers. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Iona smiled. "I wasn't worried," she lied.

"I know." Zephyr walked over to the bed and sat down beside her. He ran a hand through his hair, the strands falling back into place with a careless grace.

Really? Iona fought not to roll her eyes as she struggled to untangle her own long strands. *Unfair.*

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Me? I'm not the one who single-handedly fought off an IPSA enforcement squad."

Smiling, he lifted a hand and brushed her hair back from her face, the gesture making her stop her finger combing.

"Firefly, you almost burned yourself out last night."

With a sigh, she smacked his hand away, though there wasn't much heat behind the move.

“Stop calling me — wait, did you say last night?” She turned toward the grimy windows, noting the weak sunlight managing to shine through them.

“Yeah, it's morning.”

She'd slept longer than she'd realized. A heavy silence fell between them, and for some reason her she could feel her heart beating, too fast and too loud. She needed to dispel this weird tension.

Iona cleared her throat, turning it into an awkward cough to try and hide her nerves. *Ugh*. “You didn't happen to bring any coffee with you, did you?” she asked.

“No.” Zephyr was still watching her, but at least he didn't crack a smile at how odd she was acting. “I figure we'll grab some when we leave.”

“Leave?” she frowned. “But Miko isn't here yet.”

“We'll find her.”

Iona shook her head. “She always finds me.”

“Not this time, firefly.” Zephyr stood, and just that small distance seemed to help restore some of Iona's equilibrium. “That prototype is a little too hot to leave wandering around the city, even in Miko's capable paws.”

Iona was watching him carefully, which was why she noticed the slight twitch of his lips, the furrow of his brows. “You're worried.”

He hesitated, then shrugged. “Yeah. I'm fond of Miko.”

Somehow, that warmed her toward him. Honestly, Iona was starting to wonder if she'd misjudged him. Maybe she'd taken one look at Zephyr's handsome face, the way he used it to manipulate and charm others, and decided not to like him. That was unfair. The more time they spent together, the more she saw of the man underneath the facade, the one who was protective and caring. *Hmm. Dangerous ground, Iona.*

“Anyway,” he said, “we should go find some decent clothes, get Miko, and finish this.”

“I agree,” she said. She scooted to the edge of the bed, quickly weaving her fall of dark hair into a neat braid. Unpleasant emotion twisted in her stomach as she realized reality was about to intervene. “But what does that mean, exactly?” she asked.

“Obviously, recover the prototype and make sure it gets to where it needs to go, and out of our hands.”

“And where is that?” she asked, getting to her feet. “To my boss, or yours?”

She could see the question surprised him. When he didn’t answer immediately, she sighed.

“I knew this truce was temporary.”

He lifted a placating hand toward her. “Hold on a minute, firefly—”

“No. No *firefly*, no holding on. It was always going to come down to this. We work for different people, Zephyr. I don’t know where your loyalty lies, but it isn’t with Aesir, right?”

He didn’t say anything, and she nodded. “Exactly. Thanks for all of your help. I truly, truly couldn’t have done this without you. But I’ll meet up with Miko on my own. You can go your way, and I’ll go mine from here.”

Zephyr’s expression was shuttered, his eyes searching her face. “Iona, listen to me.”

“Why?” Iona asked, shaking her head. “So you can convince me to hand over the prototype to your boss instead?”

“No,” Zephyr said. “I swear to you, Iona, I have no intention of betraying you.”

Iona snorted. “You expect me to believe that? You mean like the DataSight job? I trusted you then, and you definitely betrayed me.”

It was the very first time they'd crossed paths. She hadn't *exactly* trusted him, but he'd snuck under her defenses with that charm of his, and she'd lowered her guard. He'd saved her life when that building fell down around them, and then he left her in that rubble and escaped with the research they'd both come to find. She still remembered the shock of standing alone and abandoned, covered in plasteel dust in the middle of the street as emergency vehicles roared in around her. It had been a stupid mistake, and one she never forgot.

He winced. "That was different."

She huffed a laugh. "Right."

"I know it's hard to trust me," Zephyr said. "But I can help you. I have connections that can protect you, keep you safe from IPSA and anyone else who might come after you. And I can make sure the prototype gets into the right hands."

Despite herself, Iona hesitated, studying Zephyr's face. He looked serious, his face stony with resolve. There was none of the beguiling magnetism or cajoling charm she was used to seeing from him.

"Why?" she asked, suspicious. "Why would you help me? And whose hands are the *right* hands? What does this prototype even do? Do you know?"

"I do." He held his hand out to her. "Just come have a coffee with me. I'll tell you what I know, and then you can decide. Please."

It was the first time he'd ever asked her for something like this. The look in his eyes pleaded with her, and she found herself wavering. *Mother damn it.*

She looked away, lips pressed tightly together. That memory flashed in her mind again, his face all battered above her, eyes filled with pain and worry. She expelled a long breath. "Fine. One cup of coffee. That's all you get."

"Fair enough."

Iona followed Zephyr out of the dingy safe house. She couldn't believe she was agreeing to go for coffee with the man who had previously betrayed her trust, but something

about his demeanor made her think that maybe he was telling the truth this time. *Don't let your guard down*, she told herself. *Remember, he'll do anything to win.*

As they walked down the street, Iona noticed how different Zephyr seemed without his usual cocky attitude. It was like he'd turned off a switch, and instead of being the brightest, most magnetic person in the room, he'd become... well, normal. His shoulders were hunched, and he seemed lost in thought. Was this the real Zephyr?

They found a small café a couple of blocks down the street, and after ordering their drinks, they sat down at a table in the corner. Iona sipped her coffee, staring at Zephyr across the table. "Alright. Talk," she said.

Zephyr tilted his head, and a telepathic shield sprang up around the table, invisible to the nulls around them, but a barrier that would keep anyone from noticing or eavesdropping on their conversation.

He took a deep breath, his eyes fixed on hers. "The prototype is a new kind of neural implant. It allows for direct and instantaneous communication between humans and artificial intelligence systems, enabling individuals to access and process information at inhuman speeds. It will enhance cognitive function, memory, and learning ability, while opening the potential for the human mind to evolve in ways previously unimaginable."

Iona stared at him, her mind racing at the possibilities. "This is— this could—" She leaned across the table, lowering her voice, even knowing no one could be listening to their conversation. "Zephyr, are they trying to recreate the evolution of Talented minds?" The war-time experiments that had led to the Talented were quite possibly the largest technological secret in the universe. No one knew how it had been done, and scientists had been trying to recreate it until the Commonwealth passed the accord outlawing Talent. To be truthful, plenty of scientists probably still *were* trying to recreate it. Just in a more controlled way. The true danger the Talented represented wasn't to the populace, as the government wanted everyone to believe, but to the powers that

governed the galaxy. The Talented were too much; too powerful, too free, too unpredictable.

It clicked for Iona. “This is it. This prototype is trying to create an evolution of human that can be controlled.”

“Yes. An implant in the brain can have all kinds of fun accessories. Like a kill switch.” Rumor had it, the Talented who worked for IPSA all had kill switches surgically implanted, so they could be instantly killed if they went off script.

She thought about what VoidTech or Aesir would do with such a technology, and her heart dropped. The military applications alone were terrifying. Peace was a new concept for the Commonwealth. It wouldn’t take much to plunge them back into war.

“Who do you plan to give it to?” she asked Zephyr.

He didn’t say anything for a long moment, staring down into his coffee. “Zephyr?” she prompted him.

“I’m not going to give it to anyone. I’m going to destroy it.” He looked up, meeting her eyes. “I would have done so last night, but with the enforcement team on site and you as a complication, the best I could do was to get it safely out of corporate and government hands to destroy later.”

She stared at him in shock. “You’re going to destroy it?”

“Yes.”

She’d never thought of Zephyr as a hero before. Maybe not a villain, exactly, but certainly not someone who would sacrifice for a cause bigger than himself. She was having to re-evaluate everything she’d ever thought about him.

“What about the research? They could just rebuild it.”

He turned his cup in his hands, took a sip, and put it back on the table. “I wasn’t working alone last night. My job was the prototype. My team’s job was the research being held on a closed, locked-down server at VoidTech’s headquarters. They did their job.” He hesitated before continuing, but then his

shoulders fell and he sighed. “Malik Kahn is dead. The enforcement team killed him last night.”

“The enforcement team killed him?”

“Technically, yes. He died in the altercation I started when I forced one of his bodyguards to draw a weapon and fire on them.”

She blinked, wishing for all she was worth that she had a datapad handy. The chairman of the biggest tech corporation in the galaxy dying at the hands of a government-run enforcement team had to be the most sensational news of the year.

No, no. Of course, they would spin it. Her breath caught in her throat. *Oh, no. Oh, Mother.* They were going to blame someone, and it wasn't going to be a government goon squad.

“Are we— are we in the news?” Was her holo even now being dispersed throughout the galaxy as a wanted person of interest in the death of a tech celebrity? Just because Ansel would have wiped the security feed, that didn't mean the enforcement unit wasn't equipped with their own holo recorders.

“Not yet,” he said grimly. “Ansel wipes everything, right? I know you're professional enough to leave no trace behind, but we're talking about IPSA here.”

“IPSA or not, no one is better than Ansel.”

“He's fourteen, and last night was a chaotic mess.”

She snorted. “He would be *so* insulted to hear you say that.”

Zephyr's face was implacable. “Check in with him.”

“I'll need a datapad.”

Zephyr got up from the table and went to the counter where they'd ordered their drinks. Most cafés had rentable units available. While he was gone, she sat staring into her coffee with her hands at her temples, elbows on the table. She thought after that successful heist and escape the night before, the worst of this job would be over, but it was just beginning.

“Worst. Job. Ever,” she muttered.

Zephyr slid back into his chair, and set an aging and battered-looking datapad on the table in front of her. She called up the holoscreen and the first thing she did was turn to the news casts.

Malik Kahn and VoidTech was on every cast. *Aesir must be pissed*, she thought. They liked things quiet, and especially a job like this one. She listened to each cast until they started repeating themselves. No info on who might be responsible, not even a release on cause of death, just that the event at VoidTech the night before ended in tragedy, with Malik Kahn leaving his own banquet early, and dying in his home sometime in the night. Speculation was rampant that something had gone awry with his latest anti-aging treatment. The man was over a hundred. It wasn't too unbelievable.

Relieved, she called up a generic messaging service and fired off an inquiry to one of Ansel's burner accounts, before closing the device, wiping the history and tossing it back onto the table.

“So they're spinning it as an accidental death,” she said.

“That doesn't mean we're safe.”

No, it most certainly didn't.

She glanced around the café, noting the various customers ordering food or drink, those already seated around them having their own conversations, the beep of the door as it slid open and closed for people coming and going. It all looked incredibly normal. No one stuck out or felt out of place, and yet a chill shuddered over her. Aesir, like all mega-corporations, played big games with dangerous consequences, but this certainly felt a few levels higher than anything she'd experienced in the past.

Warm fingers slid over hers, and she glanced up at Zephyr in surprise. He gave her hand a squeeze.

“It's going to be all right,” he said. His chestnut eyes were looking at her too intently. She didn't like that he could see her unease so clearly. But she couldn't deny there was something

reassuring about his hand covering hers. Something warm and familiar. She stared at their fingers, nearly intertwined on the table, and something in the dark void of her past gave a shudder. She turned her hand over underneath his, lifting it until their palms met, and folded her fingers between his. She held his hand like that, listening to her heartbeat wildly in her ears.

Something hovered just on the edges of that void. A ghost that whispered to her. She looked up to find Zephyr watching her, a guarded look on his face.

The words waited in her mind, ready to be spoken. *You know me, don't you? You know who I am.*

She couldn't say them. They stuck in her throat, buried behind her shields and the scars of whatever haunted her. What if he didn't? What if she was imagining this connection she felt, this magnetic pull every time she saw him? Or maybe worse, what if she wasn't? If it was real, if he knew her and all this time he'd kept his distance, what did that mean?

A chittering squeak sounded between them, and they both startled, their hands breaking apart. Miko's head popped up next to the table. She was on her hind legs standing up beside them, paws on the tabletop, her little claws leaving scratches on the cheap material.

"Miko!" Iona felt her face flush as she focused on her animal friend. She willed her heart to slow. What the hell had almost just happened?

The Ailurus leaped up onto the chair next to Zephyr, chittering at him and rubbing her head against his arm. He gave her head a scratch and then quirked an inquiring brow at Iona.

"In the pouch on her harness," she told him, jerking her chin toward it.

It was clasped shut and took him a minute to undo, and then he checked inside and nodded. "It's still here."

Iona let out a long breath. *Thank the Mother.* Not that she hadn't trusted Miko to keep it safe. They'd worked many jobs

together, and Miko was no ordinary animal. She knew her job, and she'd defend her prize with vicious teeth and claws if necessary. But the prototype wasn't a normal prize, either. Too many powerful entities wanted it.

"I think we should get out of here," she said, glancing around the room.

"Agreed."

"I've got to get my things. I need my own datapad if Ansel's going to get in touch, and I'd really like to get into my own clothes."

"All right, so you'll head to your ship?"

It was her turn to raise an eyebrow at him. "You know where I live?" Iona and Miko lived aboard a small courier ship provided to her by Aesir. It was fast, discreet, and jump capable. She got to use the berths at various spaceports Aesir paid for, so it was convenient and low cost for her.

Zephyr just smiled at her enigmatically, still stroking Miko, who was rubbing her face against his arm and clearly loving every second.

Whatever. Honestly, this guy and his secrets.

"Miko, come," she said, just to be contrary. The Ailurus gave a last, happy squeak at Zephyr before hopping across to the chair beside Iona.

Zephyr's smile widened. *There he was.* Cocky Zephyr was back, and Iona's equilibrium was restored. This guy, she could handle. The other guy who looked into her soul and acted like he cared, not so much.

He rose to his feet. "I'll meet you there," he said.

"Sure." She shrugged like she couldn't care less. Maybe he'd show back up, and maybe he wouldn't.

Of course, they both knew he would. Not for *her*. For the prototype. For this whole mess they'd gotten themselves into.

He tipped his head to her by way of saying good-bye, and then his lean frame was disappearing out the café door.

Iona glanced at Miko, who gave a soft chirp beside her. It sounded sad. “And that’s why you shouldn’t get attached,” she told her friend sagely. “He’s always leaving.”

CHAPTER FIVE

WALKING BACK onto her ship was such a relief. Tension she hadn't realized she was holding seemed to drain out of her the moment she settled into her favorite chair, Miko leaping into her hammock beside her. The Ailurus curled up into a ball, tail wrapped around herself, and soon was fast asleep.

She'd probably had a long night traipsing all around the city, and then trying to find Iona.

Suppressing a yawn herself, Iona picked up her personal datapad and checked it for anything new from Ansel. Nothing. She tossed it back down and spent a few minutes just listening to the quiet. A faint hum of power was detectable if she listened closely, the basic life support and background systems running, even while docked.

Iona ran her fingers along the console in front of her, feeling the smooth surface under them. The screen was cracked down one side. It had come to her like that, a remnant from the previous owner, who didn't seem to take the same care of his things that Iona did.

She decided she'd close her eyes just for a few minutes. It had been an eventful night, and she wasn't fully recovered yet. Still listening to the silence, she let herself drift off.

After spending so much time with him in the past several hours, maybe it should have come as no surprise that she dreamt of Zephyr. On the other hand, he'd never appeared in her dreams before, and certainly never like this.

That muscled torso she'd glimpsed in the safe house mirror was beneath her hands, the skin smooth and warm as she slid

her fingers over it. She leaned into him, kissing her way up his chest slowly, pressing her lips against every scar. She started at his abdomen, with a hard ridge of scar tissue on his right side, feeling his muscles contract under her touch. She moved her lips to the angry whorl of a burn higher up on his left side, just beneath his ribs, and from there, traced up to a tattoo on his pec, a set of five-toed paw prints, distinctive, with curved claws jutting out like the points of a star. Zephyr's breath was hot against her ear as he leaned close and whispered a name that wasn't hers. "*Elowyn.*"

His hands slid up her sides as he pulled her into a kiss, soft and insistent. She opened her mouth to him, the kiss deepening, and she felt herself sinking into it. The kiss was like a drug, drinking in his taste and heat with every breath. He pulled her closer, one hand tangled in her hair, the other splayed on her back. Her head was spinning. He tasted of something sweet and decadent. Familiar, whatever it was teased at the edge of her mind, but she couldn't place it.

Iona moaned into the kiss, lost in the sensation. She hadn't realized how much she needed this until now, how desperately she wanted to feel his body against hers. His fingertips were tracing delicate patterns on her skin as his mouth moved over hers with increasing urgency.

A harsh beeping jolted Iona awake. It took a moment for her to realize that it was an alarm, one that was blaring throughout the ship. She shot up from her chair, her heart pounding.

Miko was already awake, chittering anxiously as she scurried across the console to the source of the noise.

Iona took a deep breath and tried to get her bearings. She pulled up the log on her console and then looked up the error code that tripped the alarm. Power surge. *Ugh.* So vague. She tapped her console and ordered a full scan of the power systems.

Amidst Miko's frantic squeaks and chitters, Iona shut the alarm off, and checked all of the security cameras outside the ship. Each one was clear, no sign of anyone about. Still, she

felt like something was off. Weird to be sitting docked and have any kind of alarm sound.

It would take a while for the scan to complete. A power surge could be something simple like a short somewhere, or it could be something big that would lead to a catastrophic failure in space. Or, given her luck lately, the alarm could have just malfunctioned.

Had it malfunctioned? And if so, was that bad luck or good, given the dream she'd been having?

She ran a hand through her hair, which had come undone from the hasty braid she'd plaited it into earlier. Looking down at herself, she realized she was still wearing the sweats from this morning. Exasperated, she made her way back to the drawers where she kept all of her clothes, and changed into fresh garments. Clean underwear, basic pants and a shirt that wasn't two sizes too big for her. She pulled out her favorite jacket and pulled it on, the old synth-leather soft and well-worn.

The whole time, she was caught between worry over the ship's alarm and mortification that she'd had a *sex dream* about Zephyr. She glanced at Miko, who was still elevated from the noise of the alarm, sitting up in an alert posture and looking at everything with big eyes.

"We must never even *think* of this in his presence," she told the Ailurus. "So, it's our secret, all right? You and me. Nobody else."

"*Secrets? What secrets? I love secrets.*" She startled, jerking so wildly, she almost fell down when Ansel's voice came over the subvocal comm.

"Holy Mother! *Ansel?*"

"Oh, hey. Did I scare you? Sorry about that. Anyway, what secrets are we talking about?"

"No business of yours," she told him sharply. "And if you don't want to die, you'll never ask about it again."

"All right, all right. Wow. Someone's cranky."

“I’m fine.”

“If you say so. Anyway, I got your message. I saw the news.”

Pulled back to the most immediate problem, she tried to refocus. “Right. So how screwed are we?”

“What do you mean? I wiped all trace of us. There is no record that you, me, Miko, or Zephyr ever attended that banquet, or came anywhere near Malik Kahn. Not a single frame of security holo, not even the scan of your invitation as Ms. Truex. And since no one will remember the real you, you should be totally in the clear.”

Ansel was the only person she worked with who knew about her abilities. He was a smart kid and figured it out early on, but swore he’d never tell. Oddly, she believed him. Like her, Ansel was a loner with no family, and few friends. She suspected he had his own demons he was hiding from, and he didn’t buy into the government propaganda about Talented individuals. He said he understood too much about how that kind of misleading thing was intentionally spread and used for nefarious agendas, and he would never be a party to such terrible persecution.

Iona let out a breath of relief. “Well, that’s great news.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t take care of it?”

Sensing the thread of insulted pride beneath his words, Iona decided to blame Zephyr. She didn’t even feel guilty about it. “No, but Zephyr was worried. I tried to reassure him, but he insisted I follow up with you.”

Ansel made a disgruntled noise. “That guy,” he said darkly. “I mean, I’m glad he made it out safe and sound, but—how dare he question my abilities!”

“Yeah, real arrogant, right?” Iona agreed, sitting on the edge of her bunk to pull on a pair of boots.

“Who does he think he is, checking up on my work? He’s not even a part of this team!”

“I know,” Iona agreed, grinning. She wondered what Ansel would say the next time he talked to Zephyr.

“I can’t believe that. What kind of half-assed slicer does he think I am?” Ansel grumbled a little more before switching gears. “Anyway, the boss is anxious for a meet to pick up that prototype.”

Iona almost fumbled the boot she was holding. “Oh, um, right. When and where?”

It occurred to her suddenly that by going along with Zephyr’s plan, she’d also be cutting ties with Aesir. She’d have to. That would likely mean a whole new identity. She’d have to give up this ship that had become her home. And Ansel. She’d probably never talk to him again. The idea of that brought an unexpected wave of sadness.

“Iona?”

“Yeah?” She finished pulling on her boot, trying to ignore the way her throat suddenly felt tight.

“Did you hear me? I sent the coordinates to your ship nav.”

Iona cleared her throat. “Oh, right. Um, thanks.”

“No problem. You sure you’re okay? You seem a little off.”

“I’m all good,” she assured him, crossing back into the cockpit. “Just exhausted. Last night was a lot. Hey, can you make a note to Aesir that I need my power surge alarm checked? It went off earlier, and it might be malfunctioning.”

“That’s weird. Did you run a diagnostic?”

“It’s running now, but you know it has to go through every single part of the ships’ power systems.”

“Hmm, well I guess it’s going to be a bit before you can safely take off. I’ll let Aesir know.”

“Thanks.”

Iona sat in her pilot’s chair and called up the nav computer. Sure enough, a set of coordinates was blinking in the console. She stared at them for a minute, wondering what she should

do. Zephyr would be here soon, and then she'd reach the point of no return. She'd officially be betraying her contract, and Aesir. But what else could she do? Zeph was right, this tech was too dangerous to leave in anyone's hands, much less one of the biggest mega-corps out there.

Wait. “Ansel, are you sure these are the right coordinates?” she asked.

“Don't tell me *you're* going to insult me now?” he asked.

“No, listen.” Iona stared at the console, struggling to process. “It's just— these are the same coordinates I took from Eve.”

“Wh-what? What do you mean?”

Thoughts whirling, Iona closed her eyes and tilted her head back. “Eve was hired to kill whoever stole the prototype, and take it to her employer. And the coordinates she had in her head for the meet, are the *same* coordinates you just sent to me.”

Ansel was silent for a long beat. So was Iona. In the quiet, the knowledge they'd just shared sat between them; ugly, weighty, and unavoidable. After what seemed an endless time, Ansel's voice came hesitantly over the comm.

“Iona, are you saying Aesir hired Eve to—to kill us, and take the prototype?”

“That is definitely the implication.”

“Uh, what—why—” Ansel fumbled over his words. “Do you think— I mean what should we do?”

“Ansel, you saw what this prototype is. You know what it can do, right?”

He was quiet for a long time. Iona waited until she thought he might have disappeared on her. “Ansel?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“It seems to me that Aesir isn't too keen on having a bunch of people with that knowledge running around.”

“Yeah.”

“Ansel, this is a secure comm, right?”

“Hell yeah,” he said. “I’ve got it locked down.”

Iona took a deep breath. “I’m leaving Aesir. Zephyr and I are taking the prototype. We are going to destroy it, and disappear.” She waited a beat. “You should come with us.”

“You don’t— Iona, you have to understand. Aesir won’t let this go. They have resources, connections. You can’t just take something they feel they own and disappear.” Ansel sounded horrified. Not good. She needed him calm and thinking.

“You mean like we can’t steal a priceless prototype from the biggest tech mega-corp in the galaxy and disappear? Do you think VoidTech was going to just let it go?”

Ansel was quiet for a long time.

“Ansel? Do you?”

“No.”

“Zephyr says he knows someone who can help us.”

Her console beeped to let her know the diagnostic scan was complete. She pulled it up as Ansel mulled everything over. The power distribution nodule was throwing an error. What the hell? She’d had a regular maintenance check two weeks ago, and everything had been fine then. If that nodule was malfunctioning, this ship wasn’t going anywhere.

An uneasy feeling settled in her gut.

“And you trust that guy?” Ansel asked finally.

Did she? She remembered standing in that street, covered from head to toe in plasteel dust. Alive, because of Zephyr. She thought about him staying behind to handle an IPSA enforcement unit so she could escape with her life, and the prototype.

Without meaning to, she thought about the two recent visions, or dreams she’d had with him. One of them featuring scars and a tattoo she should have no knowledge of. If they were true and not complete figments of her imagination.

“I’m not sure yet,” she admitted. “But he’s saved my life twice that I know of. That’s not nothing.”

Ansel sighed into the comm. “Iona, I don’t know. This is a lot to take in. I need to think.”

“I know, Ansel. But we don’t have much time. Zephyr will be here soon, and then we’re leaving.”

“You can’t just give me an ultimatum like this!”

“I’m not trying to. But you know what Aesir is capable of, and if you stay, they’ll think you’re complicit in whatever we do.”

“I’m not an idiot, Iona. I know that. But I need time to consider my options.”

Iona chewed on her lip. They didn’t have time for this. But she also knew that Ansel was right. This was a big decision to make, and he needed to make it for himself.

She opened her mouth to say something, but the sound of someone knocking against the hull of her ship interrupted her. Iona’s heart skipped a beat. Was Zephyr here already? She looked to the monitor and saw two figures standing outside her ship in the darkness. She recognized the outline of the bulky IPSA body armor, and adrenaline surged through her.

“Iona, what’s going on?” Ansel asked, the worry obvious in his voice.

“I don’t know. IPSA is here, and they’re not alone.”

“Shit. Okay, listen to me. You need to get out of there.”

No shit.

“You know what it means if they catch you.”

Ansel was right, of course, but where could she go? Hastily, she threw her most important belongings, the things she couldn’t leave behind, into a pack. The good thing about having most of her memory gone was that there was very little in her life that held true meaning for her. Most of what she was grabbing was tech she would need, her small stash of credits and hard coin, and items for Miko.

“Miko, come on,” she said, with a wave of her hand.

The airlock at the back of the ship for small cargo drops was her only way out. It would be a tight fit, but it would have to do. “Ansel, I’m headed out,” she said, her voice resolute.

“I’ll keep an eye on the comm,” Ansel said. “Be careful, Iona.”

“I will,” Iona replied, and then she cut the comm. She couldn’t focus on Ansel right now, not when IPSA and whoever they were with were knocking on her ship’s hull. Iona quickly slung her pack over her shoulder and made her way to the back of the ship. She opened the cargo airlock and climbed in, pulling Miko in after her. The airlock door closed behind them and Iona hit the button to start the carrier drop. They descended into the darkness, the only light coming from a small window on the wall.

She and Miko were thrown against the sides as the cargo carrier jerked to a halt a few feet above the docking bay floor. Iona’s heart raced. How could they not hear the airlock open, and the cargo carrier drop? She stabbed her finger at the button to release the hatch, and peered through the tiny window. The two figures she’d seen earlier had grown into seven. A group of IPSA enforcers were slowly spreading out and surrounding her ship. The courier was big, but not that big. Soon enough, they’d make it back here.

Finally, the door slid open. Iona and Miko tumbled out onto the ground. Iona sent Miko a visualization of vanishing, and a moment later the Ailurus disappeared. Should she risk using her Talent to make herself less visible? The problem was, an IPSA enforcement team might sense it if she did anything too big.

She looked around frantically for anywhere to go, to hide. It was then that she saw him. Zephyr was standing in the shadows, his eyes locked on hers.

I’m not alone. The thought brought with it an almost excruciating sense of relief. She had to blink back the tears that pricked at her eyes. He hadn’t left her. She wasn’t alone.

His voice slid into her head, steady and familiar. *When I tell you, run to me.*

She nodded to him to show she'd heard.

Iona might be afraid to use her Talent, but Zephyr clearly had no such inhibitions. He lifted a hand and held it out towards her ship. A moment later, a section of hull right in front of the official knocking on it sheered off and fell on top of them. The IPSA team standing at the front of the ship scattered, the metal-on-metal clang of the hull hitting the deck reverberating in a huge crash that echoed across the spaceport. A man screamed. He hadn't moved fast enough, and now he lay with his legs pinned underneath the huge hull piece. Iona winced. The weight had to have crushed them.

Now.

Iona ran. She knew Miko had probably already gone to him. She always went to Zephyr whenever he appeared. He grabbed her hand as she reached him and pulled her forward, shoving her ahead of him as he guided her behind some crates and towards the other end of the docking bay.

We have to go.

She felt a huge surge of Talent behind her.

Keep running!

Zephyr stopped and turned back just as a wave of force came at them. He lifted his hands to throw up a shield. He wasn't quite fast enough. The wave hit, shattering his half-formed shield and sending him flying.

"Zephyr!" Iona swerved toward him.

But he was already getting up, rising to his feet with a hard look in his eyes.

The hair on Iona's arms raised as she felt a cool wind swirl through the space dock. It wasn't a natural wind, but one driven by Talent. It began to swirl around them.

Iona, come here!

She went to him. Claws pricked her skin as Miko clambered onto her shoulder, chittering frantically. Zephyr grabbed her by the arm and pulled her close beside him. Her hair was whipping around her face now, and she could see the IPSA team lined up between them and her ship. They were struggling against the wind, and then one of them raised his hands and a telekinetic shield popped into place, a dome forming around the six still standing.

Beside her, Zephyr smiled.

He closed his eyes, his body tensing as he began to focus his Talent. Iona could feel the hum of energy around him, a raw power that seemed to emanate from his very being.

Suddenly, Zephyr opened his eyes a wave of Talent swept out from him. Iona watched in shock as the metal flooring beneath the IPSA team rippled and tore, rolling up like metal foil, and taking the IPSA agents with it.

The agents screamed as they were lifted off the ground, trapped inside the metallic cocoons that had formed around them. Iona watched in awe as Zephyr continued to exert his power, causing the metal to twist and contort until it had reduced the IPSA team to a tangled mess of broken limbs and torn flesh, and the docking bay to scrap metal. She gaped at the wreckage.

As the wind died down, Iona could hear the sounds of chaos erupting throughout the spaceport. Sirens blared in the distance, and she could see people running and shouting. An alarm started shrieking above them, so loud she had to duck her head and cover her ears.

Zephyr turned to her, his eyes dark and intense. Without another word, he took her by the hand and led her past the wreckage of the IPSA team and out into the open air. They sprinted through the streets, weaving in and out of crowds of people, none of whom seemed to be giving them so much as a glance. Miko jumped off Iona's shoulder and ran beside them, her four feet carrying her faster than their two.

Belatedly, Iona cracked her shields and let some of her Talent out, increasing the mental pressure for people to look

away from them. Zephyr's hand was a vice grip on her arm, but she didn't complain. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, her breathing labored.

Suddenly, he slowed down, the two of them dropping from a run, to a fast walk, to a normal walk. He let go of her arm and took her hand instead, holding it as though they were friends or lovers out for a stroll together. Iona had never been more grateful for her body conditioning as she struggling to get her heart rate and breathing back under control after the extended sprint.

They were out of the spaceport now, the alarms and sirens far away. The adrenaline that had powered their escape faded, leaving her lightheaded and shaking. Zephyr glanced at her, feeling it, and pulled her against his side, his arm going around her shoulders.

"If I was really a soldier, I must not have been a very good one," she said.

Zephyr glanced at her. "What makes you say that?"

She shrugged.

"What, this?" Zephyr gestured to all of her. He snorted. "Life and death is always the same. Adrenaline leaves, and that's when reality sets in. Even for experienced soldiers. Some even get addicted to the rush."

Iona couldn't imagine ever being addicted to such a feeling. Queasiness swirled in her gut, and it was taking all of her control not to let her teeth start chattering. Beside her, Zephyr adjusted his arm around her, and winced.

Iona felt something sticky and damp touch her hand where she held it curled close between them. When she turned to look, she could see a dark stain had spread through the black weave of Zephyr's shirt.

"You're hurt?" she asked.

"It's not serious," he said, brushing aside her concern.

"It's bleeding!"

He glanced at her, mouth quirked in a smile. “It’s a scrape, Iona.”

It felt like more than a scrape from how sticky his shirt had become, but she let it go for now. There wasn’t much they could do walking down the street.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“We need to destroy that tech and get off this planet. The spaceport isn’t going to be safe. Not only will IPSA have it locked down tight after this, but we don’t want a record of us leaving.”

“So?”

“So, we’re meeting a friend with a ship and access to a shadowport.”

Iona frowned. Shadowports were risky. Criminals and smugglers often used them because they were small-scale spaceports that existed outside of government sanction. They kept no records and didn’t worry about things like cargo inspections, but they could also be expensive and lacking in safety protocols.

“I can see you’re already worried. Don’t be. I know this friend well. Everything is going to be fine.”

“Once again, you’re asking me to trust you.”

“I hope by now, I’ve proven myself worthy of it.”

Iona thought about all of the things unspoken, the secrets that lay between them. “I’d like to believe that,” she said.

Zephyr’s arm tightened around her, but he didn’t answer.

CHAPTER SIX

THEY'D OBTAINED AN AIRCAR, and were making their way out of the city when Iona's subvocal comm activated again.

"Wow, you really did a number on that spaceport," Ansel said. "Word on the street is that Talented terrorists attacked a corporate ship and destroyed it. I'm guessing you won't have to worry about that power distribution alarm anymore."

Iona felt a twinge of loss. She'd really enjoyed having her own ship to take her wherever she wanted to go. Now, she'd lost her transportation, her home, her job— she let out a breath. "Yeah, guess not," she said. "Have you had time to think about our conversation?"

"That's why I'm reaching out," he said. "I don't have much of a choice here. If anyone can find me, it will be someone with Aesir's resources, and as good as I am, even I can't take on a whole mega-corp on my own. I'm going to need—" There was a long pause, like he was wrestling with what to say. "—friends. Allies. People I can work with and count on. You and I are friends, right?"

If he'd asked her that a month ago, even a few days ago, Iona didn't know how she'd have responded. She held everyone at a distance because she had no past and nothing to offer. But now, none of that seemed to matter anymore. Ansel had kept her secret for nearly two years. Who did that, if not a friend?

"Yes," she said. "We are."

“All right. Then I’m in. Whatever it is you and Zephyr are going to do, I’m with you.”

“We’re headed now to someone he trusts. We need to destroy the *thing* and get off world. We need to go somewhere where Aesir and VoidTech don’t have a strong presence.” She paused. “We should meet.”

Silence answered her.

“Ansel?”

“This goes against every creed I’ve ever sworn to.”

“To who, exactly? Some weird slicer code of conduct? How do you think we’re going to get off world together if you don’t meet us?”

“I know! It’s just that I don’t really meet with people. Ever.”

Mother give me patience, she thought. “I understand,” she said, reminding herself that he was still technically a kid. “Consider this a challenge to yourself. Step outside your comfort zone.”

Ansel sighed. “Fine. But I get to pick the location.”

Iona smiled to herself. She was glad Ansel was on their side. He was smart and resourceful, and he had a good heart.

“Deal,” she said.

“Good. I’ll send you the coordinates. You can pick me up.”

The comm went dead, and Iona leaned back in her seat. The aircar, although an older model, flew smoothly, and Zephyr was driving with practiced ease. She looked out the window at the passing cityscape, a jumble of towering skyscrapers and sprawling plazas.

“So, Ansel’s in?” Zephyr asked.

“Yeah. He’ll be a great help to us.”

Zephyr raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Hey, he might be young, but he’s an actual genius, all right? He’s not just an excellent slicer, but he constantly

researches everything. He ferrets out truths buried in layers of obfuscation as a hobby. He figured out I was Talented after two conversations — don't ask me how — and he's never told anyone."

Zephyr turned towards her, studying her with an intensity that made her shift in her seat. "What?"

"That's the most trust I've heard you put in anyone in this entire two years." He turned back to driving. "I'm glad you've had Ansel by your side all this time."

She didn't know what to say to that. She glanced down to where Miko lay curled up between them on the seat, then reached out and stroked her fur. "I've had Miko, too," she said.

Zephyr smiled. "Yes, you have."

Her datapad chimed with an incoming message, and she pulled it out of her jacket to find Ansel's coordinates. "Hmm. We're going to have to deviate to the center of the city."

"All right."

Iona leaned her head against the window as he turned the aircar, feeling the cool glass against her cheek. She was so tired. It was the kind of fatigue that wasn't about sleep or physical exhaustion, but a bone-deep kind of tired that said she was getting to the end of her endurance.

The cityscape changed the closer they got to the center. Skyscrapers grew taller and more imposing, casting long shadows over the streets, and everything became louder, more chaotic. Zephyr dodged through traffic and wove between buildings until they arrived at a small park nestled between two towering structures. The park was empty, save for a small, lone figure seated on a bench, looking around nervously.

Zephyr landed the aircar on the street a few yards away, and they stepped out of the vehicle together, Miko bounding down beside them. As they approached him, Ansel stood up.

He was tall and thin, wearing a wool cap over hair bleached almost white. It hung over his eyes, obscuring them. He had fine-boned features and fair skin with warm undertones. He kept his face averted like he didn't want them

to get a good look at him. His clothes were a little too large for him, a big sweatshirt and pants that were too baggy. He stood with his hands shoved into his pockets, a bag hanging off one shoulder. He kept shooting wide-eyed glances down at Miko.

Iona cocked her head. “You’ve seen Miko before.”

“On a holo screen, sure. She’s... different in person.”

Miko darted over to him and stopped, raising up on her hind legs to stare at him, her head tilting this way and that like she was studying him. She gave a squeak and chattered a greeting, and Ansel grinned.

“She’s cute,” he said.

“She is. She likes you, and she’s a good judge of character.”

Ansel looked up, meeting her eyes, and then flicked a look at Zephyr.

“So, uh, hi.” He jangled one leg nervously. “We should probably get going. We don’t want to be any one place too long.”

Together, they walked back to the aircar and got in. It was an older model with a few scratches and dents. Ansel ran his hand along the hood before opening the passenger door and sliding into the back seat. “Coulda gotten you a better model,” he said. “Something with a little more... everything.” He wrinkled his nose, taking in the smells of old food and stale sweat.

“The idea is not to be noticed,” Zephyr said, getting back in on the driver’s side.

“Sure. But there’s a lot of room for improvement in that provision,” Ansel argued. He touched the seat next to him and rubbed his fingers together, grimacing. “Pretty sure we’re going to need to decontaminate after this ride.”

Miko suddenly slid over the seat from the front into the back, gliding so quickly and smoothly Ansel pulled back in surprise when she popped up on the seat next to him. With him sitting down, now when she stood on her hind legs, the two of

them were at eye level. The Ailurus leaned in, and Ansel leaned back.

“What is she, uh, doing?” he asked, swallowing nervously.

Iona smothered a laugh. “I told you, she likes you. She wants to make friends. She’s asking you to pet her.”

“She is?”

“Yep.”

Miko tilted her head coquettishly and trilled at him.

“Oh... okay.” Gingerly, he reached out a hesitant hand and stroked between her ears. Miko closed her eyes and made a happy sound. Ansel relaxed and started petting the fur along her back. “She’s soft.”

“And she loves attention,” Iona told him. “Now that you’ve given it to her, she’ll never leave you alone.”

He smiled, and seemed to finally relax as the aircar lifted and they started on their way back towards the shadowport.

“What’s this?” Ansel asked, pulling at the harness Miko wore with one finger.

“Miko has her own equipment. With that, she can carry things when we’re on jobs. She even knows how to activate pouches and open and secure them herself.”

“So, she steals stuff?” he asked, eyeing his new friend suspiciously.

“Only when I ask her to. Miko is a very polite Ailurus.”

“Oh. What’s she carrying now?” He pointed to the pouch Miko still wore, obviously filled with something.

“What do you think?” Iona said.

“You mean— she still has it? All this time? You *left* it on her?” He sounded horrified.

“What? No one is going to look for a priceless one-of-a-kind missing prototype on what they perceive as a pet. And Miko will protect it viciously. Her claws are like razors and

her teeth are very sharp. Not to mention, she has a few other tricks.”

“I guess that’s true,” he acknowledged. “So, I’ve been thinking about it. I think we should incinerate it.”

“That would be effective,” Zephyr agreed.

“We’re going to a spaceport. Shadowport. Whatever. Lots of opportunities for something like that. Just, you know, use your—” He wiggled his fingers in the air. “—to toss it into an exhaust flame and *poof*, problem solved.”

Iona raised an eyebrow. She wiggled her fingers back at him. “What’s this?”

“You know.” Leg bouncing, he looked out the window as he waved a hand at her. “That thing you do.”

“You mean this?” Amused, she couldn’t resist teasing him. She reached out with her Talent and lifted his cap into the air.

“Hey!” He snatched it back and stuffed it back on his head. “Yeah. That.”

“Sure, we could do that.” She glanced over at Zephyr. It seemed like such an easy end to something so big.

“Destroying it was always going to be the easy part,” he said. “Hard is going to be what comes next.”

Escaping, he meant. Living on the run. Iona sat back into her seat. “I’ve heard that there’s a place where Talented are going. A... kind of gathering spot, out past the borders of the Commonwealth.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I’ve heard the rumors. Fringe space.”

“No way!” Ansel said. “There are pirates out there, man. Real crazy shit’s been happening out near fringe space.”

Zephyr lifted his eyes to the mirror, meeting Ansel’s gaze. “Who do you think is doing the pirating?” he asked evenly.

“Well, uh... oh.” Ansel chewed that over. “You want to become space pirates?” he asked, not sounding very enthused by the idea.

“What choice do we have? At least we know Aesir and the other corporations will have no foothold there.”

“There are few better options,” Zephyr said.

Ansel looked out the window. He looked like he was thinking hard about something. Finally, he took a deep breath. “I’ve got an idea,” he said. “It’s kind of crazy, and it’s going to take a long time, but I think it could help not just you— I mean *us*— but a lot of other people, too.”

“What is it?” Iona asked him.

Over the rest of the ride, Ansel explained his plan. Zephyr listened quietly, but Iona asked questions. Ansel was right, it was a big idea. Really big.

“I don’t know,” she said when he finished. “I think becoming pirates might be more viable.”

“Why? This is so much better, Iona! Do you want to be scraping out a living off of other people’s scraps? Or do you want to not only live the high life, but be able to provide safety and security to a lot of Talented people, while also fucking with the mega-corporations who screw everyone over?”

“This would require a lot of resources, as well as a lot of people,” Zephyr said. It was the first time he’d spoken since Ansel started sharing his idea.

Ansel coughed out a laugh. “I’ve *got* resources, man. I mean, we’ll need more, but I’ve had programs running, skimming off all of the mega-corps for years now. Every time their bots catch me, I point the blame at one of their rivals and set up a new program. I’ve got quite a lot saved across a bunch of different accounts. Credits, hard coin, real estate, even some mining rights. I’ve spread it all out, but if we use it all and we’re careful, I think it would be a good start.”

Zephyr slid a look Iona’s way.

I told you, she whispered into his mind. Ansel was smart, and loyal. He’d always struck her as just a really smart kid who’d had some hard knocks in life, and just wanted what anyone wanted: acceptance, and love.

“You really want to start our own corporation?” she asked Ansel, drumming her fingers on the seat beside her.

“Not a corporation,” he insisted. “A *mega*-corporation. And we won’t need any fancy neural prototypes, or whatever, because we’ll be staffed with the most powerful people in the galaxy.”

Talented. People like her, like Zephyr.

“We’ll be a target for IPSA.”

“So what?” Ansel leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands together. “You know why they have those enforcement units, right? Because they give some of the Talented they take a choice: execution, or keep serving like they did during the Ascension Wars, except now they hunt down their own kind. Nobody likes this deal, but people don’t want to die, either. They don’t have a choice. They get this surgery that implants a kill switch in their heads, and—”

“We know,” Zephyr interrupted.

“So, what if we can remove the kill switch? I read a lot about you guys from the wars. You’ve got people that can control tech, right? Like with telepathy and shit? And you’ve got people who can do stuff to the human body, manipulate cells, stuff like that? Why can’t we figure out a safe way to remove the kill switch? Wouldn’t these IPSA teams want to work with us then? Switch sides?”

“You’ve thought about this a lot for someone with no stake in this fight,” Zephyr said.

Ansel leaned back, looking away. He lifted a shoulder. “I mean, Iona’s one of you. A Talented.” His voice dropped to a mumble. “I wanted to know what to do, in case.”

Iona felt her heart warm. “Ansel, that’s—” she didn’t know *what* that was, honestly. “The sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

I think he has a crush on you, Zephyr told her.

She glared at him. *He does not.*

He’s blushing.

She glanced back, and sure enough, Ansel's pale skin was flushed.

Iona smiled. *Well, even if he does, it's sweet.*

Zephyr looked amused.

"We can talk more about this later," he said. "We're here."

The aircar skimmed over a cluster of tall trees spread along one side of a huge clearing. Iona teared down at what looked like a large open field that stretched for miles. "I don't see anything," she said.

"Wait for it." Zephyr put the car into hover mode over the field, while Ansel and Iona pressed their faces to the windows. As they watched, the telltale shimmer of a holo-field flickered, and the empty pasture disappeared before their eyes, becoming a small, but definitely recognizable spaceport. There were landing pads, terminals, a control tower, cargo docks, a refueling station, and even a vendor area. It was probably supplied with black market goods. People bustled all over the place, and several ships were docked.

Clearly, they were doing a thriving business.

Zephyr lowered the aircar and parked it. "My friend is already here, waiting for us.

At some point, Ansel had pulled what looked like a tricked-out datapad from his bag. He held it in front of him now with a frown. "Uh, yeah. We're gonna want to hurry. Word just went out that this shadowport has been added to an IPSA watch list. I'd expect company real soon."

He stuffed the datapad back into his bag, already reaching for the door handle.

Iona gaped at him as he exited the car. "You're tapped into IPSA communications?" she asked.

"Well, yeah." He gave her a look that said *of course*, and slammed his door shut.

"You were right," Zephyr told her. "This kid is useful."

The trio quickly made their way through the bustling shadowport. People of all stripes walked around them, some in groups, others alone. Some looked like merchants, others like smugglers, but all of them were keeping to themselves, and no one paid them any mind. As they walked, a sense of urgency began to build around them. Voices were raised in alarm, vendors started packing up their wares, and pilots ran for their ships. Word of the imminent raid was spreading.

She glanced back at Ansel, who shrugged. “I may have sent out an alert on the dark net for anyone paying attention.”

Zephyr led them across the port to one of the hangars. It had seen better days, the metal pad and loading dock both scuffed and scarred. A few dim lights flickered on the outside, fighting to stay alive. The ship docked there looked decent, though. It was a freighter, quite a bit larger than the cruiser Iona had left behind, an older model she didn’t recognize offhand. As they approached, a muscular, bald man with numerous tattoos covering his arms and neck stepped out of the hangar.

He didn’t crack a smile when he saw them, but he and Zephyr clasped arms like old compatriots, and his startling green eyes lingered for a long time on Iona. She shifted a bit, uncomfortable with the directness of his stare. Ansel moved closer to her, frowning at the guy.

Zephyr gestured to him. “Everyone, this is Ferris. Ferris, this is Ansel and Iona.” It sounded like he stressed her name slightly over the others, and Iona flicked a glance at him, but his face revealed nothing. He glanced down at his feet, where Miko sat. “And this is Miko.”

Ferris nodded down at the Ailurus. She stretched up, squeaking at him in a way that wasn’t quite a greeting, but echoed more of the way she chattered when she saw someone she was excited about.

Iona frowned. “Have you and Miko met before?” she asked impulsively, even though she knew *she* had never before seen this man, and so her friend was unlikely to have, either.

“Now, how would that be?” he asked gruffly. Turning, he waved for them to follow. “Best get going. Zephyr here says we’re about to get raided by an enforcement team.”

He’s a telepath? She cast a questioning look at Zephyr.

He is, he sent back.

She gave Ferris’s back a long, studying glance, noticing the limp as he moved deeper into the hangar ahead of them. *He fought with you in the war?*

He did.

Iona concentrated on that black void of nothing in her head. Something tingled at the edge of her awareness, but everything stayed frustratingly blank. She held back a sigh. The time was rapidly approaching when she wasn’t going to sit back and wait for answers to come to her anymore.

Ferris led them onto his ship. It was quiet and dark, with only a few dim lights illuminating the way. It was clear that Ferris wasn’t a man who wasted energy on frivolities like aesthetics. They passed through a cramped living area and into the cockpit, where Ferris stopped and held his hand out. “Zephyr says you got something you need incinerated? Best time to do that is powering up for takeoff.”

Iona hesitated. Was it really all right to hand over the prototype to this guy?

“Iona,” Zephyr said. She glanced at him. “I’ve known Ferris a long time,” he said. “I trust him. But if it’ll make you feel better, one of us can throw the prototype in the exhaust burn.”

She nodded. “I’d like to do it myself,” she said.

Zephyr’s mouth thinned. Did he think she didn’t trust him? That wasn’t why. It was just that some part of her would always wonder if something had gone wrong, unless she saw the prototype burn up with her own eyes.

Ferris shrugged. “Fine by me. I’ll start ‘er up. I’m sure you all can find your way to the exhaust nozzle. Don’t get too

close, obviously.” He lowered his big frame into the pilot’s chair.

As Ferris began to power up the ship, Iona took a deep breath and made her way to the back of the ship, where the exhaust nozzle was located. Ansel and Zephyr followed. There was a chute in the wall near the port for the nozzle. Burning garbage to ash wasn’t uncommon aboard ships, especially those used for smuggling. Smugglers who wanted to get rid of any trace of contraband would often choose to incinerate it.

The ship engines rumbled to life, and soon the nozzle was bright with white-hot flames. Iona could feel her heart racing with nervous anticipation. This was it. The prototype that had caused such chaos and danger was finally going to be destroyed. She knelt down and undid the pouch on Miko’s harness, pulling out the sphere she’d worked so hard to steal. She held the cylinder in her palm, taking one last look at it before tossing it out the chute and into the exhaust burn.

The prototype burst into flames, and Iona watched, mesmerized as the fire consumed it, leaving behind nothing, not even ash. She let out a long breath, tension easing from her body. It was done. Even if IPSA showed up now, the prototype was gone.

The ship’s comm system crackled, and Ferris’s voice told them to strap in. It was time to take off.

Iona fastened herself into a nearby seat, clipping Miko’s harness in beside her. Zephyr sat across from her, and Ansel beside him. Her eyes met Zephyr’s and held as the ship started to lift off. Iona looked at him, and thought about the questions she planned to ask him later. She didn’t say anything to him now, keeping them locked down tight behind her mental shields, but she’d decided she wasn’t going into this new life with so much known.

The shadowport quickly shrank away beneath them. She wondered if it would survive the IPSA raid coming. Ansel was looking out one of the ports, watching the world spiral away below them.

“It’s my first time off world,” he said. His fair skin looked a little green.

Uh-oh. “*Never?* You’ve never traveled in space before? Never jumped?” she asked him.

He shook his head. She could see the anxiety in the dilated pupils of his eyes.

“Space jumps can be a little unnerving for the uninitiated,” Zephyr told him.

“What do you mean unnerving?” Ansel asked, his hands clenched in the folds of his baggy sweatshirt.

Zephyr exchanged a look with Iona. *I think he might need a tranquilizer.*

I don’t want to be trying clean vomit off the consoles, she sent back.

Zephyr nodded, and undid his safety straps. “Come with me,” he told Ansel.

“Sh-should you be undoing those? Aren’t we supposed to stay strapped in?” Ansel’s voice rose an octave on the last sentence, and he grabbed his own straps in a death grip.

Zephyr grimaced; Iona felt a wave of Talent in the small space. A moment later, the boy’s eyes rolled back and his body slumped, boneless, into his seat.

“He’ll wake up later feeling rested and, hopefully, calmer,” Zephyr told Iona. He unstrapped him and slung him over a shoulder with a grunt. “I’ll put him in one of the empty bunks.”

Iona looked down at Miko as Zephyr made his way down the narrow corridor. “I think we may need to give Ansel a few spacefaring lessons,” she said. Her friend gave chirp of agreement.

“Queuing up to jump,” Ferris’s voice came over the ship comm. “Five-minute warning.”

Iona closed her eyes. She didn’t mind space jumps. She didn’t know if she had ever experienced the kind of anxiety

Ansel had, because to her, they'd always felt routine, like something she'd done hundreds of times before.

She let herself relax. They were safe. Off world, they could go anywhere, disappear, and it would take Aesir or VoidTech effort to find them. They now had the one thing they had desperately needed the most: time.

EPILOGUE

THAT NIGHT, lying in the tiny crew cabin Ferris had offered her, Iona stared up at the overhead panel. The ship was dark, it was galactic standard “night” for shipboard life, and she couldn’t sleep. She’d been listening to the hum of the ship’s engines, the creak of the metal paneling, and Miko’s soft snores for the past three hours. So far, sleep was evading her.

When she heard someone shuffling around the tiny galley space, she reached out mentally and brushed up against Zephyr’s shields. She thought about it for roughly three seconds.

Enough is enough.

Careful not to wake Miko, she got up and padded barefoot to the hatch that led to the public areas of the ship. It was open at the moment, so she stepped through and made her way down the metal stairs to the ship’s galley. There was a table with bench seats for the crew and passengers to eat at, and a small kitchen area. Zephyr stood in it, dressed in a simple cotton shirt and pants, his hair mussed like he’d either been asleep, or at least laying in his bunk for the past three hours.

He didn’t turn as she entered, continuing to heat up some water. She eyed his grey shirt, looking for any hint of blood, but she couldn’t see any sign of the injury he’d had earlier. As he’d claimed, it must have been a scrape.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she asked, perching on the table and crossing her arms.

“No,” he said, dumping tea leaves into a strainer.

“Tea.” She shook her head. “I’d’ve gone for something stronger.”

“Ferris doesn’t keep alcohol on his ship.”

“Ah.” He still hadn’t looked at her, and she was starting to get irritated. She was sure he’d sensed this moment coming. The man was perceptive *without* telepathy, and he was the strongest telepath she’d ever met — that she remembered, anyway.

“How’s Ansel?” she asked.

Zephyr lifted a shoulder. “He woke up briefly after the jump, seemed calmer. Ferris showed him around the cockpit, talked to him for a while. He’ll be all right. He’s asleep now.”

While he was talking, Iona hopped down from her perch on the table and made her way into the small galley space. Where he was standing between the two counters, she was now blocking his exit. He’d have to physically move her if he wanted to escape. Or go over the counter, which seemed like an extreme measure to her.

He turned to her, his tea cup steeping on the counter, and raised an eyebrow. It was his usual mocking look, but it lacked the normal flare. A faint scruff lined his jaw, and he looked tired. For the first time since she’d known him, there were dark hollows around his eyes. He looked like a man haunted by something.

“What do you want, Iona?” he asked. A foot of space separated them. He made no move to step away, and no move to come closer.

She smiled, and reached up to brush the hair back from his eyes. “The truth would be nice,” she told him.

He stared down at her, expression unreadable.

“Ferris knows me, right?” she said, keeping her tone casual. “And Miko knows him. Because Miko has never been mine. She’s yours, isn’t she? *Your* friend, *your* companion. But you sent her to me. To stay by my side, so she could keep an eye on me... for *you*.” She leaned closer, her eyes holding his. “How am I doing so far?”

His mouth twitched, and then he asked, “How much do you remember?”

“Not enough. Are you going to tell me the rest of it?”

For a long moment they stood like that, unmoving, not speaking. And then he slowly shook his head.

“*Mother take you,*” she spat the words at him in frustration, and without warning, grasped the hem of his shirt and yanked it up.

He grabbed for her hands, muttering a curse as he lurched back. His elbow knocked into his tea cup, and hot water spilled over the counter, drops of it hitting both of them. Iona didn’t care. His hands had stopped her from raising the shirt more than halfway, but she saw what she’d been looking for, the hard ridge of a scar on the left side of his abdomen.

She stared at it, frozen. *It was real.* The dream hadn’t been a dream at all, but a memory.

“If you wanted to see my body, Iona, all you had to was ask.” She didn’t know if that quip was supposed to sound sarcastic and cutting, but it came out strained, his voice rough.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes to meet his. She let go of the shirt hem, and he pulled it back down. The silence between them hummed with tension. She thought of and discarded half a dozen different things to say. Emotions flickered through her, one after another. Relief, anger, longing, hurt... she couldn’t decide what to feel in this moment.

“Do you think this is funny?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. She lifted a hand clenched into a fist and pounded it against his chest, right over the spot where she knew he had a tattoo. He took the blow, still saying nothing.

“You have a tattoo, right here. The paws of an Ailurus, right? Miko’s paws. Don’t bother answering me, I know it’s true.” Numbness spread through her entire body. “You lied to me,” she said.

“Iona...”

“Why would you do that? For two years. And don’t call me that name. That’s *not my name*.” To her horror, she felt tears gather in her eyes.

No. No way was she going to cry right now, right after she’d asked him point blank to tell her the truth, and he’d refused.

Zephyr’s hands closed over her shoulders gently. His unreadable expression finally cracked, and she couldn’t look away from the brutal pain etched into his face. *How dare he?* How dare he act like the wounded one here!

“What do you remember?” he asked. His voice broke on the words.

“I can’t do this,” she said. “I thought I could, but I can’t.” She struggled to pull away from him, but instead, he pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her and holding her against him. “Let go of me.” Tears spilled down her cheeks. It felt like something inside her had cracked open, and two years of sorrow and loneliness came pouring out. “You left me alone all this time.”

“I didn’t, *I didn’t*. I couldn’t stay with you. I wanted to, but I couldn’t.”

“Why?” She hated that she sobbed the word. She hated that it was still comforting, being held in his arms like this.

She felt a breath shudder through him.

“We were in the same unit during the war,” the words sounded like they were torn from him, raw and painful. “We fought together for over a decade. When it was over, our unit stayed together. We worked as mercenaries at first, but once the Accord happened, we devoted everything to helping Talented go underground. But you were caught by an IPSA Enforcement unit. They... they took your memories. Telepathically messed with your mind. By the time we caught up with you and got you back, you didn’t remember anything. You had some kind of episode when I tried to untangle what they’d done to you. Like a panic attack, but worse. It was... bad. You hurt yourself.”

She jerked in his arms, and looked at her wrist, the one with the scar.

“I was told by someone who is an expert at these things, that your mind needed to heal on its own, naturally. That trying to force things would only hurt you, and maybe even worse.” He took a deep breath. “I couldn’t trust myself to let you remember at your own pace, so... that’s why.”

Reeling, she stood frozen, tears still tracking down her face.

“I’m sorry.” He buried his face in her hair, the words muffled. “Elowyn, I’m sorry.”

Her hands clutched at his shirt, the fabric tight between her fingers. She didn’t know if she could forgive him. All this time, she had been living in a world of lies and half-truths, and he had been the one to orchestrate it. But at the same time, she couldn’t deny the relief that came with finally knowing the truth.

For a while, they just stood there, holding each other. The silence between them was heavy, and she could hear the sound of their breathing, ragged and uneven. His heartbeat was slow and steady under her cheek. The tears had stopped, but her eyes were still red and puffy.

She pulled back from him, still holding onto his shirt. “There’s only one way I can move forward, Zephyr. One way for me to forgive you.” Her lip trembled, and she took a moment to control it before she continued. “Tell me everything. All of it. Leave nothing out.”

“Elowyn—”

“No. I’ve already remembered... some things. I know what we are — *were* — to each other. I remembered that battlefield. I haven’t had a panic attack. I haven’t tried to hurt myself. And tonight, you’ve told me enough that I have the gist of it. I’m still here, and I’m all right.” She lifted her chin and stared him in the eye. “I’m strong enough for this, Zephyr.”

She could see the hesitation in his eyes, the longing and the wariness. In that moment, she couldn't bear it. Raising up on her toes, she leaned in, and brushed her lips across his.

He didn't respond at first, but then his arms wrapped around her, holding her close as he deepened the kiss. It was a desperate, passionate embrace, and she could feel all the emotions they had been holding back for two years finally spilling out. When they parted, they were both breathless.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

"Either you tell me, or this is done," she said. "*That's* how sure I am."

He leaned his forehead against hers, closing his eyes. "All right," he said simply. "I'll tell you everything." He took a deep breath. "There's one thing, the most important thing, that I need to tell you first."

"All right." Her heart pounded. She might not remember him, but some part of her *knew*. Knew what he was about to say, and felt it.

He opened his eyes, and everything he felt for her was in them. "I love you, El."

Her body relaxed into his, her arms going around him of their own accord. Her head found his shoulder. She'd known that, deep inside. Known that whatever they'd shared had been a deep, unbreakable bond. She closed her eyes. Everything was going to be okay. It would take time, but she wasn't alone anymore, and she would never be again.

"Okay," she said.

"Once, you loved me, too," he told her. "I hope you will again."

She didn't know what to say to that. Her emotions were still all tangled up inside. She took a moment to process it, to really think about what he meant to her right here and right now.

"I feel... things," she said. "It's complicated."

His arms tightened briefly around her. “I know. And I’m partly at fault for that. We’ll start tonight, with the truth. And we’ll go from there.” He gently pushed her back so that their eyes met. “Okay?”

She nodded. “I can work with that.”

She might never get back her past, but together, the two of them could build something for the future. She was certain of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carysa Locke has loved writing since she was ten years old scrawling horrible Pern and Star Wars fan fiction into spiral notebooks. Her space pirates series is based on a role-play game her best friend, MaLea Holt created and ran back in the early 2000's. She loves playing old school RPGs, reading, writing, and in her spare time enjoys jewelry making and sewing.

ALSO BY CARYSA LOCKE

See all of Carysa's books at <https://www.carysalocke.com/>

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

MALEBRANKI DIASPORA
BY JC HAY

DESCRIPTION

For years, Bryony LeClerc had been chasing bounties in the hope that one would lead her closer to her goal: kill the Malebranki crime lord who murdered her sister. When she seduces and arrests the Red Widow's top enforcer, she finally has her chance—until he reveals that he's an undercover agent that she must set free.

Lorcan Orzoth has spent the last two years undercover, working to break down the Red Widow's syndicate to no avail, when his accidental arrest threatens to undo all his progress. But the short, foul-tempered, Terran bounty hunter may be just the opportunity he needs, assuming he's willing to give her up.

Pitted against drug-runners, pirates, an irascible felyx, and their own growing attraction, the pair must decide who they can trust—and what they're willing sacrifice—to get what they want. And just maybe, find a future that has room for them both.

CHAPTER ONE

BRYONY LECLERC SCRUBBED her skin under the spray of water, but any feeling of cleanliness proved elusive. Normally, near limitless hot water and decent pressure were her favorite parts of being docked at a station; today it just reminded her how close she'd come to crossing a line.

She shut the water off with a rueful chuckle. *Because there are so many lines left you wouldn't cross*, she thought. Kidnapping, or false imprisonment, or whatever this sector government called it, was hardly the worst crime she'd committed in the last few years, and she had plans to do far worse if needed.

She wrapped a towel around her blaze-red hair as she strode into her quarters, pausing long enough to touch the holoframe on her ship's molded-in shelf unit. In the image, a cherubic boy with hazel eyes had his mouth open mid-laugh. She'd made a face at him from behind the camera—the cause of his laughter—and she'd kept the picture because it captured Benji's personality so perfectly.

Once upon a time, she'd been able to laugh like that too—carefree and with her whole being.

The slinky dress she'd worn the night before had been draped over the back of her chaise longue when she'd gone into the shower. It had since been pulled down and wadded up into a hunter-green nest, and Rue had curled on top. The creature opened one yellow eye and watched Bryony, her tail bristling in a wordless warning.

Bryony rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t going to wear that again anyway. You’re welcome to it.” A momentary regret tugged at her heart. She’d purchased the dress—an Arilli Blanc—in hope of better times. She’d never expected the tight-fitting arrangement of green e-cloth and its suggestive, roaming patches of translucency would be used to lure a criminal back to her ship, or that it might keep him distracted long enough for her to drug his drink.

The dress should have made her feel sexy. No, she *had* felt sexy. And the big, dangerous criminal wanted nothing more than to get back to her quarters. It was what happened after, the memories of what she’d done as well as what she’d wanted to do, which left a metallic taste in her mouth.

Rue’s tail relaxed, and she closed her eyes.. The gem in the middle of the felyx’s forehead pulsed blue green, a sign of her satisfaction in the sanctity of her newly claimed bed. Bryony watched as Rue’s ears dropped, then laid flat across her front paws. A few moments later, soft snores filled the room.

Warmth swelled in Bryony’s blood. Rue wasn’t always the angel she looked to be when asleep, but in that she and the felyx were more similar than different. They both had claws and didn’t mind using what weapons they had to get what they wanted. There were people who didn’t consider pets—no felyx would ever deign to accept the moniker, she was certain—to be family, but for Bryony, the only other thing she cared about in the galaxy was currently leaving its purple and lapis hairs all over what used to be her favorite dress.

Bryony dug through her drawers and pulled on her usual, ship-appropriate attire. The lightweight shirt still clung to her curves more than she’d like, and the last thing she wanted was to entice the guest currently staying in her brig, so she pulled a loose, pocket-laden jacket on as well. The pseudosuede was bulky enough that it helped hide her shape. Not perfect, but it would have to do.

“Persephone?”

“Captain?” The voice unit on the ship’s computer was good, nearly human sounding in its inflection and tone. It had

cost a pretty set of credits to get it away from the stilted monotonous of most computers, but *Persephone's* voice made deep space feel less lonely. Sometimes, at least.

“Get clearance from C&C to launch, then drift us out to the firing point.” That command would take an hour to complete easily, assuming that command and control wasn't bogged down with other ships leaving. That would give her plenty of time to see her guest while the ship got underway, and he, in turn, could adjust to the idea that he wasn't going home.

Lorcan Orzoth opened one eye and immediately regretted it. The light was too bright by half and seemed determined to carve a channel into his skull using his retinas as a starting place. Worse, now that he was awake, even closing his eyes didn't provide relief—light shone through his eyelids in a red haze that took his already aching skull to the nausea point.

What in the Nine did I get up to last night?

He fought through the fog that had settled into his brain and tried to pull together enough context to piece together where he was. Had there been a girl? A *woman*, he corrected automatically. Hair like the sunsets on Ta Gorev. Curves like the rolling...actually, Ta Gorev hadn't had rolling hills. It had been a volcanic place, with too much activity to wear down the stones gradually. Everything was sharp and jagged. And then it was gone.

Thought was coming more clearly now. He could remember the woman, and an incredible green dress which clung to her shape so tightly he'd have broken bones to take its place. There had been drinks, and instant chemistry. An offer to come back to her place. More drinks, and... That was it.

A subtle vibration started up, a low hum of power coming from everywhere at once. But that wouldn't make sense unless he was on a ship, and he... *Hells*.

This is bad.

He managed to peel open his eyes and take stock of his surroundings. A narrow bed molded into the stark, white wall. No sheets on the blue gel heroically failing in its role as a mattress. In the corner was what looked like an omnisan, with attachments to serve the hygienic needs of both humanoid and non-humanoid sapients. He closed his eyes again with a groan. He didn't have to look behind him to see the open wall defining the other end of his cell, or the vague yellow haze across the opening indicating a field was set to provide an incapacitating, though nonlethal shock should he attempt to cross. He'd seen enough brigs in his lifetime to recognize when he was in one.

The spike of panic was enough to clear most of the haze in his brain. His *v'tana* flared to life, and heat coursed through his blood as the flame looked for a place to break free. He forced himself to slow his pulse with a breathing exercise, practiced discipline all that kept him from losing control. No matter how many questions and worries he might have, answers would present themselves eventually. Either his captors knew who he worked for, or they didn't. They hadn't killed him while he was helpless, which meant that they wanted something from him—even if it was just information. So long as he had something they wanted, he had a chance to get free.

In a perfect galaxy, he'd be able to do it without the Red Widow finding out he'd been captured. He knew too well what happened to those she decided were compromised.

The clang of the ventilation cover hitting the floor next to the omnisan launched him upright, fire coursing around his fist as he raised his hands to defend himself. When nothing jumped down to attack him, Lorcan released his *v'tana*, the flames flickering blue-orange before dying. He moved closer to the vent, hopeful of an egress. Unfortunately, it was maybe a half-meter across.

Maybe if I cut off both my arms...

A pair of yellow eyes blinked at him from inside the vent, lit by an amber glow coming from a source just above them.

“Hello there, little one,” Lorcan said, trying to keep his voice friendlier than his usual growl. He was only half successful. “What are you doing? Do you want to come out of there?”

After a moment’s hesitation, a felyx crawled to the front of the vent and reached its front two paws toward him. He held his breath. He hadn’t seen a felyx since he was a child. They weren’t especially common, and to find one outside of Malebrank space was even more unlikely. The stone in the felyx’s forehead continued to glow amber. The colors were indicative of the felyx’s mood, but his matriarch’s pair had been so foul tempered, Lorcan had never had the chance to decode all the possible hues. Regardless, the felyx didn’t appear to mean him any harm, and any company was better than brooding in his cell alone. He hooked his hands under the felyx’s arms and lowered her down.

The animal—she, he realized belatedly—was gorgeous, with a long coat of fluffy lapis with a subtle purple brindle. As soon as she was free of the vent, the felyx wrapped her four hind legs around his arm and clung to him. He shifted his grip, so the poor thing was better supported, and carried her to his bed.

Once he was seated, the felyx started butting her head against his hand insistently. “I don’t have any food for you.” Lorcan chuckled. “Are pets good enough?” The purr that rumbled through the creature when he started stroking along her spine seemed to indicate that, yes, petting would do in lieu of snacks.

Lorcan let the ultra-soft fur calm him as he petted the felyx. It had been a long time since he’d seen one, or any pet that wasn’t being starved or trained to hurt others on command. He winced at the painful memory and pushed it out of mind. Compartmentalizing was practically a reflex action for him by now. “So, what are you doing in the vents, little one? Did you get lost?”

“Oh, she knows exactly where she is.” The voice, husky to the point of sounding whisky-burned, caressed his skin like a touch. He finally understood what Terrans meant by “getting

goose bumps”— piloerection wasn't a Malebranki trait, but he was certain this must be what it felt like. He turned his head to find the woman who'd invited him back to her ship the night before. She was wearing rough-spun spacers' togs, instead of that sinful green dress, but his brain was capable of filling in the remembered details. Her hair, pulled back into a messy braid today, had been unforgettable in its loose waves; a scarlet so vivid it made his skin look dull in comparison.

“Azonir,” she continued, “aka ‘Azonir the Flame’, aka ‘the Red Widow’s Sting.’” The woman held up a holoprojector in one hand. His image floated above it, along with a long list of crimes. He recognized a few of them, but there were plenty listed that he'd only been involved with by reputation.

“You are bound and captured, in accordance with Hegemonic bounty policy thirty-one-point-five-point-alpha. You will be remanded to authorities in exchange for bounty at my convenience.” He opened his mouth to respond, and she cut him off. “And now that the formalities are out of the way, put my felyx down, you piece of filth, and maybe I won't electrify you in your cell.”

CHAPTER TWO

IT TOOK TREMENDOUS WILLPOWER, but Bryony did not roll her eyes at the fact that Rue had found a way into Azonir's cell. Bryony had barely been out of the room ten minutes, and yet the felyx had made it into the ventilation shaft and down the corridor in half that time. Teaching her how to use the ship's HVAC system to get around had probably been one of her worst ideas.

"I've got a better suggestion, *Tarzu-ma*. You let me go now, and I won't tell the Red Widow about your... indiscretion." Azonir smiled, one hand giving Rue belly scratches and showing no inclination to put the animal down as she'd asked. Rue's stone pulsed a deep violet, while one of her rear legs kicked at the air. The felyx was absolutely loving the attention.

Traitorous little felineid. "Persephone? Set cell two's floor charge to maximum nonlethal on my command."

"At your word, Captain," was the AI's crisp response. She could have set it on her wristcomp but saying it out loud felt like more of a threat.

"You don't want to do that..." Azonir's smile turned heated, his eyes stroking down her body in a way that let her know he was remembering the dress from last night. Fire bloomed in her cheeks; hopefully she was still far enough away he wouldn't notice.

She'd been wrong to wear her baggy work clothes. She should have chosen a full suit of power armor. "I really think I do."

“...because if I’m holding your felyx...” he continued, as though she hadn’t spoken at all, “...then you can’t fry me without zapping her too. And whatever you Terrans think, they’re more than clever enough to make the association. Even if it didn’t kill her, it would burn away any trust you and she had developed. Something I suspect you already know.” His forearm flexed slowly as he stroked his fingers through Rue’s coat, the corded muscles rippling beneath skin so red it looked purple in the shadows.

She shouldn’t be jealous of Rue, but damned if she wasn’t. She’d be purring just as loudly in the felinoid’s place. And that was the frustrating part of this whole scenario. It hadn’t required much acting for her to seduce him. If she overlooked things like his personality and the company he kept, then Azonir would check nearly every box on her fantasy list: broad shoulders narrowing to a muscular waist? Check. Thick black hair begging to have a fist tightened in it? Definitely. And she’d already spent too long staring at his forearms. Like the devils some Terrans had associated his people with, Azonir was built of and for sin.

And he’s the surest way to get a shot at the Red Widow. Hells, he already mentioned talking to her directly. He could get me close...

She was putting the thrusters in front of the ship. Plenty of steps led from this moment to her goal. No sense rushing them. She cleared her throat. “You’re assuming I’m attached to that annoying ball of fluff. I keep trying to leave her in various ports, and she keeps sneaking back aboard.”

He inclined his head slightly, accenting his smirk. “Felyx know when they’re not wanted. And they are perfectly capable of leaving if there’s a path for them.”

He’d called her bluff. Rue might not always seem to like her, but she adored the six-legged little hell beast. “So, we have an impasse. At least until I crack out the canned flatfish, and she rockets out of there like she’s firing afterburners.”

His left hand stopped stroking Rue and held it out to one side. As Bryony watched, flames rippled to life along the skin

of his forearm and wrenched his hand. “It’s not an impasse. It’s a simple equation, Captain.” He laced enough irony into the title to wound a lesser person. “You return me to the station, or I burn your fluffy little friend here to ash.”

Fear gripped her insides, not only from the threat to Rue, but from the obvious strength of his heart-flame. Most of the Malebranki she’d encountered who had the talent could barely make an existing flame dance. One could shape those flames into more useful dimensions. But to generate his own flame? Azonir’s skill had to be very strong indeed.

And he was using it to threaten Rue. Except the gem in the creature’s head was still purple. If there was a threat, then Rue certainly didn’t sense it, so... “Do it.” Her words felt like lead as she pushed them past her teeth. *If Rue trusted his intentions, I can trust hers.*

The flames around his hand brightened, the heat enough to ripple the air around them. The flames coalesced into a blade of living fire and held them above Rue. Far enough away, she noticed, that the heat wasn’t dangerous to the felyx.

“Anything you want to say to her?” he said. Bryony wasn’t sure if Azonir directed the question at Rue or her. Either way, her answer was the same.

“Get it over with already, Azonir. Stop torturing her.”

He glared at her, either in shock or outrage, though Bryony couldn’t put a finger on which. He cocked the arm wielding the flame-dagger back, then whirled away as he brought his hand down again. For a moment, Bryony’s heart lodged in her throat. Then she realized he’d used his momentum to hurl the felyx toward the open vent.

Rue gave an undignified yowl but caught the edges of the vent with three paws and scrambled up. In the same amount of time, Azonir had leapt onto his bed, his flame extinguished and his feet no longer on the floor. She tapped her wristcomp and dialed back the charge quietly, then smiled. “Persephone? Mark.”

The charge that arced through his feet was strong enough to straighten Lorcan's spine, and he tumbled unceremoniously backward off the bed. His back struck the floor with enough force to knock the wind out of a lesser being, but the Orzoth Matriarch didn't raise any runts, as they used to say. Fortunately, the bounty hunter had killed the charge before he hit the floor.

He rolled over, pressed his palms to the deck plates, and levered himself back to his feet. "What kind of monster electrifies the bed?"

The bounty hunter walked up to the field across the front of his cell, and her smile was like a promise of malign delights. It was no wonder he'd followed her like he was caught in her gravity well. Achlerazza, the goddyx of desire Themselves, couldn't have made a woman better suited to tempt him. Even now, part of him wondered what the downside might be of just giving in to her. Working for criminals didn't suit him nearly as much as the idea of being her—

—her what, exactly? She wants one thing out of you. Maybe two if she counts your screaming.

"The kind who's used to bounties who think they're smart enough to avoid the floor. Terrans learn and adapt, otherwise we'd have never made it this far into space. Isn't that the quote?"

The actual quote was that they stole and adapted, but the Malebrank ambassador who'd said the words had been fired shortly after letting them slip. Not that he suspected she would appreciate the distinction. Time to change tack.

Lorcan let his shoulders slump and a sense of defeat enter his voice, though that was less acting than he wanted to admit. "Did you even tell me your real name?"

To his surprise, she flinched. Not much, and she pulled her impassive glare back into place so quickly that for a heartbeat, he thought he'd imagined it. She watched him a moment, then

her jaw tensed. “I didn’t give you a name at all, not that you seemed to mind. You were a target, not a hookup.”

Behind him, he heard the felyx give a low mrowl. When he checked over his shoulder, she had pulled herself into the ventilation shaft and was glaring at them both with narrowed eyes and a gem which was nearly black. That mood, at least, he remembered—stressed or annoyed. On his matriarch’s felyces, it had been the most common emotional color. While he couldn’t see the felyx’s tail, he had no doubt it was threshing the air in irritation.

He folded his legs and sat down in the middle of the floor. If she was going to give him another jolt, then at least he’d be prepared for it and wouldn’t fall over. “Fine, if I can’t appeal to your emotions, then how about your accounts? You grabbed me for the bounty, right? I’ll double it. Hells, you let me talk to the Red Widow first and I’ll triple it.” Avarice was always an excellent motivation, and fortunately, one he had means to work with. “I just need to know where to wire the fun—”

“Not interested.” She leaned against the bulkhead and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Turning you in to the marshals has a satisfaction money can’t buy.”

“Well, if all you want is to be satisfied, I can see to that for free.” The words left his mouth before he thought better of it, a suggestive flirtation he wasn’t entirely joking about.

The quick blush heating her round cheeks indicated she wasn’t entirely opposed to the idea, but if she had any interest, she quickly crushed it behind her icy shield. “What I want, since you seem to be in a negotiating mood, is to kill the Red Widow and destroy her entire organization. If you can give her to me, I’ll consider letting you go. That’s the only deal I’m offering.”

Lorcan slotted this new information into what he had built up; keeping his sudden rush of excitement under wraps was easy, given how long he’d worked to not show any signs of relief or exhaustion. He had to play this cautiously. “‘Considering’ isn’t an assurance of my freedom.”

“And brains too. Your matriarch must be so proud,” said the bounty hunter, and if sarcasm could cut flesh, Lorcan would have been bleeding to death in the cell.

“You’d be surprised how proud she is,” he drawled. That was true, at least. To be fair, if his matriarch even recognized him at this point, he’d be shocked, but his relationship to his House was immaterial. “So, you want me to give you the Red Widow, a powerful and well-connected crime lord, one who has proven she can get to prisoners who have wronged her on two well-known occasions, without a promise of release or any other guarantee of safety? I’ll take my chances with the marshals, *Tarzu-ma*.”

She closed her eyes and let out a long, slow breath. “Fine. Have it your way. Persephone? Plot a course to the nearest sector marshal’s orbital and let them know we’re bringing in a known fugitive.”

“Captain, aye.”

“That’s not going to be the hero’s welcome you’re expecting,” Lorcan rumbled. The service would let him go eventually, but it would set back the level of trust he’d developed with the Red Widow for him to spend any time with law enforcement. He’d be back at square one in terms of their relationship and proving himself to her this time wouldn’t be as easy to get out of as the last. “I mean you’re *really* not going to want to do it.”

“Pleading is beneath you. You know that, right?” She gave a dismissive snort and pushed off from the wall. “You might as well get it out of your system. It won’t be any more effective on me than it will with the marshals.”

“Oh, I know that. I work for them. That’s why you can’t take me back.”

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS enough to make Bryony wish she was religious, if only so she could call the attention of whatever gods there were to stare in awe at this level of chutzpah. She rolled her eyes. “I ought to give you credit, Azonir. That’s the first time I’ve personally heard that excuse from a bounty. Not that it’s original. I’ve heard of others using it. Bounty hunters talk, you see.”

Which was true, to a point. Though she was typically too busy to talk to them. She had been looking for someone to get her to the hidden base from which the Red Widow ran her vast criminal syndicate. Now she had her top enforcer at her mercy.

“It’s not an excuse!” he said, suddenly tense. Over his shoulder, Rue had curled up at the mouth of the vent and was watching the goings-on, her gem a muted blue green.

“*Sure* it’s not,” she said, drawing out the first word with as much sarcasm as she could find. Which was a lot, really. “Let me guess, because you’re under deep cover, if I try to ask them about you, the marshals will deny all knowledge of your existence.” The sheepish look on his face told her she was right. “Convenient for you.”

“And if you turn me in, you’ll get your bounty, and they’ll let me go one standard cycle later, but that will already be enough to damage my position in the Red Widow’s org.” He stood up, and Bryony had to resist the urge to give him another jolt through the floor capacitors, just because he’d wasted her time—assuming what he said was true. He sat on the edge of the cell’s bed and looked up. “I have an idea though. A way to prove I’m right.”

“Let me guess, you’ve got a number in your tablet for me to comm.”

“No. That would be obvious. You reach out to the nearest marshal’s office, ask for Lt. Silva. Tyrell Silva.” The Malebrank was speaking faster now, suddenly sure of himself. It didn’t help that once he knew where he was headed his natural charisma began to shine through. It, as much as his rugged, sinful good looks had made seducing him easy. But now, it also made her consider spacing him rather than have him around to tempt her. After all, one more frozen body littering the void wouldn’t be that big a deal.

Except if he was innocent, then she’d be no different from the Red Widow. “And what will this Lt. Silva say?”

“No clue,” said Azonir. “But if you say the phrase Fire-falcon Wing, he’ll know you have me. He’ll be able to confirm it for you.”

Dammit. Could anything go right with this gig? Bryony grabbed the muscles at the back of her neck and did her best not to swear out loud. “Persephone?”

The AI’s chipper “On it!” was quick, and a reminder that the computer didn’t always need to hear its name before it started listening.

“What did she do to you?” Azonir’s question was quiet, though the timbre of his voice rippled through her like he had bellowed.

She walked to the front of the cell and studied him. Tried to see something that spoke of being a marshal, rather than a criminal. He had plenty of scars that looked real enough. And two small bumps at his hairline where the magnetic horns favored by a lot of Malebrank criminals would affix. Bryony took a deep breath. “She killed someone I cared about.”

Azonir snorted. “She does that. Husband? Wife? Partner?”

Benji’s face, full of laughter as always, and beaming enough to be a new star, drifted through her memories before she could push it away. “We’re not friends, got it, Azonir?”

We're not sharing histories and we're not going to do each other's nails."

A smile quirked his mouth, creating an adorable dimple in the red flesh of his cheek that she forced herself to ignore. "So much for my hope of getting a decent manicure. You'd be amazed how bad the Widow's syndicate is at them."

The laugh came unbidden, squeaking past her lips somewhere between a cough and a cry. "I just can't believe she doesn't have a decent aesthetician on retainer. Does she have no sense of pride?"

"See? I said the same thing. I wa—"

"Captain?" Persephone cut Azonir off mid-sentence.

"Go ahead."

"The Marshal Service confirms Marshal Lorcan Orzoth's story and has transmitted his biometrics. I have scanned, and they match those of the prisoner." After a heavy pause, the computer added, "We should expedite his release now, Captain." Bryony was only imagining the smug tone to the computer's voice. It was auto-generated from a bank of phonemes; the computer didn't have an attitude.

She glanced at Azoni—at *Lorcan*, apparently. He made a grand gesture at the stun-field that closed off his cell and looked at her expectantly. "If you can't trust computers, who can you trust, really?"

"Certainly not you," Bryony muttered as she tapped the commands into her wristcomp. The warning light on the front of the cell turned green, and the field disappeared with an electric pop. She resisted the urge to charge the floor one more time, just to take the smug look off his face, but only barely. "We're already in nullspace, so I can't drop you back at Progress Station. But once we drop back to realspace, I can leave you at the nearest planet with enough to charter a return flight."

"That's not necessary," he rumbled. Lorcan hopped out of the cell, as if he suspected she might give him another shock for good measure. At least he had good survival instincts and

wasn't simply good looks and muscle. "I know you're losing a bounty on this."

She gritted her teeth at the reminder. It wasn't the bounty she hated to lose; she had saved up enough to cover a couple of missed jobs. It was losing the chance to get her revenge that stung worse. "I'm not in the habit of owing people. My fuckup, so I'll pay my debts, thank you."

He held his pants with one hand and grabbed one of the two chairs in the brig to sit in. At first, she couldn't figure out why he was behaving oddly, then it hit her. She went to the effects locker and held her wristcomp to the sensor. The locker door opened, and she retrieved his boots and belt.

Lorcan snorted as he threaded his belt through his trouser loops. "Were you really worried I'd hang myself in your cell?"

Bryony shook her head, unable to stop the smile ghosting her face. "Nah. I just like making people miserable."

Wow, she was a terrible idea. And yet, that slightly wicked smile of hers arrowed straight to his dick faster than any Malebranki woman ever had. The last thing he needed to do was get involved with a woman who had literally kidnapped him. In her defense, she was technically fulfilling a contract, or close enough that he could overlook the finer points if he wanted.

And by the Nine, he *wanted*.

He brushed his fingertips against one of the neodymium implants at his hairline, unused to the sensitivity of having them uncovered. "I don't suppose my horns are in the locker too?" In addition to being a status symbol in the Red Widow's syndicate, the body modification was expensive. He'd hate to lose them.

"My quarters," she said tersely.

"You took a souvenir? Nice."

She gasped, and the outrage flaming in her cheeks was an aphrodisiac all its own. “You wish, Devil man. I had to carry your oversized ass down to the brig myself. There was no way I’d risk accidental impalement.”

“You only like to be poked deliberately. I’ll remember that for future scenarios.”

He was thankful for his Malebranki heritage because the glare she shot at him would likely have incinerated him on the spot without his innate association with fire. “You’re not half as cute as you think you are.”

“Probably for the best,” he said as he finished getting his boots on and stood. “Because even half would be pretty devastatingly cute.”

She rolled her eyes and started toward the door. “I’ll have *Persephone* set you with permission for the galley and one of the crew cabins. They’re old, but they have a bed, an omnisan, and a shower. Do us both a favor and lock yourself in there until we touch down.”

He bristled. “If that’s the case, I could have just stayed in my cell.”

“That can be arranged if you want.” She wiped a hand down her face and exhaled slowly. “I’ll bring your horns to the galley when I get a chance. You’ll be able to grab them there.”

“Since I’m not the horrible criminal you thought I was, do you want to tell me your name?”

“Does Captain not work for you?”

Not especially. He wanted to know *her*. For whatever reason, he’d fixated on her and couldn’t get her out of his head. He suspected the way she’d been poured into that green dress the previous night might be a contributing factor. “I’m fine with it if you are.”

“Good.” She gave him a curt nod and headed out of the brig. “See you later, Marshal.”

He followed her into the corridor. Despite her brig being relatively pristine, the hallway outside looked much like other

ships that doubled as residences. Storage was everywhere, and things that didn't fit into the designed storage had been buckled against the wall in crates. It affected him the way it did most spacers, creating a nearly claustrophobic sensation that was close and somehow extremely comforting. "Lorcan's fine. And I've had a thought."

The bounty hunter turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised. "I find that hard to believe."

Damn. Her sardonic wit practically made him weak in the knees. Which made what he was about to say dangerous, bordering on stupid. But he also wanted to get to know her better, stay on this ship a little longer.

"I can help you take her down." He held his breath, wondering what she was thinking. "I mean, that's what you wanted me for when you captured me, right?"

"The bounty would have been nice as well," she said after a too-long pause. "But why would you do that?"

"Honestly? The longer my bosses drag their feet, the more people she's going to kill. Either directly, or through drugs and sapient trafficking, and a hundred other things. I keep compiling evidence, and nothing is going forward. If I help you, we can bring her to justice faster."

Her eyes hardened, and the undiluted rage in her cooled some of the ardor in his blood. "I don't want justice. I want dead."

He could always stop her in the moment. It was more important to find a way to crack open the fist with which the Widow ruled over her syndicate. Lorcan nodded. "I can work with dead, if that's the deal."

"That's the only deal there is. If you get me close to her, I can do the rest."

It wouldn't be that simple. He knew from experience that the Widow was perhaps most dangerous up close, so the bounty hunter's chances were slim at best. And that was with the element of surprise. Still, they needed a few stops before

they went to the Widow's fleet. He could surely work out the details by then.

“I can get you close.”

Her smile held none of its previous warmth; it was predatory, lean, and somehow triumphant. “Then you can call me Bryony.”

CHAPTER FOUR

BRYONY SPRAWLED on her chaise and stroked a brush through Rue's fur. The paired horns she'd taken off Lorcan's forehead still sat on her dresser, waiting to be delivered. Unease nested in her heart like a twitchy bird, looking for the flimsiest excuse to batter itself against her ribs. Normally, grooming the felyx would be enough to calm her. Instead, it felt like putting off the inevitable.

Not that Rue shared any of her concerns, clearly. The felyx was stretched out between her legs, all six paws tucked under to better facilitate Bryony's attention. The gem in her forehead pulsed a relaxing blue purple, telegraphing exactly how much Rue was enjoying herself.

"Why does this feel like it's too good to be true?" Bryony asked the felyx. Rue didn't answer, though the gem briefly shifted to black when Bryony stopped petting. "Yes, how dare I? I should be able to talk and pet at the same time." Despite her mood, the smile pushed at one corner of Bryony's mouth, so perhaps the felyx's healing magic was working after all.

And to answer my own question, it feels too good to be true because it must be. There were plenty of ways Lorcan could have manipulated the information at her disposal. Rerouting nullspace comms was expensive but not unheard of, and if anyone had the resources for their people to have that kind of skill, it would be the Red Widow's syndicate. Over the last half decade, she'd grown from being another in a long line of Malebranki pirates to the point where she had whole systems under her sway. Her legitimate businesses were almost as numerous as her illicit ones. Granted, even those ventures she

operated legally were protected with the same threats of violence and abuse—if not outright murder—that she'd been using since her start.

So, what do I do? Go into this eyes wide open and just hope I can spot the double-cross in time? Do I have a choice?

As an answer her door chimed. There was only one person it could really be, given that there was only one other person on board the ship besides her. She confirmed that the bulky sweater she'd thrown on hid her lack of a bra, then called out, "Enter."

Lorcan stepped through the door, and instantly, the cabin felt half its size. She was too aware of him: his broad shoulders, the stony edge of his jaw, the way he disturbed the small currents of air in the room. Everything added up to a heavy physical presence that threw the feeling of her refuge off-kilter. She'd been careful not to bring him back to her quarters for precisely this reason; everything about him felt like a temptation her fingers itched to touch.

From the way his nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed, he felt it too. His eyes travelled over her body, and suddenly she was certain no sweater would be bulky enough to keep his gaze at bay. He cleared his throat roughly, then said, "I thought I'd save you the trouble of bringing the horns to the galley. Since I was up."

"On the dresser." Bryony nodded at Rue, spread out across her lap in a decadent and shameless display. "You'll excuse my not getting up to get them for you."

His chuckle rumbled through the air like summer thunder on her homeworld, soft and rolling at the same time. "No, you've obviously got a more important job in front of you."

For a moment, she thought he was mocking her, then she realized his comment was meant in earnest. She remembered the way he handled Rue in his cell. Even when he tossed her toward the vent it had been cautious, an effort to get her clear of any charge from the floor than a desire to hurt. The care toward her felyx left a funny warmth in her gut that Bryony refused to think about. "You've been around a felyx before."

It made sense—they were more common in Malebranki space than in Terran territories, though they were still uncommon.

“My matriarch had a pair of them.” He collected the two horns from her desk and snapped them into place on his forehead with an audible click. Bryony appreciated that they weren’t overdone—she’d seen some truly ludicrous, curving horns on Malebranki toughs. Clearly, they were trying to compensate for a certain lack. Lorcan didn’t have need of any such ego-boosting statement. His horns were short and thick, slate-grey cones with sharp points that complemented his crimson complexion.

He was, she had to admit, a damn handsome devil. Literally.

His words finally registered, and she blinked in surprise. “A mating pair? Was she breeding?”

“Thank the Nine Houses, no.” His chuckle deepened into an actual laugh, the dimple in his cheek reappearing in an entirely unexpected moment of gorgeousness that threatened to steal her breath. “Twin sisters. Blues, both of them. Gorgeous. But given how cranky they were normally, I doubt I would have survived either of them mating.”

Bryony couldn’t help the smile that warmed her lips. The idea of this giant Malebrank cowed by a pair of felinoids was incongruous with her image of him, but also told her too much about his attitudes. A person who was good with and to animals won points with her, particularly given how much she preferred them to sapient. “They do tend to pick a person and give everyone else the cold shoulder.”

“I’ve probably still got scars from that ‘cold shoulder’ on my arms. It came with a lot of claws.” His smile turned wry and introspective. “Look, I didn’t just come by for these.” He tilted his head to show off the horns. “Though I appreciate getting them back.”

Any warmth remaining in her body fled, replaced by a wariness that pricked against her insides like a stellar urchin.

She kept her voice neutral as she said, “What did you come by for?”

“I can’t take you directly to the Red Widow.”

“Interesting, because I *can* take you directly to the marshals. I’m sure you’ll be very popular with her as a result.” A ball of icy rage started to fist in her stomach.

His hands came up in the universal gesture of placation. “Hear me out. I said directly, and that’s what I meant. We have a few things I need to grab first, and... You’re probably not going to like it.”

Bryony closed her eyes and squeezed the back of her neck. Typical. Without understanding he’d won some ground in her opinion because of his treatment of Rue, he decided to burn any advances by trying to alter the deal. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Hold. When she was calm enough not to yell, she opened her eyes. “Tell me, and I’ll be the judge of whether or not I like it.”

“Before I was...invited aboard your ship, I was stopping over on my way to Thilles CE8. The Darkstar syndicate is engaging in some activities that encroach on the Widow’s areas of interest. I’m supposed to make an example of them.”

Was that all, she thought. “So, I have more scum to deal with, and the threat of potential violence. Oh, and the benefit of sending a message to some similarly minded criminals. What makes you think I wouldn’t have fun with that?”

There were so many problems with the feral gleam in her eye, Lorcan didn’t know where to begin. He combed his fingers through the hair at his temple and tried to buy himself some time to come up with a response. “I said it’s something I need to take care of. Not you. I don’t want you anywhere closer than low orbit.”

“You should have thought about that before you invited me along. You’re literally my only way forward, so if you think

I'm letting you out of my sight, you're mistaken." She didn't even look up at him, focusing instead on the felyx sprawled across her lap.

And what I wouldn't give to take the little fluffy monster's place.

Which was yet another check mark in the column of why this was a bad idea. If she came along, he'd worry about her. And worrying about her meant being distracted. Undercovers who got distracted made mistakes, and then they got dead. It was a simple survival instinct to leave her behind. "You didn't want to trust me with your name, but you expect me to trust you to have my back in a room full of criminals. All I know about your skill set is that you look amazing in a green dress and you're a dab hand with a poisoned drink."

The bounty hunter rolled her eyes. "Goddamn, men are stupid. How was I going to poison your drink when you wouldn't take your eyes off me?" She cut him off before he could answer. "It was already in the glass. That's how I was able to pour from the same bottle for both of us."

He remembered that whiskey she'd provided last night; it had been the real thing, not some synthetic almost-alcohol. Slow and smokey, with a flavor like acrid honey and *Ymarasap*. At first taste, he'd imagined drinking it off her amazing chest and thought his night could only get better. Turned out he was dead wrong, but the memory held all the same.

"Which means you were planning to abduct me all along."

She lifted her shoulder in a half-shrug. "Only from the moment I saw you in the station. You just happened to make it easy."

"All of which makes my trusting you even less likely, if you can imagine."

"Congratulations, you now have an inkling of how I might feel." She started to fold her arms across that ample, amazing chest, when the felyx thrashed its tail to remind Bryony that she had stopped petting and grooming.

“Fine.” He spread his arms wide. “What do you want to know?”

“You can generate flame.”

“Is that a question or a statement?”

“Yes.” She gave him an arch look and damn, but he shouldn’t enjoy verbally sparring with her this much. Which gave him an idea...

“I can. The *v’tana* is a skill—”

“I know what it is. How strong is yours?”

“Very. I can generate flames as well as shape and manipulate them. It comes in handy when I need to be intimidating.” All true, though he didn’t mention that he could also throw flames, a trait he’d only ever seen in —the Red Widow, herself. “Where’s your in-flight gym?”

She blinked at the sudden change in topic. “I guess you have to keep those muscles working if you want them to stick around, huh?” Bryony set the felyx on the floor—an act Rue clearly thought was a significant betrayal, given how loudly she complained. “That’s Rue, by the way. And I converted one of the passenger cabins. It’s not huge, but it’ll do for stretches and free weights.”

“Is there room enough to spar?” *This is madness.* “Because if you insist on following me planetside when we get to Thilles CE8, then I need to know you can hold your own in a fight.”

He had thought her prior grin had been feral, but this one sent shivers down his spine. And other places if he was being honest. He had a type, and she played to his weakness perfectly.

She cracked her knuckles one after the other. “This? This is going to be a blast.”

Her competitiveness fired a rivalry in his chest that burned as bright as his *v’tana*. “We’ll see how you feel when I pick you up off the floor, *Tarzu-ma*.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THIS IS LESS *than your finest hour, you understand*. Every neuron in her brain told Bryony this was a terrible idea, that Lorcan was not the ally he wanted her to think he was. And yet, the bones of her hands ached with the desire to smash the smug grin from his crimson face. It wasn't as if she had anything to prove—he wasn't in a position to make demands, anyway. If he didn't want her as his backup, that was too bad, because she wasn't letting her shot at vengeance walk off without her.

She opened the door to the cabin she'd converted into a ship's gym. As she expected, he'd beaten her here. *It wasn't like he had other clothes to change into*, she reminded herself. That thought aside, he *had* removed his shirt, and the acreage of muscle and scarred, scarlet flesh made her briefly regret that she hadn't seduced him first and then drugged him. She watched his back flex as he did triceps curls with a fifteen-kilo plate from the rack. It was, she had to admit, a literal mouth-watering display.

“You going to come in the room, or just ogle me from the doorway?” His voice was gruff, but she couldn't miss the thread of heat that roughened his tone. *So at least he felt it too*.

Which only made this whole sparing idea more idiotic. Sweaty, close quarters were going to get them thinking about other sweaty, close activities, and that was strictly off limits. It had been before he'd been a marshal. It was doubly true now. “I figure if you're putting on a show, why shouldn't I be watching?”

He chuckled and racked the weight. “Fair. You need to tape up?”

It felt like his reach covered the whole room, but even if that was her nerves talking, it was still going to be a problem. Her guess? He was two full meters, maybe a smidge more. He’d have plenty of arm past her meager one-five. Fortunately, she’d been fighting taller opponents most of her life; she had a few tricks up her sleeve. “If you think your friends on the surface will let me stop and tape up, then sure. Otherwise, my gloves are fine.”

He shrugged. “Practical. I hate the way the tape makes my hands feel.” He popped the horns off his forehead and, using the magnets, stuck them to the side of the weight rack. “For the record, any Malebrank in the Widow’s crew won’t do you the courtesy of taking those off.”

“I assumed not. You boys have to compensate somehow, I suppose.”

His belly laugh was heavy and loud, echoing in the small space. “I’m not compensating for anything, *Tarzu-ma*.”

She growled as she tugged on her padded helmet and gloves. “What does that mean? I looked it up, but apparently the computer doesn’t include epithets.”

He pulled his own helmet on with a smile. “*Tarzu-ma*? It means ‘peach bottom’. It came to me watching you walk in that damn dress. At the time, it seemed appropriate.”

Bryony charged forward, bringing her heel down in a stomp on his right foot. Or would have, but he was already moving past her. *Hell and stars he was fast*. She spun to face him again, in time to see the jab he launched at her head. The smart move would be to slip the punch and dig into his kidney, but it was also the expected one. Instead, she headbutted the incoming fist as hard as she could, catching it with the broad bone of her forehead. She felt more than heard his knuckles pop from the impact, and Lorcan’s hiss of surprise was like music. While he tried to rotate away, she ducked in and drove her fist into the back of his knee then let her momentum take her into a roll to his other side.

Lorcan stepped back and tested his knee. “You fight dirty. I approve.” She couldn’t decide if his tone indicated surprise or respect.

“Yeah, well, you’re fast for a lumbering ox.”

He laughed again, the corners of his eyes wrinkling beneath the rim of his padded helmet. “Would it help you if I slowed down some?”

The playful tease in his voice did funny things in her chest, and she found herself unable to keep from grinning back at him. “I mean, I try not to be ageist, so I won’t judge if you’re winded already.”

He pantomimed a blow to his heart. “We age at the same rate as you Terrans. I’m thirty-two. I’m not old.”

“Really? Because I’m certain I saw a few grey hairs when I carried you down to the brig,” Bryony said. He threw another quick succession of punches, and she was only able to dodge the first two, with the third landing solidly into her shoulder. “And watch it, you almost punched me in the tit.”

“What’s the Terran saying? Need me to kiss it better?”

The thought brought a flush of heat to her cheeks, but she shook it off. “You wish, Devil-man.” She feinted in with an overhand casting punch, and he slid out and to the side, so he could counter from a safe distance. She grabbed his counterpunch and put everything into pulling down and shoving back at the same time. It wasn’t a full throw—he was far too big for her to do that effectively—but he stumbled forward, graceless and off balance. Cutting his feet out from under him with a leg sweep was a mercy, really.

Lorcan hit the ground hard, catching himself with one arm. Bryony didn’t waste a second. She leaped onto his shoulder, wrapping one leg under his braced arm before locking the foot behind her other knee. Her calf pressed into his neck, his arm out of position to do more than slap back toward her. He tried to charge back to his feet, but her added weight kept him off balance, and he stumbled a second time. She took advantage of the shift to tighten her leg, choking off his air. He threw

himself back, which only gave her the ability to use the mats as leverage to tighten further. Lorcan slapped at her thigh, looking for a weak spot in her hold, then tapped out on the floor of the gym.

She unlocked her legs, but Lorcan stayed where he was. Bryony rapped the top of his head with one knuckle. “So, can I ‘hold my own’ to your satisfaction?”

He rolled to his side and stared up at her, his infernal smile framed by the meat of her thighs, and she realized her mistake. Even fighting wasn’t enough to dim the Malebrank’s charisma, and the languid way his gaze travelled up to her face left scorch marks on her skin. His dimple reappeared as his smile widened. “You tell me,” he said, a picture of innocence. “Are you satisfied?”

Satisfied? She was anything but. Want threaded along her nerves, pooling low in her belly like molten sugar. The way his voice thrummed through her, the way the muscles of his jaw flexed against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh? Screw the cautionary tales, *this* was why deals with the devil were such bad ideas. They reminded you of all the things you didn’t have.

His nostrils flared, and Bryony was self-conscious of her arousal and how aware of it he probably was. She shoved herself back from him in an ungainly crabwalk before standing up. “I’m satisfied that I kicked your ass,” she muttered.

He surged to his feet, trapping her in the corner with his massive frame, and she hated her body for responding to the thrill of him. His contained power, the threat of strength, and the promise of safety all waged war on her senses. He leaned in, breath hot against her ear. “Is that all that matters?”

Bryony closed her eyes, Benji’s face a hazy image that splashed ice water on her libido. She pushed against his chest, and he stepped back, giving her space enough to slip past him. The confusion on his face mirrored the storm that seemed to be tearing her up inside. She had a flash of sympathy for him, but it died as quickly as it had started.

As quickly as they had died. Gone in an instant.

“I need a shower,” was all she said, then she fled back to her quarters.

Way to make a mess of that, Lorcan thought. He pried his horns off the rack and clicked them into place before heading out into the hall with his shirt tossed over one shoulder. Bryony had clearly made good time, as there wasn't a trace of her in the hall. He assumed she'd gone back to her quarters as she'd said, but she wasn't likely to welcome his presence there. Not the way she'd run off as if scalded, certainly.

An image of her, standing under the shower as hot water streamed over her voluptuous curves, made him stifle a groan. Never mind that in-flight, the showers ran sonic vibrations and pressurized air in order to save precious water for other uses. The fantasy persisted until he bit down on the inside of his cheek to drive it off. He was half tempted to turn around, head back into the tiny gym, and lift weights until exhaustion claimed him, but that wouldn't work. The operation against the Darkstar syndicate was going to be dicey at best, and doubly so if he was distracted by thoughts about Bryony. Having a failure in the field was not the best way to stay in Lilith's good graces, and he'd worked too hard getting close to her. That meant he needed Bryony off his mind and absolutely not in his bed.

“Computer.”

The AI sounded annoyed. “It's *Persephone*.”

His hand started toward his temple again, and he forced it back to his side. *The Nine deliver me from self-indulgent AIs.* “*Persephone*, send a message to the captain when she's finished her shower. I'd like to meet in the galley.”

“What is your preferred form of address, Marshal?”

He thought about it. He'd been Azonir for so long he thought of himself that way half the time. More than that, he'd done enough questionable things as Azonir that it bled through to his true self. If he were to be judged by the Nine, as some of

the more religious of his people claimed, he had no doubt they would see the stain on his soul. Another reason to be glad the Malebranki great houses had fallen into petty infighting after the system had collapsed. His finger tapped against his thigh, until he answered, “Lorcan. Call me Lorcan.”

“As you wish, Lorcan. Message will be delivered after the captain’s shower.” Any trace of annoyance left the computer’s voice, replaced by the bright, almost cheerful tones he remembered from the brig.

Not knowing how long he had, he headed for the galley. Along the way he pulled his shirt back on. He’d been picked up in his shore clothes, designed to display his affiliation with the Widow’s syndicate, and to send a “keep back” message. The poly-cloth T-shirt was like a second skin as a result, and he hated that it felt like he was showing off. Especially given how Bryony had reacted.

In the galley, he found Rue pawing mournfully at a metal food bowl, the stone in her forehead glowing a deep amber, verging on red. The felyx added a pitiful *mrowing* to the clatter of the metal bowl as soon as Lorcan entered the room. He couldn’t help but chuckle. He crouched down to drag a hand along the creature’s back. “Whatever could you be trying to tell me, you fluffy ball of cute?”

Rue looked at him with a frustrated annoyance that would have been equally at home on her mistress’s face, and he laughed. “Okay. I’ll see what I can find for you, is that fair?”

She butted her head against his shin in what he assumed was agreement, and he gave her a last scritch along her spine before standing to search the small galley. Actually, both *small* and *galley* felt like aggrandizement. It was more like a swollen node in the ship’s main corridor, situated between the bridge and the crew cabins. Still, she’d done a fair bit to make it feel functional, from the small net of fresh fruit hanging in the corner, to the magnetic cabinet locks to keep items on the shelves.

Some quick searching discovered both a pre-portioned package of food for Rue and a box of crunchy liver treats. He

grabbed a chartreuse, multisided fruit from the net for himself and set to filling Rue's bowl. The felyx rolled onto her back as soon as she spied the box of treats, batting at the air with four of her paws in a display that would be adorable if he hadn't known it evolved from a wild felyx's disemboweling strike. *Scratch that, it's still adorable.*

He gave Rue a tummy rub and dropped some of the treats onto her bowl of food. "There you go, dinner and dessert in one easy parcel."

Rue stayed long enough to show she appreciated the belly rubs, her gem glowing the deep violet of absolute trust and adoration, then she rolled over, strolled to the bowl, and began eating. The fruit, he discovered, had a sweet, tart flesh hidden behind a tough, bitter rind.

"You're supposed to peel me'elors. Have you never eaten one before?" Bryony leaned against the corner where the galley bulged from the rest of the hall, towel still draped over her shoulders. Her hair was damp with leave-in shampoo and poked up at random angles from her head. If she was doing it to throw him off guard, then it was working because she looked somewhere between adorable and delicious.

He held up the uneaten portion. "Is that how Terrans eat it? We Malebrank accept that bitter and sweet must be paired to be enjoyed, so we eat the whole thing."

She blinked at him. "That's...really perceptive? I know your culture has a thing for warrior-poets and warrior-philosophers, but I'd never actually he—"

His laughter cut her off. "I'm fucking with you. No, I never ate one before and was just wondering if I should have peeled it when you arrived."

She snapped her towel toward him, making a sharp crack that echoed in the ship. "You're an asshole. I was almost ready to compliment you." Despite her words, laughter leaked into her voice.

"Did the shower help?" He'd meant it in the sense of recentering her thoughts, but almost immediately, he thought

of cold showers and thwarted desires. He took another bite of the me'elor and used the bitterness to excuse his wince.

Any levity had evaporated from her features, like liquid boiling off into the void. "Worry about yourself."

This had to end. Might as well have it out now.

"I am worrying about myself," he growled. "If we go down to the surface and you get unpredictable, or you run, or worse, you decide to charge in guns blazing; that endangers me. If I can't trust you, you're staying behind, and it's as simple as that. This may be your ship, but it's my ass on the line, so consider this your single chance. What happened to you back there?"

CHAPTER SIX

SHE DIDN'T TALK about this. This was her ship, and her life and...she wanted to get it off her shoulders. To say it out loud to another person, instead of to Rue, who was comforting but not understanding, or to *Persephone*, who could understand but not comfort. Bryony picked Rue up from her food bowl, which caused a momentary fuss until the felyx could get all six legs settled. Rue's gem glowed a soft blue as Bryony sat on one of the three stools along the galley's single counter/table.

"We were free traders, my family. Mostly content to work a single system for a few months, then stock up and move to the next. We were on Cara's Forge..." Lorcan's brow furrowed in confusion, and she worked to remember the world's registry name, "...um, Arcius 58b?"

"Driethyl mining," he said, matter-of-factly. "I know it."

"I was on a courier run out to one of the mines, delivering a new filtration unit. My sister and her family were in the town, negotiating a livestock transport to the far side of the planet, when the Red Widow's people attacked." Remembered pain made her tighten her grip on Rue, who squirmed and made a *meep* of protest. She could talk about this, it wouldn't kill her. "I never knew what had caused the attack—a missed payment, or some slight or offense. It didn't matter. When I got back, the Widow's sigil had been burned into the town square, and they were dead. My sister. Her wife. My beautiful nephew—" Her voice broke, and she hated the sign of weakness, squeezed her eyes closed to push against the burn

that threatened to become tears. She wouldn't cry, not over them. Not until she had justice.

A pair of huge arms enveloped her, not tightly, nor rigid with desire. Carefully, to offer comfort. His skin was so warm; she knew that Malebrank had a higher basal temperature than Terrans, but this was the first she'd noticed it. She leaned into the touch, her hatred of what he represented at war with her desire to be comforted. His voice was a rumble deep in his chest. "I should have asked first. I'll let you go if you want."

She reached up to grab his elbow gently, holding him in place. "No. It's okay. No guarantees Rue won't jump back to her food bowl, though."

Bryony hated the neediness. Worse, she wanted desperately to accept a comfort her sister's family never got. It burned in her throat and behind her eyelashes. She'd sworn there'd be justice that day, that she wouldn't rest until the Red Widow lay dead. All the same, she didn't want him to let her go. Just a few more moments where the circle of his arms kept the rest of the galaxy at bay, and then she'd be able to face the task that lay in front of her.

"How long ago?" Lorcan's voice was softer than his usual growl, half-whispered into the top of her head.

True to her prediction, Rue jumped back down as Bryony pressed closer to him and basked in the warmth. "Four years." *Plus eight months and thirteen days.* A horrific thought stiffened her spine. "Were you...?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't involved. I didn't start doing serious work for the Widow until about three years ago. And..." He trailed off.

"What?"

Tension tightened his arms as he measured what to say next. "She has me handle other kinds of problems. Not protection rackets. I've done plenty of questionable things, and no mistake, but I've positioned myself so that if I need to injure someone, they had it coming. She has enough butchers in her employ. She uses me as a surgeon."

The self-loathing in his voice was painfully familiar to her. She knew the sound of someone who'd sacrificed their own moral center for a higher goal. She heard it every day of her life. It felt like a connection between them she hadn't expected.

"Which isn't important," he added after a pause. "Even if I'd been undercover at that point, I couldn't have stopped her. The best I can do is mitigate the damage. For what it's worth, I hate that you've been hurt by her."

"There are people in every part of the sector, plenty of them hurt by her and others like her. I just want to make sure there aren't any more." No more tiny graves. No more painful memories. Maybe no more warlords. For a moment, she wasn't sure she could stop any of them.

For a moment, she didn't want to move at all.

His arms tightened. "It doesn't mean much, since you barely know me, but in that? We want the same thing."

Bryony worried that she'd said she hadn't wanted to move aloud, then realized Lorcan meant that he, too, wanted to stop the Red Widow. They were both working within the limits of the systems they had. She took a deep breath, and his arms loosened accordingly. Her hand on his chest guided him back enough that she no longer felt enveloped by him, which was good. He was a distraction. A tool to reach her goals.

Which didn't explain why she immediately wished she'd let him stay close. Or that he might resist just a little, so she could have the pretense of being unable to shove him away.

Focus on the work, on the goal. Whenever she felt uncertain, that at least had been the course she could chart. She ground a fist into her eyes to stem the worst of her emotions and looked up. "So, this planet we're going to? What's the plan?"

There were bad ideas, and then there was whatever this was. Lorcan wished he had the same devotion to the Maxims of Al'kheri that other Malebrank were prone to; supposedly, the dour set of strictures so beloved by the Great Houses were comforting in times of stress. The Nine knew he had plenty of stress to clear at the moment.

Thilles CE8 wasn't helping his stress levels either. The planet was notorious for its violent electrical storms, one of which he could see on the horizon. Webs of lightning illuminated the distant clouds and threatened to obliterate anything taller than a pebble when it reached them, which he guessed would be within the hour.

"Storm's moving fast," Bryony said from her position crouched next to him behind the ridge. The other big factor in his heightened cortisol levels, if he was being honest. Her presence here made him worry for her. The distraction would introduce irrational behaviors, a desire to keep her safe at the expense of the mission. He needed to send her back to the ship, get her out of harm's way, so he could do his job and get it over with. Plus, he didn't like the idea of her seeing him in his full persona as Azonir. The person he had to be to stay close to the Widow was not a role he enjoyed playing. The smartest thing would be to send her back.

"Indeed," was all he said.

"How does that change the plan?" She shifted her multi-focals to watch the building below them. The factory was a hustle of activity, loading transports with what he assumed was enough Meningysol—the street name was "Manny"—to black out an army. He knew that the Darkstar were moving more Manny than they could purchase, so it made sense they had a factory of their own somewhere. After that, it was simple elimination to figure out where. Down below, robots were loading crates into the back of a hover, no doubt waiting until the last minute so they could get underway with the storm for cover.

"We move fast," he said. When she cocked her eyebrow at him in an expression of frustration, he couldn't help but grin. "In seriousness. Everything has to move fast. I'll take care of

the truck, you lock down the far entrances, then we can just pincer them toward the center.” He doubted there were more than six sapients in the whole factory, so as long as they were divided between two fronts, they’d both be fine.

“Good enough,” she said, and started to move.

He grabbed her hand, and she stopped. “Be careful.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I figured I’d just run in with a bull’s-eye on my chest, is that okay?”

“They’re a big enough target already,” he quipped. He was horrified, it was crass at best, and most likely unwelcome.

He was about to apologize when she grinned and said, “You should see them outside their containment device.”

A string of images flooded his brain and went straight to his groin. “I wanted to, remember? Then you kidnapped me.”

Her smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. “True. Sorry about that.”

“You want to make it up to me? Stay safe so I can check them out later.”

Her eye-roll was almost as welcome as her smile. “You wish, Devil-man. Now let me go.”

“Anything you say, *Tarzu-ma*.” He released her hand and slid down the back of the ridge in a rattle of scree, though not before he saw the burst of pink in her cheeks at the nickname. He’d expected her to ask him to stop once he’d explained what it meant, but to his surprise she hadn’t. That worked fine with him—having a pet name for her gave him a heated thrill in his chest. He liked using his language to shape a name for her, and her acceptance of it made him hope that one day, perhaps, she might be able to accept more.

He groaned and checked to make sure she hadn’t followed him on the offhand chance he’d said any of that out loud. Allowing her to clear her head back in the galley had addled his brains in sympathy and made him hope for too much.

Because you know, once she sees who you really are, that’s all over. He tried to push the voice down, but its claws sunk

into the meat of his innards like icicles, clinging to him with all the weight of inevitable dread.

He stepped past the scrub and into the open, making no effort to hide himself from the Darkstar gang members. They were a largely Terran syndicate—few of the criminal groups made more than token stretches beyond their own people, if he was being honest—so given the encroaching dark of the storm, it was possible they couldn't even see him. Malebrank had better low-light vision than Terrans, thanks to their home system being bathed in the weak light of a red dwarf. Terran or no, he'd make sure they noticed him soon enough.

Lorcan's first attempt to summon the fire of *v'tana* brought flames that flickered at his fingertips, then died. He stopped, still in the open, and tried again. He focused his emotions into a starburst made of his honor, his desire for justice, and... nothing. After planting his feet more solidly, he pushed himself through one of the exercises he'd practiced as a child, trying to summon the warmth up from within him, but there was no answer. It was as though his *v'tana* had left him completely.

That was going to be a problem. His plan had relied on using the fires of his heart-flame to terrify the Terran Darkstars into compliance. At best, he'd crack a few heads, then Bryony was free to collect any of the criminals with active bounties for her own. It was a gift. Now though... He reached for the pistol he'd borrowed from Bryony's small shipboard armory.

"Not so fast, Big Red." The sound of a plasma capacitor charging made Lorcan freeze mid-twist. The speaker's voice was mechanical and steady. *Probably wearing a rebreather*, Lorcan realized. Manny was most popular as an aerosol, so it would be helpful not breathing in any leaks in the factory. At least not if you wanted your workers sober and safe on the job. Most syndicates, the Widow's included, didn't much care what happened to the source for their drugs, so long as the flow wasn't interrupted.

"How about you pull that pistol out, two fingers only, and toss it over here. And no funny stuff. You may be flame-proof,

but that won't stop this plasma from burning a hole clean through your torso."

"That's a myth," Lorcan said, while he carefully obeyed the instructions. At least if they were looking at him, they might not be watching the front of the factory, where Bryony was. "We're not fireproof. Most of us can use *v'tana* to shield ourselves against small flames, but that's hardly the same thing."

"I don't give a spacer's damn if you've got little green men in your blood that shoot ice beams at it. I'm just letting you know, I ain't seen a Devil ward off an old-fashioned blast of superheated plasma." He stepped forward and kicked the pistol out of the way. "Now hands on your head and shut up."

Lorcan slowly went to his knees, though he hadn't been asked to. It made Terrans more comfortable if they were taller than you, he'd noticed. "It's not too late you know. You could pretend you never saw me and get out of here, never look back. That'd be a lot safer for you. In fact—"

The butt of the plasma rifle knocked his teeth together and sent him into the dirt. He had enough time to notice the Darksun was indeed wearing a respirator before unconsciousness claimed him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BRYONY CREPT behind a pair of rusted-out cannister drums and tried to keep her idiotic smile from giving away her position. Sparring with Lorcan—physically or verbally—left her feeling breathless and giddy. It was a dangerous distraction, and one she could ill afford. She was too close to her goal to allow petty things like her emotions trip her up now.

So why were you flirting with him?

Because it makes him more likely to give me what I want. The answer didn't sound as convincing as it had before. He was attractive, certainly. No, who was she kidding, he was stellar-flare hot. Lorcan's attention was flattering, and she played to it. That's all it was. That's all it could be, until the Widow was dead.

But what then?

She'd never been close enough to achieving her goals to think about what came after, and the idea of the sudden emptiness left her feeling as unbalanced as one of Lorcan's dimpled smiles.

A door opened on the side of the building facing her, and one of the Terran criminals shouted to the guard on detail. "Corrus! You gotta see this. Guyrin caught a Malebrank sneaking around out back!" The guard gave a short, brutish snort that she assumed was a laugh, then flicked his still-lit stim into the dirt before following his friend inside.

Well, shit. The likelihood there was a second Malebrank just happening by a remote drug-processing factory on Thilles

CE8 was pretty slim. That meant Lorcan had been captured. She wasn't exactly a one-woman rescue squad, but she also wasn't about to let a handful of narco-dealers take away her best chance at vengeance. From the little bit she'd observed, these Darkstars seemed like the sort who would gloat for a while, maybe engage in a little light torture as a warm-up, instead of doing the smart thing and executing a possible threat. She hated the idea of leaving him in their control for too long—because he was her link to the Widow, nothing more—but she needed to head back to the ship. One woman was useless against a gang of marauders. One woman and her felyx, however, was a different story altogether.

By the time she had returned to her hiding place with Rue in tow, the guard—Corrus, apparently—was back at his post with a fresh stim in his mouth and his respirator down around his neck. Bryony carefully took Rue out of the rucksack she'd used to carry the felyx and set her on the ground. Rue's gem pulsed between black and red, her annoyance at being carried like a sack of me'elors. That changed when Bryony brought out the sighting laser. As soon as the red dot appeared on the dirt, Rue's attention was...well, laser focused.

Bryony moved the dot back away from the barrels, and Rue stalked after it, all six legs keeping the felyx low to the ground. Another quick curve back, and Bryony leaned out enough to trace the laser straight up onto Corrus's chest. The guard noticed the red dot and froze, a poor survival choice if he was expecting to get sniped by some distant killer. Which meant the panicked shriek he let out when Rue charged up and pounced all twelve kilos of herself onto his face was hilarious. Bryony ducked out from her hiding place and silenced the guard with a shot from her pistol. The drug-laced needles were designed to take someone down for an hour, give or take. That gave her an official time limit to freeing Lorcan and getting out.

She hid on one side of the door just as it burst open and one of the Darkstars stepped through. She pressed her flechette pistol behind his right ear. "Close the door. Hands on your head."

To his credit, the thug did as asked. Bryony slapped a pair of restraints on him and triggered the enzymatic hardener to lock them down. She leaned in close to whisper, “In accordance with Hegemonic bounty policy, you are bound and captured, blah, blah, blah.” Before the Darkstar could ask any questions, she lowered her pistol and shot him in the thigh. He grunted in pain, then crumpled to the ground beside his friend.

Those were the easy two, only four to ten more inside. She tossed a liver treat down to Rue, who crunched the piece of kibble with a rumble of pleasure. “Ready?”

The felyx eyed her suspiciously, gem shifting back into the blue-green swirl of mixed emotion. The sky above cracked as the first bolt of lightning arced above, and bryony felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“In the interest of speed, I’m going to take silence as assent, just so you know. Let’s do this.”

Fortunately, hunting bounties was not a profession that favored the incautious. She reached into her pocket, grabbed a scanner marble, and pried the door open enough to roll the silver ball through the gap. Inside, it would produce hypersonic clicks until it stopped rolling, reading the reflection and building a 3D image of the room on the other side which it would feed straight to her tablet. After counting to thirty, Bryony opened her tablet and checked the map. Two exits from the main room, and from the look of the image, no guards.

Two ways out was still bad, but a fifty percent chance of picking the right one was better than nothing. She pulled the door open the rest of the way, scooped up Rue in one arm, and ducked through. No shots came. *Score one for the marble.* Inside, lighting was provided by a string of hanging lights, probably wired to a solar panel on the roof of the facility. It was a quick and dirty solution, but it also kept unexpected power draw from attracting attention.

Down the hall on the right, she could hear voices. The drug cookers must think Lorcan had come alone. That was the only thing that would explain their sloppiness. Well, that and if they

were sampling their own wares. She set Rue down and left the felyx to her own devices. Ideally, Rue would spot some small vermin and chase it, making noise and distracting the criminals further, and the creature would come running when she shook the cannister of treats.

Halfway down the hall, she found what had probably been a break room when the facility had been operating legally. She took a moment to eavesdrop on the voices inside.

One, a deep baritone that reminded her of Lorcan's rumble, spoke first. "It's a lousy idea, keeping him alive. I don't know what the boss is thinking."

"You questioning his leadership?" The second voice was softer, but even without seeing them, Bryony could picture the person's cold smile, as though looking for an excuse to choose violence.

"You think the Red Widow's going to let any of us live if we damage her pet? I heard she's turned whole planets to glass for doing that."

Bryony bit the inside of her cheek to keep her reactions in check. She didn't know about whole planets, but the Widow had certainly taken out whole towns before. Even the traders who visited weren't safe.

"We haven't broken anything she'd consider essential. And besides, space is dangerous. Maybe his ship just gets lost and he doesn't make it home."

There was no way these two would be talking like that in front of Lorcan, so he clearly was elsewhere in the factory. She slipped past the half-open door and headed for the factory's main floor. She eased through a pair of swinging doors into a broad room that fit the bill: plenty of synthesizers and at least one pressure-packaging unit. She'd barely taken a step forward when the whine of a capacitor sounded just behind her left ear.

"I'm sorry, miss," the criminal said, his voice genteel even through the distortion of a respirator. "But this is a private party. I'm afraid I need to see your invitation."

Lorcan's jaw hurt. He was pretty sure that the two outermost fingers on his left hand had been broken. Worst of all, one of these idiots—he thought the Terran's name was Sinder or something like that—had removed Lorcan's horns and magnetized them to his belt buckle while cracking a joke about being horny. The first time, it had almost been funny. As they were on the fourth or fifth repetition of the joke, all Lorcan wanted to do was incinerate the guy for being painfully one-note. Unfortunately, they'd also zip-tied him to a chair, so his revenge fantasies would have to remain just that.

Honestly, he wasn't sure why they were keeping him alive. It wasn't like they could ransom him back to the Red Widow—Lilith would literally eat them for dinner. As soon as they'd sussed out he was here on the Widow's behest, the best bet would have been to kill him and make it look like an accident. One of them had even advocated that as a solution but had been shouted down by Horny Guy.

When they weren't beating him, Lorcan worked through every one of the practice drills he could remember in an effort to awaken his *v'tana*. While not every Malebrank had control over their inner flame, most had some kind of fire control. Among the males, he'd actually been considered a powerful shaper, a *Tanvir*, and the sudden loss of access to his element left him feeling cold in more ways than one. He tried to remember any cases where the *v'tana* had been lost and all he could think of were tales of dishonor.

That clearly wasn't it, as I dishonored myself years ago.

"Friends, we have a guest!" a voice shouted from near the door.

The cruel laughter of the other criminals expanded the pool of ice in Lorcan's gut. He didn't have to look over his shoulder to know what he'd see. And true to his fears, a moment later Bryony was shoved to the ground next to him. Hopeful eyes met his, clearly wondering if he had a plan. He'd had several;

they just all revolved around his ability to shape flames and keep himself from getting captured.

“You again?” he whispered. “Not that I’m counting, but it’s been ten hours.”

She blinked for a minute, and he saw the moment when her eyes narrowed and she understood what he’d said. “It only feels like ten,” she replied. “It’s actually eight.”

So, she’d subdued two of the criminals on her way in. That was...not great, but it was better than none.

“Do you two *know* each other?” Horny Guy said in a mocking voice. “Oh, this is wonderful.”

“It depends on how you mean know,” Bryony replied. “I’ve been chasing the bounty on this slippery slime-eel for the last three months. Every time I thought I had him, he got past me. I followed him here, wasn’t expecting to find him with you. Tell you what, you knock him out, and I’ll take him off your hands. Even split the bounty with you, since you did the hard part.”

It was all he could do not to smile. It was a good story, and no doubt would pass muster if they bothered to check if she was a guild-certified bounty hunter. Even better, it gave the Darkstars the out they needed to get rid of him and make it look like it wasn’t their fault. Pride and respect warred with each other over her quick read of the situation. He just couldn’t give in to the idea too easily or they’d be suspicious. “Trade me for her! I’ll tell the Widow to overlook this little enterprise of yours. Especially if you keep me out of the hands of a lawless bounty hunter.”

“You’d know what lawless looks like, you split-tongued excuse for a—”

“Enough!” Horny guy shouted. His voice echoed off the walls of the factory floor, and for a moment, drowned out the hiss-clunk of the machines packing gas canisters behind him. “No one is being exchanged for anyone. I’m in charge, and I say—”

“You’re in charge?” Bryony rolled her eyes as she stood up and dusted off the knees of her jumpsuit. “I’m sorry, I thought I was waiting for a real boss to hear me. If the top man is a guy wearing a pair of stolen devil-horns on his belt buckle, then I have to pick a different way to communicate.”

The thug who’d dragged her in locked his arms through her elbows to immobilize her, and Horny gave her a crack across the jaw. “Don’t interrupt your betters.”

Rage boiled in Lorcan’s gut. A fair fight was one thing, but you didn’t knock people around when they were defenseless. He struggled against his bonds, but they were just as secure as they were a moment earlier.

Meanwhile Bryony spat a goblet of blood on the floor and her round face split into a bloody-toothed grin. “My betters? Please. I have shoes smarter than you.”

It was perhaps the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. And he could remember her in that green dress, so that was saying a lot.

Horny Guy pulled out a hooked dagger that looked suspiciously like a Malebranki ceremonial knife, and leaned in. “Apparently, you need convincing.”

Bryony’s eyes focused on the dagger, and despite her aloof demeanor he could read the fear in every tense line of her body. He was *not* going to sit her and watch her die. Anger at his helplessness in the face of her fear was a blazing fire in his blood, one that only burned hotter as the criminal smirked at him with a menacing “Wait your turn.”

The familiar burn of the *v’tana* surged through his arms, and he felt the flames flicker and then incinerate his bonds before dying out. There wasn’t time to think about the implications, or the connections. He lunged forward and threw a punch at Horny Guy. The knife clattered out of his fingers in surprise, and Horny Guy stumbled backward off-balance.

Bryony bull-rushed into the man as he fell, knocking the wind out of him. Lorcan didn’t envy the man; he was already

familiar with her ground-fighting techniques, and his throat hurt in remembered sympathy.

He spun and charged the thug who had dragged her to the factory floor, a lean, hungry-looking man who had turned to run. His fist closed on the man's clothes, yanking the Darkstar backwards before tossing him to the floor. Instinct took over, Lorcan grabbed the man by the neck and lifted him, until he was breathing in his face. The sour smell of fear emanating from the Darkstar almost made him gag. Over Lorcan's shoulder there was a grunt and a wet pop as Bryony dislocated Horny's shoulder.

Horny's screams drew the man's panicked gaze.

"Look at me," Lorcan growled. "Don't look at him. You can't help him. You can't even help yourself." He tried once again to summon his *v'tana*, knowing how much flame could be used as an intimidation tactic. Unfortunately, whatever flash of the gift he'd shown seemed to have once again deserted him. He snapped his fingers instead, putting on his best menacing face. When the man pulled his terrified eyes back to Lorcan's face, Lorcan continued. "You don't manufacture your own Manny in the Red Widow's sector. You're allowed to traffic what she sends you to traffic and not a wisp more. Otherwise, she'll send me to find you again, and if I have to come to another stinking backwater that reeks of unwashed Terrans, I. Will not. Be happy. Am I clear?" He punctuated each sentence with a pop of the knuckles in his free hand.

The Darkstar nodded his head in assent, and Lorcan removed the man's pistol before setting him back on his feet. Like most Terran weapons, it felt small in his hand, though it had a spacer's modification—the trigger guard had been removed to allow a pressure-suited hand to still fire it.

Lorcan pointed the weapon back at its former owner. "In case I wasn't clear, you should run." The Darkstar turned to run, and this time got four or five steps away before a quiet cough from behind Lorcan sent a flechette into the man's hip. The thug took a few more steps then slumped to the concrete.

Lorcan turned to find Bryony on one knee above the unconscious body of Horny Guy. She looked at him and shrugged. “What. He’s worth good money. And someone ought to make a little off this whole venture.”

“That’s not why we’re here,” he grumbled, even as he admired her mercenary assumption that she’d get a chance to turn some bounties in. It didn’t matter that he’d planned to allow her to do just that, she’d made her own assumptions and taken charge. “Besides, one of them has to get away, so the Widow knows her message has gotten out, and yours is broken.”

“I don’t work for her.” Her face hardened, and she nodded at his hands. “You could have pulled the flames out sooner, by the way. I thought you were helpless in here.”

He had been, and when he checked again his *v’tana* remained completely inaccessible. Only the threat to her life had created anything like a response in him and that only happened when...*no*. “We can talk about it later. There’s still six more to deal with.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Okay... But now I have to bring it up again. Also, you keep losing these. I thought they were an honor thing or something.” She tossed his horns back to him, and he caught them in his hand.

“I think I’ll sterilize them before I put them back on. No telling where he’s been.” He tucked the horns into his pocket carefully and looked at the gun he’d stolen. “This could get messy.”

Her grin was pure malice wearing a cloak of temptation. “You really know how to please a girl.” She stuck the curved knife Horny Guy had threatened her with in her belt. “Let’s go.”

The loading dock opened, and two more Darkstars came into the building, then stopped in surprise as they took in the scene. There was a brief moment where Lorcan hoped that Bryony’s dart gun would take them both down silently, but then the one on the left screamed. The one on the right lifted

his wristcomp and shouted, “Intruder protocol one-one-alpha-one.”

A heartbeat after that, all the hells broke loose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BRYONY WINCED and fired a flechette into the Darkstar on the right. The thin ceramic needle hit him and a moment later sent the man into unconsciousness. At the same time, Lorcan fired his pistol at the other. The slugs both hit center of mass, and the man dropped dead.

So much for the element of surprise for getting out of here. Now everyone in the vicinity would be coming after them. Fortunately, by her count that should only be about four bodies.

One of the loading robots trundled in on its all-terrain treads, opened and closed its pincers menacingly, and started toward them. A string of whumps echoed through the facility, which made little sense until Lorcan shouted, “Grab a respirator! They set off canisters of Manny!”

She only had a passing familiarity with the drug, but overdosing was not something that seemed like a good idea. She yanked the respirator from around Horny Guy’s neck and settled it over her nose and mouth. The seal wasn’t perfect, but it would do.

She was about to confirm that Lorcan had done the same when the loader attacked.

One of the massive yellow forks slammed into the space where she’d been standing, and if she’d moved any slower, it would have crushed her. The faceplate on the loader-bot turned to follow her movement, impassive and inexorable.

Bryony fired her flechette pistol at it twice, but the ceramic needles just shattered against its metal hide. *Don’t know what*

that was trying to prove. It's not like the thing has blood or a nervous system to be affected. She holstered her weapon and charged in close. Most fighters had reach on her, the disadvantage of her height. Getting inside their area of ability was typically the key.

It was here as well. The robots were designed to approach a pallet at a certain distance, grip it, and move it somewhere else. They weren't designed to grasp or even touch themselves, a design flaw that she took full advantage of.

As she hugged herself against the robot's torso, she spotted two more of the units rumbling in from the back of the factory floor. "Did you think to count the loaders?" she shouted, though the respirator made her voice sound tinny and flat.

If Lorcan heard her, he was too busy with his own issues to respond. She turned her focus toward trying to stop the robot in front of her. It spun quickly, in a clear effort to shake her free, or at least move her to where its pincers could grip her. Bryony had a frightening flash of what those industrial clamps might do to a person's torso, or skull, and clung harder.

The robot began rolling toward the two new arrivals. *That definitely puts a time limit on this strategy.* One of the other loaders would be able to easily pluck her from inside the first one's reach. She pulled up the knife she had claimed off the ground and used it to pry off the access panel in the loader's side. Inside were a number of important-looking wires and hoses that would take an advanced degree to understand.

She stabbed the knife in and slashed through anything that could be cut.

Oil and slick hydraulic fluid coated her hand. The loader lurched suddenly, turning in place as one of its treads died and the arm on the same side went limp. With the other loaders still on an approach trajectory, Bryony decided this was the best chance she would get and rolled outside the robot's circle of reach.

She searched the factory floor for Lorcan, but between the haze of Manny and smoke he was nowhere to be seen. Her heart gave a lurch. *No. He's got a respirator. He's fine. Go get*

Rue. The other two loaders shifted their focus from their companion to her, changing direction and forcing her decision.

She ran for the door she'd entered the room through, hoping to retrace her steps. An explosion somewhere behind her shook the floor, and she tripped. Bryony started to tuck her shoulder so she could roll out of the fall when a powerful hand grabbed the back of her coveralls. A scream tore its way out of her throat so quickly, she wasn't even sure it was her own voice at first. She struggled against the grip, but it held firm and carried her toward the exit. Only then did she look up and realize it was Lorcan, not one of the robots. To be fair, it was an honest mistake. A man hadn't been able to pick her up one-handed since...puberty? Maybe there was something to be admired about Malebrank men after all.

He made sure to meet her gaze before setting her feet back down. "Sorry, I would have asked permission, but I didn't want you to fa—"

She cut him off with a squeeze around the neck and a quick kiss on the cheek. The crimson skin was smooth, hot against her lips. She could feel the faint impression of scales, even though they weren't visible to her eyes. The temptation to linger, to learn a little more, or just to allow him to support her weight—which he was doing easily and without complaint—was almost overwhelming. She pushed away before she got caught in his gravity well. "We need to find Rue before we can go."

His unfocused gaze sharpened as her words penetrated his brain. "You brought your felyx in here with you? Are you mad, Terran?"

"My original backup got his dumb ass captured, so I had to come up with something, alright?" She stomped down the hall with her flechette pistol out in front of her while her other hand dug for the canister of liver treats in her thigh pocket. One of the two thugs she'd heard arguing in the break area stepped into the hall and promptly ate a pair of flechettes for her trouble. A double hit shouldn't be an overdose, but she didn't know how well it would mix with the Manny once that reached the hall.

She also didn't care. That was on the Darkstars and their stupid intrusion protocols. *Who in the hell blows up a drug lab rather than get captured?* She shook the canister and was immediately rewarded with a curious *mrowl?* from the galley. She pushed through the door, expecting another one of the criminals, but only found Rue sitting in the middle of a table with an empty bowl in front of her. The felyx's gem glowed a self-satisfied indigo. "Unbelievable. Is there anyone in the sector you *can't* trick into feeding you?"

Rue gave her the sort of innocent look that had no doubt worked its magic on the woman Bryony had just shot. Fortunately, she had experience resisting that particular expression. She scooped up the felyx under one arm and met the incredulous Lorcan back in the hall. When he stared at Rue for a heartbeat too long, she snapped, "What?"

Dammit, his lopsided grin was adorable. "Her gem. She is *not* happy with you at the moment."

Sure enough, the peaceful colors had darkened into an almost black red—a sure sign of displeasure in felyces. Bryony chuckled. "Yeah, you get used to it." She gestured up the hall with her pistol and stepped over the fallen Darkstar. "Lead the way."

Lorcan pushed up the hall ahead of her, while she walked backwards, covering their escape with broad arcs of her weapon. They probably looked ridiculous, but they made it outside without incident.

Lorcan indicated the two unconscious criminals leaned against the front of the building. "This your handiwork?"

She nodded. "Drag them away from the building? If the whole place burns down I don't want them killed."

"You're not taking them in?" He grabbed one leg from each and walked away from the building with them. "Thinking about a career change?"

"Are you going to carry them back? Not that you're not capable, but are you willing to delay reporting to the Widow so I can turn them in for whatever meagre bounty is out there?"

These two are nobody.” Part of her hated the idea of losing out on even the small bounty, but the sooner she could finish her business with the Widow, the sooner Lorcan could be gone, and she could go back to the safe, lonely life she’d had.

And gods did that sound pathetic.

He nodded and moved to drag the two Darkstars away from the building. Once they were settled, Lorcan reached for his hip and winced.

“What?” she asked.

“My burner is in my ship, which is decidedly not here.” He fixed her with a pointed glare. “Let me see the knife.”

“You can’t kill them—”

He gave her an arch look. “Obviously. I need them alive too. But I also need to make sure they know the Widow was responsible for this.”

She handed him the blade, and to her surprise, he sliced open one of his fingers before using the blood to draw the Widow’s sigil on each man’s face.

Seeing it again made her think immediately of the ruined field around that nameless outpost on Cara’s Forge. Sour bile filled her mouth. *What if this was a setup? What if he really did fake his credentials, and now you’re aiding the people you swore to hunt down?*

He handed the blade to her and blinked at her curious expression. “What?”

She stumbled back, suddenly unsure of her footing as it felt like the galaxy twisted around her. Bryony spun to return to the ship, going through the measures she’d taken to confirm his identity. She’d found the number herself, had *Persephone* make the calls and confirm biometric data. No. She wasn’t misjudging him. She wasn’t that sloppy. She couldn’t be.

And the icy disappointment in her heart? Just concerns she’d made a mistake, not anything like a regret. It wasn’t like she needed him to be worthy of the kiss she’d given him in the factory.

She crested the rise As lightning from the electrical storm started to slam into the ground again. When she glanced toward the factory, black smoke rolled from the loading dock, and the hover truck that had been outside was gone now. No doubt the survivors had grabbed what Manny they had and fled. As bad as the storm looked to get, she should do the same.

Lorcan pulled himself up behind her. “They won’t be restarting operations here for a while.”

Rue *chirruped* her agreement from Bryony’s shoulder, and she reached up to give the felyx another liver treat. It definitely seemed like the factory was out of commission for the foreseeable future.

She took a deep breath and let it out as slowly as she could. “A job well done then. Let’s go tell your boss about it so I can kill her.”

He looked at her, mouth open, but she didn’t respond as she marched back to her ship.

True to her word, Bryony didn’t ask the question again until Lorcan was on the ship. *At least she waited until after she secured her pistol.* Though, honestly, it was only by heartbeats—as soon as she’d closed the weapons locker with a click, she turned on him. “I kept my promise. Now what in the nine hells happened with your fire, Devil-man?” The corridor that served as the armory and the entry to the bridge was narrow. Her anger filled it. “I risked my life because I thought you were in danger. I risked *Rue’s* life!”

Her voice cracked on the felyx’s name, and it felt like one of his ribs broke in sympathy. “I’m glad you did, since I actually was in danger.”

“It’s not dangerous if you could have burned your way free whenever it was dramatically appropriate.” Her finger stabbed into his chest roughly, though he scarcely noticed the impact. The fear and upset on her face cut him far deeper.

“I couldn’t have done that.” *Without you*, his brain added unhelpfully. “For whatever reason, I couldn’t summon my *v’tana* until I saw you in danger. Even then it faded once I was able to help you.” He knew what the next words out of her mouth would be and dreaded them. He’d been asking himself the same question since they left the factory.

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” *Liar*. There was a reason the word *v’tana* meant heart’s fire, after all. The Malebranki were a people ruled by their passions, and the *v’tana* followed the same instinct, tying its strength to the passions of its wielder. Most of its best practitioners were ascetics who treasured honor above all else, or matriarchs in defense of their families. Like it or not, his heart had chosen, and his flame had followed.

She eyed him suspiciously, and he knew she didn’t believe the answer any more than he did. “So is it all better now? No more issues?”

“It doesn’t appear to be, no.” Lorcan closed his eyes and counted to five before continuing. “I’ve been trying to reignite a flame since we broke free and haven’t had any luck.”

He could see the moment those pieces slid into place. Her eyes widened, then narrowed. “So, I need to be in danger for you to get your flame back? Not happening, Devil-man. Not even if you ask nicely.”

She flattened her palm on his chest to push him out of the way, and he reached up to catch it between both of his hands. “Technically, that’s not the only way it could come back, but I won’t ask you.”

“What?” Her pupils flared open as he pressed her hand between his, her skin, so deliciously cool against his own.

“Kiss me.”

Her gaze darted to his mouth, and she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue; the subconscious gesture nearly undid him.

She blinked and shifted to meet his eyes. “Nice try, but I’m not that stupid.”

He nodded, a surprising lance of pain burning in his chest. He forced himself to his usual carefree smile. What was an undercover operative but a really good actor, after all? He could look unphased and blow this off. “Well, it was worth a shot. Anyway, thanks for the help ba—”

Bryony’s mouth crashed onto his. That was the only description of it. She leapt up to get to head height with him, arms wrapped around his neck as she plundered his mouth as thoroughly and passionately as he’d ever experienced. After a moment of off-balance surprise, he hooked his arms under her ass, holding her in place against his chest. The coolness of her body served as a balm against the fires that raged in his blood.

No, not balm, but fuel. Flame scalded him from the inside, an inferno he struggled to contain. Her fingers locked into his hair at the nape of his neck, tugging his head back so she could kiss him deeper. He groaned, and she dug her ankles into his hips and pressed herself against the wall. With her thighs wrapped around him, he couldn’t miss the answering purr in her chest or the growing heat of her arousal. For that matter, he knew she had no illusions about his own desire, since she squirmed delightfully against him. The image of burying himself in her welcoming softness ripped through him, and it was all he could do not to spill in his pants like an oversexed teenager.

Fire engulfed his hand.

He felt it before it erupted, a building pressure in the heat of his blood, and he clamped down on his *v’tana*, bleeding the temperature down until the flame wreathing his fingers was a dull blue. Still, he had to brace Bryony against the wall with his hips so he could move his hand away from her skin. He couldn’t risk hurting her.

She broke the kiss and looked at the fire dancing between his fingers. Unable to resist the urge to show off, Lorcan shaped the *v’tana* into a sphere he could balance on his fingertips.

“Well, I stand corrected,” Bryony said.

“Technically, I’m holding you—”

“Shut up.” Her soft, throaty laughter rippled against him. “I thought you were just angling for some action; I didn’t think you really expected kissing you would do the trick.”

He blinked. “I can’t decide if I’m hurt or offended that you think I need to resort to trickery to get some ‘action.’ Not everyone locks me in the brig after they pick me up.”

“By that admission,” she said with a grin, “enough do that it’s a known problem. You should have been better prepared for me.”

“I blame the dress.” It had been absolutely sinful, and the memory of it combined with her kiss made him weak in the knees. He needed to be better than that, or at least make certain she had the whole story first. He set her down carefully, immediately missing the cool feel of her pressed against him. He took a breath and stepped back, at least as far as he could in the narrow corridor. “And I owe you an explanation.”

He didn’t miss the brief flash of annoyance on her face when he set her down, even though she covered it quickly with uncertainty. “Shit. You’re married. Or whatever the Malebranki equivalent is.”

Lorcan coughed out an involuntary chuckle. “*Lortana*. Heart-bonded. And no.” It was a grueling and involved ceremony, and even long-time lovers didn’t always go through with the process. “No, that’s not it.” He took a deep breath while she stared at him, letting him complete the thought in his own time—a courtesy that he appreciated. “I... How much do you know about *v’tana*?”

“I’m Terran, as you’ve pointed out, so...not much. Assume anything I do know is hearsay.”

That was a more honest assessment than he’d expected. “Our deepest desire is what fuels our inner flame. It’s what we lean into when Malebranki summon and control their fire. For some, the act is so innate it’s subconscious, for others it’s a more active practice.”

“So it’s tied to your sex drive?” She furrowed her brow. “Because that seems like a lot of variance.”

He swallowed his disappointment. It was such a common mistake. “For some, yes. But this is desire meaning the thing you are always striving to keep and increase. So yes, for some it’s pleasure. For others, honor. For others, especially those who are bonded, it can be a partner, a specific person rather than an ideal. For me it’s been justice, for as long as I can remember. I lie too much for it to be honor, and I’m too picky about my partners for it to be pleasure.”

Bryony offered a quiet snort. “Big same.”

“Which is why I was surprised when my *v’tana* had dried up. My drive to find justice hasn’t changed any. And when the flame returned to defend you... That’s not something that should happen that quickly. Or with someone with whom I’ve not...” He let the sentence hang, searching for a better description, but all he could offer was, “With whom I’ve not been intimate.”

She folded her arms across her chest, the act causing her cleavage to fill the open neck of her flight suit. Keeping his gaze on her face became immeasurably more difficult. “What are you trying to say? That I’m your heart’s desire or something? Shit, are *we married?*”

He chuckled. *A devil could dream...* “No. Simply that, for whatever reason, my heart has focused on you. Something that your kiss confirmed when my *v’tana* resurfaced.” He gave himself another pause to steady his nerves. “Because my *v’tana* has tied itself to you, it could make me unusually possessive. Particularly if we were intimate. It’s safer for you if you don’t get involved with me.”

He braced himself for her response, but all that came was a quiet. “I see.”

CHAPTER NINE

KISSING LORCAN HAD BEEN A MISTAKE. A huge mistake. A spur-of-the-moment decision to catch him off-guard and get him out of her system, which had backfired horribly. Her nerves were still on fire from the heat of his touch, and her body ached to get back into close contact with him. Now she understood why the devil was associated with temptation: she could imagine all manner of sins with the Malebrank and could be inspired to invent all new ones as well.

But...

He wanted to be honest with her, and she owed it to him to pay attention, rather than objectify him. She had to admit, at face value it sounded like he was trying to spin the Malebranki version of her being his destiny, or some other fated-to-be-mated bullshit. She knew there were a few species around who used that as an excuse to get laid, but Lorcan was doing exactly the opposite. He was warning her away. And clearly counter to his own libido if the bulge straining the front of his trousers was any indication.

And she'd rewarded him with a deeply skeptical "I see."

Bryony tried again. "I mean, I understand as well as I can, from a Terran perspective. And I know all about having a heart that does what it wants, consequences be damned." She'd fallen in love with every person she'd taken to her bed. It was why she didn't have one-night stands. Her heart didn't draw neat lines around physical stimulation, much to her chagrin. "I was coming off a bad breakup when I was living with my sister. Bad for me, that is. I guess for the other person it meant

nothing. He got to check the ‘big tits’ box on his dance card.” *Or the curvy girl one*, her brain added unhelpfully. She tried to shrug away the bitterness in her mouth, then she noticed his fist. His hand had clenched so tight it vibrated; the knuckles blanched to pale pink from the pressure.

Lorcan’s voice was so close to a growl as to be unintelligible. “I would hunt this man down just for the crime of not knowing what he was throwing aside, but clearly he was unworthy of you.”

That was... It would be wrong to say intoxicating, wouldn't it? She’d thought she was over Balan until she’d brought him up, and now the idea of Lorcan chasing him down on her behalf was—a little scary. But also, definitely a positive for the “may get possessive” column.

She licked suddenly dry lips and watched his eyes zero in on the tip of her tongue. “He wasn’t and isn’t worth it. Entertaining as the thought might be. But thank you for the offer. And for telling me.”

She stepped forward and leaned her face against his chest, inhaling the smell of him. Almost...woody. Like smoke from a warm fire. It made her think of welcoming hearths and places of comfort, which was madness, because she lived on a spaceship, and the only thing more dangerous than fire in the closed confines of the ship was a hole out to vacuum.

The heart has reasons, of which reason knows not. Her sister had said that ancient quote should be her motto. That she should get it tattooed on her ribs, or her wrist, or somewhere she couldn’t miss it. The memory stabbed a gasp of pain from her lungs, and she choked back a sob.

Lorcan’s hand on her back was warm, tender. He rubbed small circles between her shoulder blades, careful to keep the pressure light enough she never forgot she could pull away if she wanted.

She didn’t want to. If that made her weak, then in this moment she was weak. It felt like she’d been so busy driving to avenge her sister, she hadn’t stopped to grieve.

“I am still sorry he hurt you,” he growled.

“It’s not him. I—” She swallowed, distracted by the damp spot she was leaving on his shirt. “Just hold me.”

He opened his mouth to say something, and she reached up to lay a finger across his lips. Lorcan went silent, just holding her, as she’d requested. For these few stolen moments, she could pretend his words about her being his heart’s fire or whatever were true; pretend he cared about her and wasn’t just using her in the same way she was using him. She could pretend the rest of the galaxy didn’t matter.

It was a terrible idea. The memories of painful lessons learned were still sour in her mouth, and even knowing that, she said it. “Show me he was wrong.”

“I just told you about—”

“And it’s cute you think I can’t accept responsibility for my own actions.” She jabbed her finger into the tear stain she’d left on his chest. She whispered, afraid any louder would break whatever this moment had become. “Show me he was wrong.”

Lorcan nodded and picked her up as though she weighed no more than Rue, with not even a grunt of effort. The trek back to her room was mercifully short, but at the end of it he stood her on the chaise like it was a pedestal.

His fingers moved closer to the zip of her coveralls, and he asked, “May I?” She nodded, and his roughened voice choked out, “I need you to say it.”

Bryony swallowed against the unexpected lump in her throat. He wanted her participation, not simply her permission, and while she appreciated his checking for consent, there were too many lights on for her to feel comfortable taking her clothes off. “*Persephone*, lights off.”

“*Persephone*, lights at fifty percent,” he growled in response. The lights cut then rose back to half-brightness, more than enough to see the seriousness on his face. “You want me to show you he was wrong? Then you can’t hide your beauty in darkness. You should shine, like a beacon.”

Her cheeks heated, and she laughed uncomfortably. “You get that I’m a sure thing, right? You don’t have to sweet-talk me.”

His breath was a blaze of air against her ear as he leaned in. “When I sweet-talk you, *tarzu-ma*, it will be to tell you how delicious you feel clenched around my cock.”

Need shot through her, leaving a shiver of delicious anticipation in its wake. What was he waiting for? Then she remembered. Her vocal consent. “Undress me,” she said, and, feeling a rush of heady power after asking for what she wanted, added, “but you have to undress too.”

He smiled. “As you say.” He stepped back from her and peeled his shirt over his head. Muscles stood out in high definition under the scarlet expanse of his skin, but even from the short distance he’d given her, she could see the network of scars and damage that laced over him. It was easy to pick out a plas-scar on his shoulder, and the mouthwatering lines of his abdomen were interrupted by a jagged tear of unknown origin. She’d seen the scars on his knuckles, but his body was a road map of violence done and suffering received.

He was beautiful.

She unzipped her flight suit as Lorcan took a step toward her and tried to deflect his hungry eyes with humor. “No sexy underwear, in case you’re hoping for that. These things need all the architectural support.” Bryony pulled her arms free and let the top of her flight suit drop away, leaving her decidedly unromantic bra, with all its hooks and underwires.

“You’re beautiful,” was all he managed to whisper before crashing into her like a meteor. She’d never had a lover ignore her breasts once they were on display—even dressed, men saw little else about her, other than her size—but Lorcan instead claimed her mouth with a possessive hunger that would have made her knees falter were she not so completely supported by him. She parted her lips, and he was there, his tongue delicious against hers, the heat of him covering her skin like a blanket. Her fingers tangled in the hair at the back of his skull, while

his hands slid down to curve over her backside and pull her tightly against him.

It wasn't enough. She broke the kiss and her grip on him long enough to fold her arms behind herself and undo the column of hooks. She couldn't hide the sigh of relief as the bra came open, and Lorcan laughed softly against her neck. "Better?"

She tugged the bra forward and off, pressed her skin against the unyielding heat of his body, and sighed again. "You have no idea."

He leaned his forehead against hers, and she could feel the two horns as they pressed against the top of her skull. "Do you want me to take them off?"

Bryony smoothed her palm along the heavy angle of his jaw. "That's up to you. Do what makes you comfortable."

Lorcan tugged off the short, stubby horns with a self-deprecating chuckle that rumbled through her where they touched. "Then with you I'd rather be me, instead of the person I'm supposed to be."

The admission heated her cheeks, but she was also flattered. At least until he distracted her with another kiss that seemed determined to sear itself into her memories.

"Any man," he whispered, as he nipped and kissed his way back to the corner of her jaw, "who failed to appreciate you for the amazing, beautiful woman you are..." the kisses continued onto her neck, and she dug her fingers into his shoulders as he hit a particularly sensitive spot and sent a shimmer of pleasure through her, "...isn't worthy of the title."

His kisses trailed lower, into the valley between her breasts, his hands cupping her just enough to allow him to thumb their tips to pebbled, taut peaks. Lorcan murmured something in the Malebrank language as he knelt, his broad, heated palms shaping her hips as he pushed the rest of her flight suit down, leaving her exposed to his gaze.

She placed a hand on his head, and he looked up at her, past belly and breasts that she'd so often hated, and the

wonder in his gaze nearly undid her. “You don’t have to—”

“Nonsense,” he said, voice thick with hunger. “I’ve dreamt of little else.” He punctuated his statement by covering her with his mouth, broad hand supporting her as his tongue slicked through her folds. Somehow, he managed to be both gentle and demanding, and she opened her stance to give him more access. The heat of his body became less noticeable as warmth filled her skin. She had to keep a hand on his head for balance, but he never let her feel unsupported, even as her knees buckled and pleasure exploded through her nerves like a lightning strike.

She realized he was holding her completely, his arms and shoulders lifting her when she would have fallen and keeping his wickedly talented mouth exactly where he wanted it. When she was sensate enough to form words, the best she could offer was a quiet, “Wow.”

Lorcan laughed and grinned up at her, and even in the half-light she could see the shine of her arousal on his face. “Wow? Oh *tarzu-ma*. I’m just getting started.”

CHAPTER TEN

RUE HOPPED up on the galley counter to watch him, so Lorcan appeased the felyx with a dried liver tidbit from the can. Her gem flashed deep purple in appreciation, and he reached out to ruffle the fur on the back of her neck.

“What are you doing?”

He turned and smiled when he saw Bryony. The satin robe she’d pulled around herself left little to the imagination. *Especially when you’ve seen so much of her already.* “Is she not allowed to have a treat?”

“Not the felyx, Devil-man.” Was he wrong or did he detect a hint of warmth in the nickname? “You. What are *you* doing?”

“I’m cooking. I would have thought that was obvious.” Not that the galley—such as it was—was especially well equipped, or even stocked for such an endeavor. He’d pulled together what he could, using powdered eggs and milk to make a thin batter, and creating a makeshift griddle by laying one of the metal trays across the central heating element.

“How?” she asked, voice incredulous. She stepped up next to him and ran a hand over the skin above his waistband, leaving a trail of cool shivers behind. “Are those pancakes?”

He wrinkled his nose at her. “These are *namala*, like the first Fire Lord made for his lover, the sun. I don’t know what a Pam-cake is.” He flipped the first one he’d poured, when he was checking the batter. It had turned a beautiful golden. He scooped it off the tray and laid it in front of Rue. “You be careful. That’s hot.”

Rue purred appreciatively, the rumble pulsing in time with her amethyst gem. She also ignored his warning and tried to gulp the too hot *namala* in one bite. Lorcan obliged her by tearing it into smaller pieces so it could cool.

“How come she gets the first one?”

“Because she helped me cook. Sorry. Rules of *namala*.” He piled the remainder onto a plate and handed them to her. “You can have these, though.”

Bryony did a little dance that made his heart do strange, painful things. “I didn’t know we had anything to even make these.”

“Honestly, I was as surprised as you. The galley on your ship is...”

“Oh, it’s horrible. But I might have the perfect thing to zhuzh them up hidden down here.” She set her plate down, then knelt to rummage through the cabinet. After a moment she looked up at him, her robe gaping scandalously. “And no funny ideas.”

Lorca smiled down at her. “Trust me, my ideas are all completely serious. Also, you put clothes on.”

She tugged at the leg of his boxers playfully. “So did you.”

“Yes, but that’s because hot oil and my genitals do not make a welcome combination.” He poured a fresh set of *namala* onto the griddle and set the batter aside.

She stood, holding a clear bag filled with red pebbles. “Part of me says that makes sense. Part of me says, if the oils’s not too hot...” Her wistful half-smile let him know exactly what she was thinking, and suddenly he was less interested in food than he had been. She leaned past him and sprinkled some of the pebbles into each of the fresh *namala* he’d just poured. “This is the perfect excuse to use these freeze-dried raspberries.”

“What have you done?”

“Look, I don’t know what the Malebranki penchant is, but Terrans? We put fruit in our pancakes, and it’s considered

amazing. It makes me wish we had some chocolate.”

Chocolate, he knew. Earthy and bitter, but also rich and delicious. If Terrans were right about chocolate, he decided, he could trust her about adding fruit to *namala*. Still, he had a role to play, so he mock-bridled. “I told you, these aren’t pancakes.”

“We both know they are, really.” She hip-checked him, collected her plate, and added some of the seasoned meat he’d found. “You even know to have bacon with them. Any question about our cultures being distantly related are officially over. Anybody who makes pancakes after sex gets to be an honorary Terran. Them’s the rules.”

He laughed as he collected his own plate and moved to stand next to her at the narrow bar that served as an eating area. “Technically, our culture is older. It’s more likely that anyone who makes *namala* is allowed honorary status as a Malebrank.”

“In your dreams.” She pointed a forkful at him. “This? Is pure Old Earth.”

He took a bite and was proud of his self-control, which stopped him from making an audible groan of pleasure. The raspberries were a decadent addition, melting into a burst of sweetness and acidity that managed to elevate the taste of the *namala* into something sublime.

When he opened his eyes, she was smiling at him. “See? I was right.”

“You were right.” It was an easy admission in this case. “Somehow.”

“Call it a Terran-Malebrank joint venture.” Her touch drifted lazily across his back again. “Two great tastes taste great together.”

He could easily remember the taste of her, both before and after he’d been inside her, and couldn’t argue with the sentiment. A knot of desire twisted in his groin, and he wondered how long they could delay the return to Lilith’s hidden base. Forever would be good, but also not nearly long

enough. Unfortunately, Lilith would also come looking for him. She accepted betrayal even less than failure.

“Speaking of cross-cultural cooperation, how are we going to handle the Red Widow? How are you planning to sneak me in?”

He managed to keep his profanity to himself, barely. “It’s better to not plan too intensely.”

“Whoa,” she laughed. “For a minute, I thought you were a Malebrank.”

He snapped a flame to life between his fingertips. “Would you prefer me to prattle on about honor, or quote Al’kheri’s maxims?” Not that he could—he knew the most popular ones, of course, but the Maxims had always had more pull with the great houses, who could afford to have space for honor and legacy, where the lesser families had to focus on practical things, like eating. “Or perhaps as a Terran, you should go about laying claim to everything that already has residents.”

She had the good taste to look chagrined. “Okay, point made. Though I’d argue that Terrans earned that stereotype through their imperialist tendencies. So, unless you want me to lay claim to you—”

“Again.”

“*Again*,” she agreed. “I was thinking you could bring me in as one of the Darkstars, looking to apologize for the group’s overstepping of boundaries.”

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “That could work. She likes to see her rivals grovel before she kills them.”

“Exactly. So, you smuggle me in with a weapon, and *pop*.” She made an imaginary pistol with her fingers. “No more Red Widow.”

It would never be as easy as Bryony thought—Lilith hadn’t reached her position through stupidity or being unaware of threats—but he also recognized that desire for revenge and knew she wouldn’t be deterred. Ultimately, this was the reminder he needed. All he was to Bryony was a tool. A

means to an end. Vengeance pushed out everything else. Still, he should at least try.

“I don’t want to be an ass about this, but she won’t even remember sending people to the planet where your sister died. I know what it meant to you, but for her, it was just business. A name on a chart.”

A cloud darkened Bryony’s eyes, and she set the fork down on her plate. Her voice was as cold as the void of space outside their little ship. “She’ll remember, when I’m done. And then she won’t.”

There was a Terran saying, “He who seeks revenge should dig two graves.” He’d not given it much thought before, but now, he could see how it was killing Bryony. How there was *nothing* else.

Lorcan sighed quietly. “Have you thought about what you’ll do when it’s over?”

Rue walked along the counter and began eyeing their plates jealously. He reached out and stoked the felyx’s head quietly and waited for Bryony to answer.

“Let’s get through the thing first,” she said finally. “There’s all the time in the world to figure out what comes after.”

The words, innocent enough, cut through the haze of endorphins and dopamine that had filled his morning. She had no plans because she didn’t care if she lived or died. Only that she punished Lilith. His teeth ground together. For a brief moment, he’d entertained thoughts that they might...but there was no place for him in her life.

Just like Lilith wouldn’t accept his loyalty being given to anyone else. In the end, it would make everything easier. And he could go back to gathering data on the Red Widow, until the marshals felt like they had enough evidence to act. Whenever that might be. Hopefully, he’d have enough left of his own soul by the time it was done. “I’ll go give coordinates to *Persephone*.”

He stacked the plates and carried them back to the recycler, to Rue's rather noisy dismay, and tried to ignore the cold, greasy lump that his *namala* had become.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BRYONY DISTRESSED HER TOP, hitting the seams with a wire brush from engineering—his suggestion, so she looked like the more down-on-their-luck Darkstars—and tried to figure out where things had gone wrong. Lorcan was saying all the right things, and stars knew he could certainly *do* all the right things. But no matter how close she got to him physically, it felt like his brain was in another sector.

As much as it shouldn't, it hurt.

Not because she hadn't been shelved by lovers before; it was unusually common in her experience. No, it hurt because she had expected better of Lorcan. For all that he claimed honor was an inconvenience, he genuinely seemed to care about her. So why he had fallen back into sullen silence and only the most perfunctory conversations was a complete mystery.

The wire bristles caught the seam and unraveled part of it. Fortunately, she had an old pair of trousers that wouldn't need any additional work to look threadbare. She held up the shirt in front of the recessed lighting in the machining room and decided that the wear she'd added looked natural enough. She was tempted to put it on, if only to see if the ruined fabric might entice Lorcan into being less distant.

So of course, he chose that moment to check on her. She didn't even need to turn to see him, the heat of his presence at her back was enough. Even silent, he swelled to fill all the available space in a room, leaving her all too aware of where he stopped and she started. It only highlighted her frustration

with having gotten attached, and with having expected better of him without any evidence. Someday she'd learn.

“We're coming out of nullspace. You should get ready.”

“What do you think I've been doing?” she snapped. “Teaching Rue to play chess?”

His face softened for a moment, a flash of unexpected pain that made her regret her harsh tone, before settling back into the neutral mask he had worn for most of their “relationship.” “That brings up a valid point. What do you want to do with Rue?”

Bryony hadn't given it much thought and had just assumed that the felyx would stay on the ship while she dealt with the Red Widow. “What would you suggest?”

A deep furrow creased the space between his brows, and he exhaled slowly. “In this case, I'd bring her with you. Whatever else you may think of her, Lilith has a soft spot for animals. Plus, it will give me a chance to keep an eye on Rue while you're imprisoned. You don't want the people who work for her to be surprised when they search the ship.”

“Imprisoned? I thought she'd bring me to her directly?” Except that of course she wouldn't. The Red Widow would want to humiliate her, remind her of who held the power in the relationship between the two syndicates. Again, it was what she would do in the crime lord's place. The apology came after victory had been enforced. “In that case there's a carrier in my quarters. Good luck getting Rue into it, though.”

He took a step back from the door to the room, leaving her space to breathe. “A lot of what comes next is going to be... what's the Terran idiom? By your ass?”

Bryony laughed in spite of herself. She knew he was baiting her, that his grasp of Terran was far better than he sometimes played at. “By the seat of my pants? Or pulled out of your ass? Two different things.”

“We will need to adjust the plan quickly as information changes.”

“Seat of the pants, then.” She thinned her lips before they could smile. “What are the biggest concerns?”

“I’ve been gone long enough that she may decide to just kill us both and be done.”

“Remove her own Sting?” She saw him flinch at the use of his title, and wished she’d said it differently. “She wouldn’t do it outright. She’d want you to explain yourself first.”

Lorcan nodded. “It’s disturbing how much you think like her.”

“You only say that because we’re both attracted to you.” Despite keeping her tone jovial, the admission brought a kernel of protective, jealous rage to blaze in her chest. Even if he’d made his position clear, her stupid heart hadn’t given up on him. And that annoyed her most of all. “Go. I need to get changed before we come out of null in case they scan us.”

He opened his mouth, as though he might say something else, then just nodded and walked up the hall, leaving her alone to stew in her thoughts.

By the time they came out of nullspace, her mood hadn’t improved any. Even Rue skittered out of her path, the gem in the felyx’s forehead pulsing a dull amber in distress. The animal was almost as obvious about avoiding her as Lorcan. Unlike the felyx, there was one place he couldn’t avoid. She walked onto the cramped bridge, where he sat in the nav station. He’d put on the clothes she’d captured him in, the black shirt stretched across a chest that she hated having such fond memories of.

When he glanced up, she cut off anything he might say with a sharp, “Have they spotted us?”

His gaze raked her up and down, taking in the distressed clothing, and her overall attempt at poor-criminal chic. It must have passed his muster, because he gave a curt nod and turned back to the display at his station. “Almost certainly. She hasn’t

hailed yet, but this isn't one of her ships. I was just about to broadcast on one of their reserved frequencies, with your permission, Captain."

Bryony narrowed her eyes. The sudden formality was the last straw. "Granted, *Marshal*."

If he'd already opened the comms, it would probably doom them both, but dammit, his pulling away *hurt*. He winced at the ice in her voice, so at least they were both smarting for his bad decisions. Misery loved company and all that. He touched a few controls on the station and announced, "Widow's Nest, Widow's Nest, this is Azonir. Passcode alpha-zero-gamma-two."

Silence, broken only by static from stellar radiation, was the response. Her stomach clenched as the seconds ticked on, and she expected *Persephone* to report a missile lock any moment. Then a voice, husky and whiskey-burned, cut through the ship's channel. "Azonir, my sweet. It's about time you got back. What is that miserable garbage scow you're in? Does it even have visual comms?"

He hit mute and looked back at her. "Do you trust me?"

The gall. She let out a slow breath, angry with herself for being upset that he'd turned out just like every other man she'd met. "Do I have much choice?"

"Not really, so let me do the talking." He released the mute. "It took me a moment to figure out, switching to visual now." He tapped the panel, and the display lit up with the face of a Malebranki woman of indeterminate age. She had the high, sharp cheekbones so common to their people, and the tiny horns she affected gave her just enough alien allure to make her more attractive.

As soon as she saw Lorcan, her mouth curled into a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I was going to say it took you a long time to get back, but in that old relic, I'm surprised you made it at all." She glanced past him, and Bryony had the unsettling feeling of being studied by the other woman. "Who's your friend?"

Lorcan tossed a look over his shoulder, his crooked smile genuine enough to make Bryony regret some of her harsh thoughts. Then he turned back to the monitor. “Some fucking bounty hunter. Thought she could use me to get leverage over you, as if.” His chuckle was cruel, mirthless. The icy black of space was warmer than her stomach felt as the words registered.

“I wasn’t expecting gifts, my sweet,” the Widow said with her reptilian grin.

Bryony charged forward to turn off the comms channel and noticed too late the black stick in Lorcan’s free hand. He spun and drove the stunner into her hip. Her knees buckled, and she sank to the ground like a cut marionette, but before consciousness left her, she heard him say, “I know, but I always bring you the nicest things.”

Lorcan felt sick to his stomach. He stood at the sink in his quarters on the Red Widow’s capital ship, *The Widow’s Nest*, and splashed water on his face in an effort to make himself feel clean. It wasn’t helping. He couldn’t bring himself to look up into the smart mirror; he had no desire to see himself right now, or the person he’d become.

In truth, he’d been dreading this moment since Bryony had insisted on coming for Lilith instead of letting it go. Regardless of what he’d said at the time, there was no way Lilith would have accepted an apology from the Darkstar syndicate. Her expectation was that he’d kill them all, without question. Turning Bryony in, blowing her cover, seemed the surest way to get her close to Lilith. After all, revenge was something the crime leader understood. She’d expect that from someone else.

The worst part had been not telling Bryony—her surprise had to be real if they were going to play Lilith. But that hadn’t made her look of pain at his betrayal hurt any less; his conscience wouldn’t let him forget her face as she crumpled.

He wouldn't blame her if she never talked to him again, much as that thought hurt, but he would need to get her to listen. Otherwise, this would all have been for naught, and she'd lose the chance she'd said was more important than him...

He ground his teeth together. This was not a time for self-pity. He'd been doing just fine collecting information on his own for the marshals to use once Lilith was brought to justice. The fact that the last two weeks of travelling in nullspace with her were the brightest in his memory had more to do with their freshness, and not any real attachment. He pulled another handful of cold water down his face. "If I keep saying that, it'll eventually be true. Right, Rue?"

He turned in time to see Rue open one eye to regard him suspiciously. The gem in her forehead pulsed a dim yellow green with suspicion.

"I know, you haven't forgiven me for crating you." He moved to sit down next to the creature and ran one hand along the silky fur covering her spine. "But you understand, right? Why it had to be this way?"

The color of the gem didn't change, but Rue did stretch out her already long body, so he had better petting access. Trusting someone apparently wasn't central to the "being petted" experience. It also didn't appear to include any sort of absolution, entirely in keeping with his experience with felyx. Though his matriarch's pets had taken the superiority complex attributed to the creatures and dialed it up to a whole new level.

Lorcan gave a bitter chuckle. "Enough stalling, time to see if I can make any of this right."

At least getting into the brig was easy enough. His unofficial position as one of Lilith's top enforcers granted him a level of access on the ship that he might not otherwise have had. The guard, a thick-necked Malebrank named Krazok whose thick horns curved back over his bald pate, was more than happy to let him in.

"Don't gloat too much," he admonished with a leer. "You know how the Widow likes to break them herself."

Lorcan did know, and the knowledge turned his stomach. He passed into the brig and went to the far cell, where Bryony sat on the other side of an energy field.

She looked up at his approach and narrowed her bright green eyes to slits. It was, he thought, a decidedly Rue-like expression.

“Well, this must be delicious for you,” she muttered, half under her breath. “Shoes being on the other foot and all that.”

In the scheme of things, it was a less hateful greeting than he’d expected. The fact she’d spoken to him at all was a point in his favor, but Lorcan refused to dwell on what if anything it might indicate. “Look, we don’t have much time, so let me talk.”

She gestured at the energy field that separated them, helpfully colored red to warn of its lethal setting. “It’s not like I could stop you.”

That was closer to the bitterness he expected. *And deserved.* “Her arrogance is your advantage here. She thinks this whole experience broke you, but we both know it didn’t. She’s going to want to gloat over you, she’s going to make sure I’m there so your betrayal is complete, and that’s the opportunity you’ve been asking for. I know it’s not what we discussed, but the end result is the same. *This* is what you wanted.”

“Meanwhile, you get to maintain your...” she paused, as though even she was wary of saying the word *cover* in the circumstances, “...*reputation* as an utterly remorseless asshole.”

He winced. She wasn’t wrong, but it still hurt to hear it said so plainly. “Exactly.”

Lorcan stepped back from the front of the cell, but stopped when she asked one last question. “Is Rue safe?”

He nodded. “She is. I’ve got her in my quarters for now. And before you ask, she hasn’t forgiven me either.”

He turned, hoping he’d said enough, and left before it became too much.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WORST PART of all of it, Bryony thought, was that she could understand why Lorcan had done it. He had too much at stake, between reporting back to the marshals and undermining the Red Widow's bloodthirsty actions where he could, so maintaining his cover would be important to him. Certainly, more important than anything she'd offered him in exchange.

And whose fault is that, really?

On the plus side, she wouldn't have to spend long regretting her choices, if the armed guards headed toward her cell were any indication. Six members of the Widow's syndicate—all Malebranki—formed a semicircle around the front of her cell and switched on stun batons. The collective hum of high-powered capacitors was louder even than the energy field sealing off her cell. One of them, a woman who dressed like she might be the ranking member of the group, said, "Stand up, turn around, and put your hands behind your back."

Bryony did as instructed and could feel the air pressure change when the restraining field was lowered. A hand grabbed one of her wrists, and she went limp. Gravity dropped her to the deck, and her weight tugged the Malebrank woman off balance. The woman stumbled forward, and Bryony lashed out with her heel. She felt the satisfying crack of teeth slamming together under the impact of her kick and sprang to her feet ready to fight her way back to *Persephone* and out of the system.

Three different stunners hit her at almost the same time.

Every muscle in her body tightened painfully then went slack, and Bryony collapsed to the floor once again. Somehow, the second (and third and fourth) times she'd been hit with a stun rod weren't any easier to tolerate than the first. Two of the guards hauled her up onto her feet, while her hands were slapped into a pair of binders behind her back. From the heft, and how tightly they closed around her wrist, she could tell they were a high-quality pair of binders too. The only way she was getting these off without a key was to cut off her thumbs.

The woman she'd kicked circled around to the front and held Bryony's chin in a viselike grip. When she grinned, it showed off a jagged break to one of her upper teeth. Bryony managed to cough out a laugh but couldn't muster the energy for more than that, especially while struggling against the strength in the Malebrank's fingers.

"You are *lucky* The Widow ordered no harm should come to you," said the woman. "But what she can't see won't hurt her."

The punch caught Bryony in the midsection, and her muscles were still too hammered by the stunners to tighten up and resist. Air whooshed out of her, and she fought to regain her breath. While she gasped and wheezed, they dragged her out of the brig and down the hall of the ship. Making sense of the turns they took was impossible, so Bryony allowed herself to relax and let them carry her along.

That's what I'm telling myself, anyway.

They'd been walking for more than ten minutes when the feeling started to come back to her legs. Waves of pins and needles pulsed along her nerves before coalescing into a deep muscle ache, but she was finally able to regain her footing and walk under her own power. The time that passed spoke volumes to the size of the ship. When she'd heard the Red Widow maintained a capital ship as her base of operations, Bryony had written it off as exaggeration. Apparently, she'd been wrong to do so.

It was clear that several parts of the ship had been gutted and redesigned, and in many cases repurposed all together.

Nowhere was this restructuring more evident than in the room they ultimately brought her to. It had clearly once been a mission briefing room, with rows of seats around a lower, central floor. Now, half the seats had been removed, along with any display equipment, and the floor was covered with unsavory stains. In the middle of the first two rows of seats sat a construction somewhere between a dais and an imperial box, complete with throne. On the throne sat the Red Widow herself, with Rue sprawled across her shoulders like a living stole.

Because of course her loyalty can be bought with a can of freeze-dried liver treats. The understanding didn't make the betrayal hurt any less. Neither did the realization of who waited for her on the floor in front of the Widow.

In the center of the room, staring at Bryony as the guards led her in, was Lorcan. He almost looked like a different person; the planes of his face had hardened, and the grim set of his jaw revealed nothing of the dimples he'd shared so casually on *Persephone*. She realized that, in a sense, this was a different person. That this was Azonir, far more than it was Lorcan. It made her miss the person she'd come to know during their travels. The person who she'd allowed into her heart, only for him to turn on her to save himself.

"How good of you to join us," the Red Widow purred from her chair, before reaching up to scratch under Rue's chin. "I understand you're here on some kind of *vendetta*? Absolutely delicious." She stretched and crossed her ankles in front of her. Bryony was annoyed to notice that the woman was, in fact, wearing boots. *Just as Lorcan said she did.* The Widow was not, despite her reputation, dressed in anything risqué. Apart from the boots, which Bryony noted had a sensible sole and probably gave good ankle support, the Malebrank wore a sharply tailored suit that covered her as effectively as armor. Apart from the blood and chaos surrounding her, she could have been as likely to step out of a corporate boardroom, instead of a pirate fleet.

"You're the one who sets the schedule," Bryony snapped. "If you wanted me here sooner, all you had to do was send

someone. Wasn't like I could come on my own."

"Oh, I like this one, she has *fire*." The Widow snapped her fingers, and a flame sprang to life around her hand. The Malebrank flicked it toward Bryony playfully, and the fireball splashed against the deck plates and washed a blast of heat across Bryony's face. "Well, there's nothing I love quite so much as a poetic ending. I'm sure you know how we Malebranki are, Terran, with our honor and poetry."

"I find it hard to believe you know much about either," Bryony spat. To be fair, that was one of the two stereotypes that tended to swirl around Malebrank, though. They were either oversexed incubi, or poet-warriors. She could, with little stretch, understand the Widow wanting to shatter that mold and create a new image, however heartless. She'd done the same thing as a bounty hunter after all the men had told her women didn't have the "mercenary mindset" for the job. *Whatever that meant.*

The Red Widow stood. "Then allow me to prove you wrong on both counts." She pulled a long, curved falx from a sheath on the side of her throne and tossed it down in front of Bryony. "You see, Azonir *says* he was captured by you, but frankly I just don't see how that's possible. If it did happen? Well, I can't afford that kind of weakness in my organization. Allow me to make everything simple. Kill Azonir in single combat, and on the honor of my House and Matriarch, I'll face you myself."

As the Terrans like to say, Lorcan thought, shit. There was something perfect about Terran swearing, all focused on the base functions of being alive, instead of the vague insinuations and honor-insults that composed most Malebranki curses. It was like swearing was as much a primal part of being alive for Terrans as all those bodily functions.

One of the guards stepped forward and removed the binders from Bryony's wrists, then stepped quickly out of her

reach. Good, she'd made them scared of her. Or at least cautious. His heart fluttered with a little thump of pride in her.

None of which was going to save his life, at the moment. He already knew which Bryony would choose, in a contest between him and her desire for revenge. She'd already told him as much. The six guards who had brought her stepped back and spread out slightly, allowing themselves to better defend each other if she turned on them. Not that she'd get the chance.

"Of course, if you rebuff my generous offer," Lilith continued, "my honor will demand I incinerate you where you stand. And then I'll kill Azonir anyway."

Great. At least she'd made it clear he was on the outs. So much for keeping his cover.

Bryony dragged herself to her feet, and he studied her. She moved like she'd been on the wrong end of a stun baton, and knowing the crew who'd brought her to the arena, she probably had been. But he'd also sparred with her back on *Persephone*. She was excellent at using deception to gain an advantage. Indeed, as he watched, she stumbled a bit, knee buckling, but her feet never moved out of a balanced position. Bryony might not be faking all her disability, but she was faking some part of it.

She scooped the falx off the deck plates. Lilith kept it sharp enough to split a hair, so the thin pseudo-leather jacket he'd donned would give him little protection. As Bryony circled around to one side, he dropped low and turned with her. He tried defensively to call his *v'tana*, but against Bryony—the first person who'd ever wanted him, the real him—the flames wouldn't come. When she attacked, he'd have to defend himself without it.

The one advantage he had lay in the fact that Bryony had clearly never fought with a falx before. The heavy, curved, leaf-bladed swords were preferred for dueling among the Malebranki, but Terrans seemed little familiar with the weapon, or with lethal duels in general. She held it too tightly, with her whole hand instead of the first two fingers, so she'd

tire quickly. She'd also lose the ability to "snap" the blade by closing her hand into a fist, though given its sharpness, he doubted the slight loss of power would matter much.

She had almost completed her circle when Bryony charged. He'd been a hair too late in turning, and she came in on his exposed side. The blade raised overhead, in what he thought was a classic beginner's mistake, but as he ducked to the inside, she opened her hand and let the falx fall. Bryony caught it with her other hand and swiped in a cross-body swipe that slashed across his thigh. He clenched his teeth, waiting for the sting of the cut when he realized that, by switching hands, she'd hit him with the dull outer edge of the blade. *Had that been deliberate?*

He couldn't afford to think about it and lunged forward to tackle her legs out from under her. The falx went skittering away as she hit the floor, her breath whooshing out roughly. With a quick lunge he grabbed one of her arms and pinned it up behind her back, twisting her face down to the deck. As he leaned over her, he whispered, "Are you trying to kill me? Or just putting on a show?"

She headbutted him in the nose in response, and he felt the cartilage shatter. Blood streamed over his mouth as he released her and fell back on his ass.

"What do you think?" she spat. Though he spotted the moment of fear when she saw the blood and thought, just maybe, she'd not intended it. She also hadn't gone for one of her vicious leg holds, which he knew could choke him out faster than he could fight her off. So maybe it *was* her putting on a performance while trying to develop a plan.

He wiped the blood off his face—if they survived this, he could set his nose later—and gave a retort, "I think that if this is your idea of foreplay, you're going to have to do better."

Her cheeks colored in an instant, and he smiled as she charged him. Normally, he'd step aside and shove her past him, but he had to keep himself between her and the discarded falx. He might think this was for show, but just in case he was wrong, he couldn't let her get the blade back. She expected

him to faint, too, he could tell by the shock as he stepped into her path. The force of the impact drove the air out of his lungs, but he twisted and pulled her up taut against his chest.

“Seven on the floor,” he hissed. “Four more by Lilith. Maybe a dozen in the crowd.” If everyone was on the Widow’s Lair, he knew, the total complement would be around a hundred and twenty. Fortunately, there were seldom more than sixty aboard at any given time; more than enough to keep the two of them from leaving, regardless.

She stomped down on his instep, then tried to back kick into his crotch, a shot he caught on one thigh. “I can count,” was hidden in her growl of exasperation. “Ideas?”

“Boring,” the Red Widow announced, and Lorcan had seen enough fights in the arena to know what would happen next. The crime boss tapped a quick command into her wristcomp, and the sixteen deck plates that made up the center of the arena came to life with energy fields of various lethality in a checkerboard pattern. Fortunately, the plate the two of them were on was currently safe, but it wouldn’t stay that way. Lilith could run several patterns, but he knew she mostly kept it set to random. Chaos always appealed to her.

“Only one,” he admitted. The panel with the falx on it was currently swathed in a red glow, its field design to deliver a lethal voltage. “I’m sorry.”

Before she had a chance to ask why, he hoisted her over his head and threw her free of the central deck plates. He’d never shown her the full extent of his strength before, and from the look on her face, she wasn’t prepared for how easily he could fling her through the air. She landed agilely enough, for all her surprise—low to the ground, on the balls of her feet, and steadied with one hand.

“She’s mine to kill,” he shouted at Lilith, though he doubted it would make any difference. “Not your random disasters.” Even as he spoke, two of the guards had shifted to walk toward Bryony, stunners at the ready to force her back into the ring.

Protective anger flared in his heart. The *v'tana* that had lain dormant flared back into life around his hand. Flame hot enough to fuse steel dripped between his fingers and blackened the deck plates at his feet. Lorcan jumped forward without thought, dropping down into a square that had been marked with a lethal field a heartbeat before he hit. He snapped out one arm, and a rope of flame caught the leg of one of the two guards and pulled him closer.

Off balance, the Malebrank stumbled, then stepped into one of the deck tiles. It hadn't been set to lethal, but the field was set to a high stun and arced through the guard. Lorcan let the guard fall and moved toward where Bryony circled with the other guard. She lunged, and as the guard stabbed out with his stunner, she dropped low. Momentum carried her across the deck and inside his guard, before she doubled up her fists and slammed them into the guard's groin.

Lorcan winced in sympathetic pain as the guard crumpled over. Bryony spun and used the momentum to drive her doubled hands into the guard's chin. The crack of teeth slamming together muffled behind lips was too loud in the muted silence of the arena. The guard crumpled, and Lorcan kicked the falx across the deck to Bryony's waiting hand.

Outrage twisted Lilith's face into a grimace, and she stabbed at her wristcomp to disable the floor tiles and allow the other guards to cross easily. As one charged toward Bryony, she brought the falx up to ward off a blow. Lorcan was forced to turn away then, shifting his focus to the two who charged him and trusting Bryony to handle herself.

He hurled two darts of flame toward the leading guard, but the guard's own *v'tana* flared into life and he scooped them from the air, the flames wreathing his hands like bright-orange gloves. The guard took a flame-covered swing at Lorcan, while his friend—a narrow-faced female Malebrank whose name Lorcan forgot—draw the falx from her hip and swung for his legs.

Lorcan crushed his fingers into his palm, the white-hot flare of his heart-flame directed at the female's face. She reared back in alarm, and he drove his fist into the other

guard's nose. Flame blazed, and Lorcan felt more than heard the guard's scream. Not all Malebranki who could control *v'tana* had the ability to resist its damage without concentrating, and the guard clearly fell into the latter group. The moment of pain and disruption caused the guard's sleeves and hair to catch fire, and the Malebrank fell back in a panic.

The female recovered quickly and slashed up with her blade, trying for a disemboweling shot. Lorcan charged inside the arc of her blade, grabbed her by the head, and threw her to the floor. She rolled toward him, and he dropped his knee into her chest in an effort to take her out of the fight. She shoved up against his bulk, struggling, until he lifted her stunner from her belt and lit her up with a charge from it.

He started to get back to his feet, ready for the next challenge, when an explosion buckled the deck and sent him sprawling.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THESE BASTARDS ARE *fast and strong*, Bryony admitted, *but they have nothing on Lorcan*. Even holding back, he'd been faster and nimbler than either of the guards she'd put down so far. It wouldn't take too many more and they'd have the floor clear. *And then*, she did quick math against the numbers Lorcan had told her. *Only about a hundred and thirteen to go*.

She saw the Red Widow, with Rue tucked under her arm, running for an exit on the level above and cursed. The sword was awkward to swing but was apparently sharp enough that the rest of the field seemed to respect it. A clumsy swipe with it backed another guard out of her way, and Bryony lunged for the box seating to try to catch the Widow before it was too late.

The explosion knocked her out of the air with the concussion, and her first thought was to question what kind of fool would open fire on the Red Widow's ship. Then she realized she wasn't being sucked out into the void, which meant the explosion had to come from inside rather than from an external attack. The cough of flechette weapons after the explosion was so understated and out of proportion that she almost didn't hear it.

A hand clamped on her shoulder and pulled her to her feet, and Bryony had the sword in motion before her brain recognized it was Lorcan. She opened her hand to release the blade, but the weight of it falling was enough to slice open his calf. "Shit! I didn't—"

"I've had worse," he shouted. "Are you okay?"

Something in the way he said it... “This was you, wasn’t it?”

He gave a little half shrug that could mean anything. “We needed a distraction if we were going to get out of here.”

“I...” *am sorry I didn’t trust you.* She couldn’t say that though. He’d broken her trust by not sharing his intentions with her, and she wasn’t sorry. But broken things could still be repaired. “She’s got Rue,” Bryony said finally.

“I know. And I—”

“Shit!” she cut him off as she spotted another guard charging his back with a knife drawn. “Duck!”

He acted without hesitation, and she used his shoulders as a launchpad to press herself into the air and hit the guard with both feet. Momentum carried them to the floor, and in seconds she had a chokehold on the guard’s neck with her thighs. The Malebrank struggled, but she increased the pressure until the guard went still.

Another explosion shook the deck under her as she stood and turned back to Lorcan, who had an expression somewhere between horror and hunger playing across his face. “That shouldn’t be as hot as it is,” he said, “though it’s also still terrifying.”

Her cheeks heated at the compliment as much as the desire flaring in his deep-set eyes. “When this is over, we need to talk. But first—”

“She’ll be heading for the forward docking bay. Her ship is there. I’ll meet you in a few, I just have to take care of something. Go!” He looked for a moment as though he wanted to say more, but then turned away to wade back into the fighting.

Her heart tugged for a second to chase after him, but Rue and the Widow lay in the opposite direction. He said he’d meet her, and she had to believe that he would. She let out the breath she’d been holding, scooped the heavy sword off the floor, and went to claim her vengeance.

Whatever Lorcan had sabotaged, the chaos was occupying the attention of most of the crew on board. That, or everyone had started fleeing the moment things started going to hell. Either way, it made following the Red Widow astonishingly easy. Even the handful of other pirates Bryony saw were too busy running to pay a Terran like her any mind. When Bryony reached the forward shuttle bay, there was a momentary lurch in her heart as she saw two different snub fighters zip through the field into open space beyond.

When she spotted the Red Widow—still carrying Rue under her arm—the fear was replaced by rage. “You have something of mine!” she shouted.

Despite the chaos and the roar of starship power units firing up, the Red Widow stopped and turned toward her. The woman reached one hand up to stroke Rue’s chin and smiled. “Oh good. I hated the idea of leaving my sword behind.” She snapped her wrist, and a coil of flame spiraled down her arm to coalesce into a whiplike cord. “Please make my day better and fight back.”

Bryony slid into a fighting stance, balancing her weight between her toes. Her knees and back would complain later about all the hard work she’d been putting them through. In a perfect galaxy, she could find a way back to a space station with hot water and spend several hours soaking in a hot tub. Preferably with a glass of berry wine in one hand. But that meant getting through this first.

To the Widow’s credit, she didn’t spend any time bluffing, or even giving some elaborate, intimidating speech. One moment, she was setting Rue down on a stack of crates, the next she hurled the whiplike flame toward Bryony’s ankles as she charged. Bryony rolled to one side and had to pull up short to avoid getting caught by a gout of flame that flicked from the Widow’s free hand.

Bryony cursed. She hated going into a fight without enough knowledge about her opponent’s capabilities. And whatever else there was to be said, the Red Widow was skilled. She might dress like a high-end socialite, but the lethal efficiency of her movements and the power of her *v’itana* made

it plain to Bryony that the Malebrank woman had fought her way to the top of the organization that bore her name. Bryony lashed out with the tip-heavy blade, and only half-feigned losing her balance to draw her opponent in.

The Widow pounced on the perceived moment of weakness, wrapping the flaming cord around Bryony's ankle and tugging back.

Bryony fell and huffed as the wind was knocked from her lungs. *Right, she has a longer reach than I do.* Another tick against her preparations for this fight.

The Red Widow knelt onto Bryony's sternum, putting her whole weight into the pressure and squeezing the air from Bryony's lungs. The Malebrank woman leaned down. "I'm sorry, did you think this was going to be a fair fight?"

"From you? Hardly." The pressure was enough to make Bryony see stars. "But that's okay. I'm not fighting fair either. Rue! Eyes!"

Clearly the woman was either unfamiliar with felyces as pets, or she was concerned that it might have been a code word of some kind. Either way, the Widow's head snapped up, and she looked toward the creature who was, at the moment, studiously ignoring them in favor of cleaning her left middle paw.

Bryony punched her under the chest as hard as she could.

Shock vibrated up her arm as air huffed out of the Widow, and Bryony was relatively certain one of her knuckles had broken in the impact. As the crime lord stumbled back to her feet, Bryony did the same. They started to circle again, like a pair of wary boxers.

Then Bryony spotted the laser sight, gliding across the floor and up onto the widow's chest. The Red Widow saw it too and started to break for cover when Rue slammed into her and knocked her to the deck plates.

Before the woman could regain her feet, Bryony pounced. Using her weight to her advantage, she tugged the Malebrank woman into the vee of her thighs and locked a leg over her

throat. The Widow struggled, but with her arm trapped, every shift only allowed Bryony to tighten her hold. Lorcan had had enough sense to tap out. The Widow struggled a moment more, then went limp.

Bryony kept the hold for another thirty seconds, just to make sure the woman was unconscious, then stood. “Thanks for the help, Rue.”

Power flickered in the bay as another explosion sounded somewhere deep in the ship. This was her moment, the chance to have the revenge she’d chased for so long. A chance to put the past to long-awaited rest. Her fingers tightened around the heavy sword.

“Killing her won’t bring them back.” Lorcan’s voice echoed through her head. She’d thought he was being pedantic at the time, but then she looked over her thoughts—the only thing stopping her from doing any of it, from moving on to whatever was next and letting her sister’s family rest in peace was Bryony, not the Widow. All killing her would do was perpetuate the cycle of violence through yet another spin of the wheel. And yes, there were problems with letting her live, but they too could be dealt with in time.

At the fair end of the docking bay, she saw Lorcan limping toward her, a sniper rifle in one hand.

Bryony tore a strip from the Widow’s expensive jacket and used it to tie her hands behind her, tightly. She leaned over the unconscious woman and whispered, “Lilith Carnellian, you are bound and captured, in accordance with Hegemonic bounty policy thirty-one-point-five-point-alpha. You will be remanded to authorities in exchange for bounty at my convenience.”

Lorcan held his breath. He hadn’t expected Rue to attack Lilith, and rather than risk the shot hurting the felyx, he’d decided to come closer. In the intervening moments, Bryony had incapacitated Lilith and then, instead of killing her, had bound her hands. He couldn’t decide if he was proud or

relieved. In the end, he stepped up and held out a set of ferro-restraints. “You’ll want to replace the cloth, or she’ll burn through it when she’s conscious.”

“Do you always keep a pair of binders handy? You’ve been holding out on me.” Her wicked grin flashed a surprising jolt of desire along the length of his spine. “Also, thanks.” She took the restraints from him and locked Lilith’s arms behind her more securely. “We need to get to *Persephone*. Or at least I do.”

There was a question there she hadn’t voiced, and while he understood it implicitly, he wasn’t sure he could answer it. He did the next best thing. “The ship’s stable. You wanted to talk.”

Bryony didn’t so much sit as collapse against the crates in the now-empty hangar. “You were right, in the end.”

“How so?” As an afterthought he checked Lilith’s pulse, but it was strong. He hefted the woman onto a nearby cargo cart. The hover field dipped slightly as the cart adjusted for the new weight, then went still.

“My sister deserves better than to be an excuse for more senseless bloodshed. My nephew deserves a better memorial.” Her voice was quiet, and the tired pain in it made him want to reach out and comfort her, but he couldn’t. Not until...

“I’m sorry I lied to you.” Saying the words felt like he’d just lifted a planet off his shoulders. “It doesn’t matter what my reasons were, it was wrong.”

She buried her face into Rue’s side, and when she looked up, she had a tuft of purple hair stuck to the tip of her nose. Despite himself, he reached out and brushed it away. “You... didn’t trust me enough to tell me your plan. That’s why it hurt.”

“It wasn’t about trust,” he started, but cut himself off. Was it? In the end he’d wanted only to have her sell the supposed betrayal, but... “It was, and I’m sorry. I didn’t think things through. I’ve been so used to keeping my secrets that I didn’t consider your feelings.”

She nodded. “Apology accepted.”

“I should tell you the marshals are en route to mop up the survivors. You’ll want to be out of the quadrant before they get here.”

Her sigh felt like it carried the weight of worlds. “Did you summon them?”

“I did. But it turns out they were already on their way. Someone else called in an anonymous tip.” Her sheepish look as she stood made him want to smile, and he gave in to the urge.

“I may have sent our destination coordinates to them while you were sleeping on *Persephone*.” She shook her head. “So I guess we both have trust issues. Do you need to wait here for them?”

“I don’t.” He reached up and unhooked the horns from the mounting points on his forehead. “At this point, I can’t go back under cover. And other than debriefs, which can be handled remotely, they’ll want me to take some time away. Do you know what you’re going to do next?”

“Honestly? I need a bath. And booze.” She guided Rue up onto her shoulders and turned to face him. “Look, I can’t promise it’s going to be exciting or even fun most of the time...but if your *v’tana* is tied to me, I’d hate for you to lose that connection...”

“I’m bad at trust,” he blurted. “I’ve been having to think for myself for so long, that I can’t promise I won’t screw things up again and forget to take you into consideration. But I can promise that I’ll try.” Unreasonable hope lit in his chest like a tiny ember.

“What do you think, Rue? Is that good enough for you?” She scratched under the felyx’s chin, and the low rumble of its purr broke the silence. The gem in Rue’s forehead glowed a trusting purple.

He stepped closer, folding his arms around the two of them, amazed all over again at how right it felt to have her in

his arms. At how the fire in his blood finally felt complete. “That sounded like a yes.”

“Pretty sure it was an ‘I’ll think about it.’” She tilted up her chin to look at him with a smile. “But I’m still the one who calls the shots.”

“Then I’ll have to convince you, too.” His mouth covered hers, and despite the flame that welled within him, it was in no danger of consuming him. It felt tempered, controlled by her. This blaze-haired Terran who owned the deepest part of his soul. When he broke the kiss for a breath, he whispered. “In the interest of our newfound honesty, I should also tell you that there’s *a lot* of money in *Persephone’s* hold. It seemed wrong to just let it get blown up.”

She nodded solemnly. “Yes. A shame. Good thing someone had the sense to move that money before the marshals confiscate it all.”

“I...” he paused. “Thing is, there’s probably plenty more hidden away. But I know a few of her hiding locations. If you were interested in having a partner, that is.”

Her eyes narrowed in laser focus. “You...”

“Me,” he said, and cut off any further complaint she might have with another kiss. “And you. Forever.”

She nodded and laid her head against his chest. “Forever is far. I like *now*. And now seems a good time to get me back home so I can reward you properly.

His heart lurched in his chest, not at the promise of debauchery to come, but at that one word: *home*. It wasn’t what he’d been looking for when he’d set out. But it, and she, was everything he wanted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JC Hay is an SFR Galaxy Award-winning, USA Today bestselling author of Science Fiction Romance, an inveterate dog lover, and dreamer. His tales of heroic hearts and fantastic futures reflect his heartfelt belief that sci-fi and romance go hand-in-hand, because the coolest gadgets in the world are useless without someone to share them and everyone deserves a happy ever after. This is the third tale of the Malebranki Diaspora, after Flare and Desert Flame.

ALSO BY JC HAY

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SMALL ACTS OF INTERGALACTIC REBELLION

BIRCH HEARTS
BY ELVA BIRCH

DESCRIPTION

The humans and aliens of Glory Station live in structured harmony under the many rules of the Oversight that protects them from the cunning and dangerous Rebellion.

Skilled but lonely junior Technician Tanadara knew she wasn't supposed to befriend the cute furry animals in the ducts. Training the paxolii to follow her whispered commands kept them safe and hurt no one. She only needed to hide them from the bosses.

Newly appointed supervisor Samath wanted to introduce himself to the only full-blooded human on his staff, not to catch her nurturing destructive pests. Tanadara's thoughts of instant attraction startle him into revealing his hidden telepathic ability. The Oversight would brain-wipe him immediately for genomic deviance if they discovered his secret.

What starts as a tentative truce soon blossoms into a highly illicit relationship. When the Oversight slates the destructive pests for extermination, can Samath and Tanadora find a way to break enough small rules to save the paxolii they've come to love... and each other?

CHAPTER ONE

“*HELLO,*” Tanadara whispered.

There were eyes peering at her from behind the vent duct cover, unblinking and bright.

It was dim in the service corridor, because unnecessary light was wasteful of resources, and it took Tanadara’s eyes a moment to adjust. The next thing she noticed were whiskers, shimmering in what light there was.

The eyes blinked.

Don’t be afraid of me, Tanadara thought, as hard as she could. It was nice to have another creature in the corridor with her, and it was refreshing to find it staring directly at her, instead of slightly to the side as was polite.

Working in the service corridors was solitary duty. The other aliens on Glory station disliked the small spaces and inconsistent gravity, but Tanadara didn’t mind them, or protest her frequent assignments here. Sometimes, it felt like the loneliness here was a little less than it was in social settings, where everyone ignored each other out of courtesy, or made light, careful conversation out of duty.

“*Hello,*” she whispered again.

The creature poked a nose out, twitching curiously, and followed it with a slim, furry body about the length of her hand with the fingers outstretched. It had little triangular ears and eight feet that could find purchase even on the featureless access panels. A long tail behind it ended in a tufted tip.

There had been stray cats in the human refuge where Tanadara grew up, and she recognized the same shy but inquisitive motions that suggested it was dying to greet her but also afraid. She sat where she was, her work bag open beside her, and let it scurry around the walls and stare at her from every direction, giving quiet little chirps and growls.

Tanadara recognized it from her training. It was a paxoly, classified by the Oversight as a Level 1 pest, and procedure would require her to report it immediately. They leached valuable power from energy systems and chewed up wiring, and they were notoriously hard to root out because they had electrical shielding that kept sensors from picking them up.

Tanadara had never seen one before, and she hadn't realized they would be so cute. The training manual had shown their sharp bared teeth, but hadn't captured the way their ears flickered, or the graceful all-body wiggle that almost looked like a dance. The paxoly paused, defied gravity, and lifted the front half of its body to fold its front legs like it was regarding Tanadara thoughtfully.

She had to giggle at its too-serious posture, and its tail flicked up and spread like a fan behind it. It chortled in reply, then lowered its head and tail, and slipped fluidly down the wall to approach Tanadara's work bag.

Tanadara held her breath, not wanting to frighten it away with any noise. *Don't be afraid*, Tanadara wished with all her heart.

There was an open package of Fazian chips there, and after a few false starts, the paxoly got close enough to snatch one out, then it turned and vanished back into the vent with its prize.

Tanadara finished her work feeling triumphant, like she'd accomplished something great simply by not scaring it immediately off. Then she remembered that she needed to report the paxoly and that it would be exterminated.

But it was so darling and brave, Tanadara thought, and surely just one of them wouldn't cause that much damage.

She was back in her bunkroom looking up more details on the paxolii when her sister called.

Tanadara took the holocall with a conflicted sense of duty, wishing she had an excuse to ignore it.

“Tanadara! Dear sister! Have you been staying on suggested rations? You look plump.”

Tanadara immediately vowed to double her rations. Once, she would have taken her sister’s teasing in the light-hearted manner it was meant, but Dailini’s attitude no longer had any real warmth to it. Tanadara didn’t think she meant to be cruel, exactly, but the sister who had once been her best friend didn’t seem to *care* how cutting her words might be anymore.

“It’s nice to see you,” she lied. “How’s the family?”

Dailini caught her up on all the family news, prattling easily from topic to topic until Tanadara could politely excuse herself. She knew that Dailini was only calling out of courtesy, because it was a *thing one did for family*, not because it mattered to her what Tanadara was doing.

It wasn’t like Tanadara was doing anything worth telling her about anyway...besides finding an illicit pest animal that she ought to report and hadn’t. Tanadara didn’t volunteer that information.

The following day cycle, Tanadara was delighted to see more work assigned in the same corridor, and even more delighted by the return of the creature she had named Whiskers in her head.

“*Hello!*” she whispered.

It was probably assigning it too much intelligence to think its answering chatter was conversational.

Tanadara offered it a Fazian chip directly from her hand and was delighted when Whiskers was bold enough to come all the way across the floor to take it.

A cycle later, Whiskers was comfortable enough to eat it in front of her, instead of stealing immediately away into the vents. Tanadara was even able to do some of her work without

frightening it off. Her efficiency rating on this job might be poor because she was moving so carefully, but her record was good enough to absorb a little slowness.

The data the station computers had on paxolii was limited. They were smart but sub-sentient, resistant to poisons, their shielding made them hard to exterminate, and they were destructive. The directive was to report and exterminate, but Tanadara could not bring herself to betray the little trust that she'd earned. When Whiskers came close enough to let her touch his gray fur and stroke down to his soft tail tip, she felt like she'd accomplished something amazing. She justified her disobedience to the Oversight by arguing that there was only one of them, and how much energy could one of them steal?

But three cycles later, in another corridor altogether, there were two of them. The newcomer had a white blaze on its steel-gray head, and Tanadara named it Chitters for its greeting before she remembered that it was unwise to get attached. The two of them together were even braver than Whiskers alone, and after a few Fazian chips, they were happily climbing on her modesty garment and twining around her wrists, purring.

Tanadara had never been so happy, and the appearance of two more the next cycle didn't dampen her delight. She named them Shimmies, for its distinctive rear-leg wiggle, and Shivers, for its frequent tremble. Shivers' dextrous little claws were all white.

She got to the point where she could work without scaring them away, and they rode on her shoulders and played in her hair while she cleaned access panels and made minor repairs and upgrades. They would even sometimes obey her commands, if she kept them simple enough. They seemed abashed when she found wire bundles they'd chewed up, but Tanadara wondered if that wasn't because of her *own* guilt.

Fortunately, they seemed to stop at four, because Tanadara worried that if there were any more, she'd be incapable of continuing to keep them a secret and covering up their damage. She was between Supervisors, so no one was keeping close tabs on her time...for now.

That would change when the new Supervisor arrived, but she tried not to fret about the future.

CHAPTER TWO

“REFRESHMENT?
HALLUCINOGEN?”

TRANQUILIZER?

Samath accepted a nutrition pack from the many-armed shuttle attendant and returned to his scrutiny of the data on his new team.

Glory Station was a respectable assignment, and he was flattered that he'd been chosen for it. It was one of the largest in the Oversight, and was considered an example of efficiency and harmony. It was a key communications relay platform, and home to several thousand aliens of all kinds, each of them working jobs selected for them that worked best with their natural talents.

One of his new subordinates was a full-blooded human, and Samath paused at her citizen report. She was wearing a modesty garment, a ubiquitous covering of the core and primary limbs in neutral colors. Samath didn't find it flattering, but of course, it wasn't meant to be. It was meant to ensure equality, to minimize the differences between species.

It didn't exactly *hide* those differences, and Samath thought that this one was particularly interesting, with her bright head fur and soft, scale-less skin. Her eyes and nostrils weren't very large, but they were very finely shaped. Her record was exemplary. Samath expected her to be no problem at all, and he flipped to another report. Dulie was an avian alien, and there was a classified red flag in her file that she was under covert suspicion as an agent of the Rebellion.

Samath frowned.

The Rebellion worked against everything that the Oversight stood for, promoting individuality and unhealthy deviations. They supported genetic engineering and the kind of chaos that led to strife. They were loud and unproductive and argumentative...and Samath still wasn't sure what their actual agenda was, besides sowing discontent.

He closed the citizen file and settled back in his chair.

The Rebellion wasn't his biggest problem, of course.

His biggest problem was keeping his own secrets.

CHAPTER THREE

TANADARA WAS NOT EXPECTING to meet her new systems supervisor in the bowels of the station.

She was especially not expecting to hear him coming when her arms were full of paxolii.

“*Hsst,*” she commanded them. “*Hide.*”

She was supposed to be working, not taming illicit pest animals to eat from her hands and obey her whispered commands.

They executed her orders quite literally now, swarming for the nearest shelter...which was, unfortunately, her *modesty garment*.

“Supervisor,” she squeaked, when he came around the corner to confront her and she recognized him from both his rank bars and the holomemo image. “All systems here check out. I’m doing a scrub of the conduit covers. I’m *supposed* to be here. This job should take seven time units in total. I’ve logged three so far and am on schedule to finish within parameters!”

Don’t over-volunteer, she warned herself. When she got nervous, she talked too much.

And she wasn’t nervous because Supervisor Samath was her new direct boss, catching her doing something wrong, or rather, it wasn’t *just* that. It was that he was *cute*.

Most of the aliens on the station were humanoid, but they tended to have very stern features and extra arms and a lot of spikes and nose flaps that were probably attractive to other

aliens. Supervisor Samath looked almost completely human except for the purple iridescent sheen to his skin and the double-blinking eyes.

And not just human, but *movie-star* human, with a nice strong jaw and big shoulders and a smile with just enough teeth and not more.

He'd probably had an ancestor who was engineered to interface with humans before the genome bans were in place.

The paxolii in her shirt were getting restless, wriggling in protest of her mental command to stay hidden.

“Your...*mammaries* are moving,” the Supervisor said.

“Maybe they're happy to see you,” Tanadara blustered.

He double-blinked at her. Probably he knew that human breasts weren't supposed to be quite so independently mobile. They *definitely* weren't supposed to squirm.

Great. Brand new boss, and the first thing he did was catch her breaking about sixteen rules. She was failing at life in an absolutely spectacular fashion.

And he was *so cute*.

“You think I'm cute?” he exclaimed.

Tanadara hastily rewound the conversation in her head. She *hadn't* said it out loud. Had she? No, she was sure she hadn't. Which meant—

“You're telepathic!”

And then they were at a standoff.

He was an illegal psionic, and she was smuggling restricted pest animals in her shirt.

CHAPTER FOUR

SAMATH HAD NEVER SEEN a full-blooded human in the flesh before, and he thought that the petite little technician was absolutely perfect. This Tanadara must be one of the ideals of the species, and he caught himself trying to figure out how all her curves went together so smoothly.

And then he blew the cover that he'd successfully maintained for fifteen cycles when she surprised him by thinking very strongly that *he* was cute.

They stared at each other in horror, and then one of her chest-mounted mammaries made a break for freedom to the neck of her shirt.

“That is not a standard human organ,” Samath said, more severely than he meant to.

The human reached down and plucked the little animal from her modesty garment. “It’s a paxoly,” she explained, as if Samath wouldn’t already know. “This is Chitters.”

Another poked a whiskered face up her cleavage. “It appears to be multiple paxolii,” Samath observed. If she was going to ignore the *telepathy problem*, so was he. He could usually disregard it, except for really strong mental messages, and he was always much more successful in keeping his talent a secret...but it was very surprising that she thought he was attractive. He wasn’t spiky or armored like aesthetically superior specimens, and he had a protruding jaw that most females seemed to find off-putting.

He’d never thought of himself as vain, but it did make him feel very good to be appreciated.

She introduced the next one as well. “This one is Shivers.” It was, appropriate to its name, quivering a little.

Samath eyed her lush little body. “Are there more in there?”

In an act like magic, two more were extracted and introduced as Shimmies and Whiskers.

“I...ah...know I’m not supposed to name them,” she admitted, letting them swarm down her arm and scatter into the vents.

And she knew that he wasn’t supposed to be able to hear her thoughts, but he could now, a babbling river of them that was too confusing to follow. She was terrified of being caught, of doing things wrong, she didn’t want her pets to be confiscated or trapped, she was afraid...of something else that she stuffed back behind a nonsense song so swiftly that Samath didn’t get so much as a glimpse of what it was.

Tanadara’s mental acrobatics suggested that she had been around telepaths before and knew how to protect herself, but Samath was mostly stuck on the part where she was *afraid*.

He sighed. “I’m not going to report you,” he said, and her relief didn’t even require words. “I...do have questions.” Like who was she, that she had experience with illegal telepaths, and why had she tamed the paxolii and *how*? They were notoriously skittish and hard to trap. They defied sensors with their camouflaging electrical fields, and they were smart and resistant to poisons.

She drew herself up, and her mammaries were still impressive, even without the padding of furry stowaways. “Maybe I won’t report you, either,” she blurted.

Oh, they *were* going to talk about the telepathy then. Samath refrained from pointing out that the word of a very junior technician was hardly going to be enough to topple a Supervisor. He knew from her hammering fear that she was only bluffing.

But...he didn’t particularly want any shade of suspicion, and he wasn’t willing to risk an inhibitor collar if she ended up

being convincing. “Are we at an impasse?” he asked.

“I believe that we are,” she said bravely. Were all humans so plucky? They were portrayed in media as soft, slow, and easily swayed, but this one, Tanadara, had an unexpected strength to her.

“Truce?” Samath offered.

He didn’t need telepathy to see her posture relax. “Yes, please,” she said. “Would you like to start all over?”

“Like I don’t know you think I’m cute and you weren’t smuggling animals in your shirt?”

Human flesh was terribly expressive, and while Tanadara’s face smiled, her skin went pink. “I think that’s the safest thing to do, don’t you?”

It was the safest thing, Samath agreed. “Do I need to go out and come back in, or will it suffice to just start here with introductions?”

She gave a bubble of noise that Samath remembered was called a laugh, then pulled herself up to attention. “Supervisor Samath, sir! I am Systems Technician Subgrade Three Tanadara, pleased to report for duty.”

“Technician Subgrade Three Tanadara, please update me on your progress in this sector.”

“Conduit cover scrubs are going according to schedule,” she said smartly. “All factors within parameters.”

“Excellent work, Technician,” Samath said approvingly. “Continue your duties and report directly to me if there are any anomalies.”

Samath was warmed to catch another sizzle of aesthetic appreciation from her. She really *did* think that he was cute. And he was not immune to being flattered by that, or reciprocating it in interest.

The idea arrested him. He should certainly not be thinking about attraction to her. She was a subordinate, and fraternization was strictly forbidden.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, just as he got a flash of apprehension from her.

“Are *you* telepathic?” he asked, despite their truce.

“No,” she assured him. Too quickly? “It’s just that your skin changed color a little. That can indicate hesitation.”

“You are observant,” he said approvingly.

She liked his approval, even though she tried to squash her reaction behind a curtain of mental white-noise. At some point, he was going to have to ask her for an explanation of that skill, but experience with skittish lower mammals suggested that he would frighten her off if he asked too soon.

He resumed their fiction. “It is nearly the allotted time for sustenance and I understand that human convention is to share a meal for socialization reasons.” He was swift to add, “I am endeavoring to do a cultural act of connection with each of my new subordinates.”

“It’s a very practical way to insert yourself into a functioning system,” Tanadara agreed blandly. “I would be pleased to.”

She packed up her work kit and Samath was very glad that she was not telepathic herself or she might have known how watching her bend over in the tight modesty garment affected him. Human posteriors were very pleasantly round.

CHAPTER FIVE

TANADARA AND SAMATH managed to speak about absolutely nothing of meaning as they left the service conduits and went to the common areas.

“I believe that they have turned down the gravity slightly today,” Samath observed.

Tanadara was painfully aware that she was walking heavily compared to everyone else. It was fashionable to float along with a smooth tip-toe sort of gait, but she had swiftly realized that attempting to match alien light-footedness was a losing proposition. Some streak of stubbornness made her regularly stomp along the grating even more extremely than she otherwise might.

She sometimes called it her small act of intergalactic rebellion, because she wasn't bold enough to join the *actual* rebellion.

“The environmental controls also seem a little warmer,” Tanadara said blandly.

“The Oversight likes to vary things for citizen stimulation,” Samath said in equal tones of beige. “They always keep it within comfortable parameters.”

“Thank the Oversight,” Tanadara said with a slight smile. She thought there was a little color ripple to Samath's skin. Did he find their conversation as secretly amusing as she did?

They were both little rebels, quietly flaunting the Oversight's rules, and Tanadara didn't think she was

imagining that it had given them a curious common ground for companionship...even friendship.

She squashed her wave of longing.

She had many acquaintances on the station that were polite. *Everyone* was polite. They gave each other plenty of space and were kind enough in a completely casual way. Dulie was an avian alien that sometimes ate with Tanadara during shared meal times; they both had non-standard energy consumption and were willing to overlook cultural discrepancies. Polia in Citizen Records dutifully reached out to Tanadara two times each solar cycle like clockwork to inquire about her comfort.

But no one ever got close.

The Oversight discouraged anything that might incite conflict, so conversations of contentious topics were forbidden in public, and opinions were kept close to the chest. Touching was not allowed unless very specific permissions were in place; it actively caused some kinds of alien pain.

The paxolii were the closest thing that Tanadara had to friends, and she loved that she could pet them and make them purr. Their conversations were perhaps rather one-sided, but she loved their cuddles.

Samath looked like he would be amazing to cuddle with, and Tanadara hoped that she had caught that realization behind a shield of mental fuzz before he caught it.

She should *definitely* not be thinking about snuggling with her Supervisor.

“They have a very pleasing selection of nutrients,” Samath said, giving no hint that he might have picked up on her shameful train of thought.

“I enjoy the variety,” Tanadara agreed. “They rotate the available meals at regular intervals.”

“Many species enjoy variety,” Samath said.

Did *Samath*?

“I do,” he said, his voice completely neutral. He didn’t explain the statement, but Tanadara decided she didn’t really want to know, anyway.

They spoke about the nutritional options and Tanadara took her advised portions and no more, though she gave the Fazian chips a brief, longing look. Samath took a portion of them, and when they seated themselves at a table, dropped them onto her tray as if by accident.

Tanadara met his eyes with a grateful sparkle, hoping that he could pick up on her appreciation as she opened the packaging.

“I understand that the human species is not common on this station,” Samath said, courteously inviting conversation on the topic without pressing.

“As far as I know, I am the only one at this time,” Tanadara said, crunching around a salty-sweet starch chip. “Humans tend to stay within their own social circles, but I thought it would enrich my understanding of the universe to live for a time off the refuge, to see what was out there.”

They weren’t alone in the eating hall, but it wasn’t densely populated. “That is an admirable goal,” Samath said kindly.

“What about you?” Tanadara prodded, hoping it wasn’t rude. She was quite certain that he or his ancestors must have been genetically altered, as she’d never seen an alien quite like him. Most aliens came in varieties of sizes and shapes and limbs and considered humans a mysteriously homogenous race, but his form was so perfect that it was almost like he’d been plucked from her imagination.

“I was offered a Supervisor position at this station shortly after I had completed my education and training. It seemed a worthy place to serve.”

“It has excellent environmental and nutritional considerations,” Tanadara said. If he didn’t want to volunteer any personal information, she certainly wasn’t going to pry. “Have you seen the arboretum?”

“I have enjoyed several strolls through it.”

Tanadara actually found it too perfect to be truly enjoyable. Every leaf and path was mathematically defined, and it was all just a little predictable, like it was trying too hard to be natural. Kind of like she was when she tried to walk lightly.

“The artwork immersion room is also worth visiting.”

“I’ll be sure to look into that.”

As inane as their conversation was, Tanadara didn’t want the meal to end. She lingered over the last Fazian chips far longer than was polite and she was sure that Samath felt her disappointment despite her best attempt to squash it when he finally took his tray and rose to go.

“This has been pleasant,” he said off-handedly.

Tanadara scrambled to her feet. “Very satisfactory,” she said in exactly the same tones.

Then he went his way, and she went hers and Tanadara told herself that it was ridiculous to miss him already.

CHAPTER SIX

SAMATH MADE sure to share a leisure activity with each of his new junior technicians, but none of them were half as much fun as skirting around subjects with the plucky little human woman. Taming pest animals! Trying to blackmail her Supervisor!

There was something absolutely endearing about her graceless plod and the enthusiasm that she did a very admirable job of restraining. Samath found her thoughts swift and interesting, and more keen than many aliens who weren't trying to conceal them at all. She was very bright, much more intelligent than he'd been led to believe that humans were, and also refreshingly compassionate.

Any relationship outside of work was contraindicated by the rules, but Samath found himself eyeing Tanadara's schedule of repairs, wondering when he could coincidentally run across her on one of the mechanical floors of the station as she worked and ask her questions. Like, how had she tamed the paxolii, and why was she so good at blocking casual telepathy? Telepathy did show up in humans occasionally, Samath discovered, as he researched more about her culture. And humans were known for bonding with lower beings.

Where would the paxolii be right now?

Samath pulled up a diagram of the station.

The amount of power that they drew was negligible in the scope of the station, but because of their ability to dodge detection, and the damage they sometimes did, they were considered a level one priority pest.

He looked up in surprise at the entrance of the Oversight Operator. It was a slightly amorphous alien that didn't often travel outside of its specially outfitted chambers. What was more surprising and alarming, it was thinking about paxolii, just as he was.

Samath tamped down his alarm. It must just be coincidence. Telepathy was considered immoral and strictly forbidden in the Oversight, so it could *not* have picked the thought from his head.

"Can I help you?" he offered politely, gesturing to an unnecessary seat and courteously keeping his gaze averted.

"How is your new assignment working?" the Operator asked in its synthesized voice. "Is the crew to your satisfaction?"

Samath could not help but think of the curvy human female, and how *she* might be to his satisfaction. "It is all quite acceptable. The system is very logical and I have not found any inconsistencies." Except Tanadara, with her paxolii.

"You have merged well with the existing bureaucracy," the Operator said with a faint hint of approval. "Let us discuss the continuing schedule."

They went over Samath's duties in some detail, and the Operator seemed pleased with his understanding of the station priorities and approved of the few changes that Samath wished to make.

"You believe that rotating the light cycles will increase efficiency?"

"There is a great deal of evidence that, for humans at least, the illumination greatly influences their productivity." Samath hoped the Operator wouldn't ask why he'd been researching humans.

"You have my permission to experiment," the Operator agreed. "Please document your findings."

Samath still hadn't figured out why paxolii had been on the Operator's mind when he first showed up, and he couldn't think of a safe way to ask. Patience was one of his greater

qualities, so he let the Operator leave without pursuing the subject.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TANADARA CAUGHT herself walking lightly to the arboretum. Samath had oh-so-casually mentioned that he enjoyed being there at specific times of the light cycle, and Tanadara wasn't going to miss a chance to "accidentally" meet him.

His tall form was not hard to pick out in the domed room. He stood at a display of carefully cultivated florals, each of them selected for their scent. Engineered airflow and energy fields allowed the visitor to smell each one of them individually by stepping over lines drawn on the floor.

Tanadara felt like that sort of defeated the purpose of a garden, where all the fragrance should be a wild, chaotic profusion.

But nothing about the station or the Oversight was wild or chaotic. Everything was orderly, and people walked delicately and didn't touch.

Samath turned at her approach, and Tanadara hoped that it wasn't because he could feel the excitement and yearning from her. She was doing her best to rein her emotions in.

"Most people on the station are uncomfortable with this much light," Tanadara said, coming to stand next to him. "Except for the Trascians, of course." The chlorophyllic aliens absorbed light as part of their energy source, and spent their resting periods on beds of visible spectrum radiation.

"I have been looking into human conditions," Samath said gravely. "For morale reasons. It appears that humans follow a daily light cycle and respond very well to increases in

illumination. I have calculated the energy requirements for lighting the places you usually work, and it is well within recreational parameters. I'll set that into motion this cycle.”

Tanadara often had to use night vision correctors to navigate the service corridors where she worked, and while they were useful enough, it wasn't the same as working in full light. “That's very thoughtful of you,” she said gratefully.

“Paxolii apparently also like increased light,” Samath added slyly.

“How *interesting*,” Tanadara murmured. She gave him a sidelong look and caught his gaze on her. They lingered there for a unit of time that wasn't strictly procedural, and Tanadara could not quite keep from smiling.

They strolled through the garden, comparing notes on the smells and sights, and veered from safe topics to quiet gossip and candid observations about regulation and fashion. Tanadara thought that he was as relieved to have someone to talk to as she was. She wondered how much of their trust was based on having mutual extortion on each other and how much was that he knew from her mind that she was *safe*.

She shyly told him about training the paxolii. “They get most of their nourishment by stealing it from energy junctions,” she explained, “but they love salty things, too. I usually save a few Fazian chips for them. It only took a few cycles before they would come out when I called for them.”

“You have a call you use?”

Tanadara lowered her gaze, not sure how much to admit. “I just *think* about them really hard and they come. I've often wondered if they aren't mildly telepathic. I can get them to do some simple tricks, but they are very literal.”

“But you aren't telepathic yourself,” Samath said.

“No,” Tanadara said too sharply, and she feared that she had ruined their rapport until Samath went on.

“They seem much smarter than science gives them credit for.”

“I don’t think they’ve been studied very much,” Tanadara replied. “Everyone always just assumes they are a destructive pest.”

“These paxolii don’t appear to have destroyed much,” Samath said. “The station doesn’t have more than the usual reports of chewed up wiring.”

Tanadara blushed. “Some of that is me,” she admitted.

“You’ve been covering for them?”

“Only a little!” Tanadara protested. “They can’t help it that they like to chew on things! But once I explained to them which things they should and shouldn’t chew on, they got much better. I knew I couldn’t keep them secret if they kept destroying things, so I tried to explain that to them and they... just stopped. Well, mostly. It still happens a little. I have to report *some* of it, but I can replace some of it quietly, too.”

“Have you considered bringing them something specific to satisfy their chewing urges?” Samath said. He was standing very indecorously close, and his musky smell was overpowering the labeled flower scent.

“Oh,” Tanadara said. For a moment, she was thinking about a very different kind of urge indeed. “I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll try it!”

There was the swish of an entrance airlock that indicated someone else had come to visit the arboretum and Samath was smoothly standing much further away from her, even though Tanadara wasn’t sure she’d seen him actually move.

“I’ll experiment,” she said vaguely. “Thank you for your advice, Supervisor.”

“Continue the good work, Technician,” he replied, not meeting her eyes or pausing before he swept away, impressively light-footed for his greater bulk.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAMATH WONDERED if he was becoming unnaturally obsessed with the human woman and her illicit pests. He woke up from rest cycles thinking about her. He felt a little zing of excitement every time he spotted her, and he was never quite sure if it was her thrill or his. Sometimes, it happened before she noticed him.

It was awkward, trying to feign indifference in public, never giving her more attention than any of the other technicians, but he found a hundred little excuses to find her in the service corridors, where they could speak more freely... and she could introduce him to the paxolii.

The idea that they were telepathic was deeply intriguing.

“Can you hear them?” Tanadara asked, when she’d coaxed Shimmies out of a ventilation tube and rubbed noses with Whiskers.

Samath was ridiculously pleased when Whiskers was willing to come and sit in his outstretched hands, peering curiously up into his face with its nose pulsing. Each of its eight legs had tiny clawed paws with short, semi-dexterous fingers, like a squirrel. It was short-furred and rather plush, with a long fanned tail that sometimes stood up behind it and sometimes folded to a point.

Though they mostly scurried around on all eight legs like furry caterpillars, the paxolii could stand up on two or four of their back feet, and sometimes folded their forepaws as if they were deep in thought. Shivers had seven white paws and Chitters had a pale blaze on his head.

When Samath focused, he felt like he could hear them...a low, bubbling sense of their communication, like a babble of nonsense. The longer he listened, the easier it was to pick feelings out of the mix.

Hungry, curious, eager, interested, attracted...

Samath realized that the last one was actually spilling over from Tanadara, and he wasn't immune to the ego-boost that provided.

He spared a glance to her and caught her dropping her gaze to the paxoly climbing her arm. Her skin was shifting to the red spectrum. She was so different and *defenseless*, with her soft, scale-free skin and hair.

Samath wanted to wrap her up in his arms and keep her safe from the harsh universe, somewhere she could laugh and tame the system pests and blackmail anyone she wanted to.

She looked up at him and Samath realized he was staring impolitely. "I can hear them a little," he said. "They are smarter than I thought...whoops!"

As if to make a liar out of him, Whiskers fell sideways off his hand. Samath scrambled to catch him, and got scratched for his trouble as Whiskers and all the others bolted for the vents.

"I guess they have somewhere to be," Tanadara said. "They often leave like that."

It wasn't that the paxolii were any kind of chaperone, but Samath felt a little like they were more alone now, and that it was a dangerous kind of alone, and it was hard to tell what was his interest and what was hers.

His human research had been fairly tame at first, but it turned out that the species was prolific with fiction and in writing accounts of love-making in particular. There were a number of things that Samath was quite dying to know more about, starting with kissing and going on through terms that the computer had experienced significant difficulties translating. Surely *slurping* wasn't a thing?

He was almost glad when there was a clatter at the service access door and an avian alien popped her head in. “Oh, I have a service record from this spot, but it looks like you’ve got it, Tanadara?”

“Did I forget to log myself in?” the human squeaked.

“I’m supervising,” Samath said swiftly, even though no one had asked him for justification. “That’s what I’m here to do.”

The avian, Dulie, was looking at her pad. “No, my bad, Tanadara. You’re listed here. I’ll get the leak in section five.”

“Very good,” Samath said severely.

Tanadara heaved a sigh of relief when Dulie left. “It’s a good thing that the paxolii left when they did.”

“It does give weight to the idea that they are telepathic,” Samath said. “It would explain how they keep ahead of people so well, and why they would trust you. You’re very... trustworthy.”

Tanadara’s pleasure in his assessment was almost as obvious in her smile as it was in the little shot of satisfaction in his head.

“Didn’t you notice Dulie coming?” she asked candidly. “Telepathically, I mean?”

“I was distracted,” Samath admitted. Shamefully distracted by wondering what it would be like to press his mouth against hers, to touch that soft flesh and run his fingers through her silky head fur.

Tanadara was reddening again, and her lips were slightly parted, like she wanted to say something, but didn’t.

Samath’s communicator went off then, and he was glad for the excuse to go, because he didn’t exactly trust what would happen if he stayed.

CHAPTER NINE

TANADARA WAS PRETTY sure that the extra immersement the junior technician staff was getting on rules and regulations was a coincidence.

Or, if not a coincidence, at least it had nothing to do with herself and her illegal paxolii.

Or her absurd crush on her Supervisor.

Or the fact that he was telepathic.

It was far more likely that the upbeat alien humanoid from Citizen Records was there to squash the whispers of rebellion and upheaval. Even the outside media lockdown couldn't quite keep the gossip from circulating, and the Oversight's attempts to paint the rebels in the entertainment reels as filthy and immoral rang hollow. The CR alien spoke earnestly and convincingly about how important respect and fitting in and conforming were and how happy everyone would be to be a diligent and obedient citizen, and started a sensory reel about how amazing and superior life under Oversight really was.

Tanadara put on her mental white noise and nodded along with Dulie and the others. Underneath it, she daydreamed about what Samath's skin might feel like. Most aliens had hotter body temperatures than humans, and she knew that he did, too. Sometimes, when she was passing a paxoly to him, she was close enough to feel the heat from him.

Would it hurt to kiss him? she wondered suddenly. Would it be like flaming hot spice seasoning, so intense and uncomfortable that it was actually pleasant?

She had to stuff that fantasy down and pretend to focus on the reel. There was a warm breeze and the smell of peppermint now, while they watched a citizen being praised and promoted while their counterpart in the rebellion suffered and struggled with guilt, accompanied by a too-sweet rotting smell and a biting drop in temperature.

Tanadara wondered wistfully if rebels got to keep pests and date Supervisors.

She knew that the Rebellion embraced deviations like telepathy. The media was clear about how invasive and intrusive rebels were, how unhealthy and poor and unsavory.

But the quiet gossip painted them in a more heroic light, suggesting that they only wanted freedom from the Oversight's oppression and the chance to follow their hearts and dreams.

The reel ended with a rousing song and the CR alien reminded them that rebels might be on *this very station trying to seduce them* but to be brave and strong and loyal.

Tanadara wistfully imagined having the guts to join a rebellion, but she knew that even if the rebellion really *was* on the station, they wouldn't recruit *her*. She was a very junior technician with no particular skills or talents, and she was too obedient to be a rebel.

Her big resistance was walking heavily instead of trying hard to step lightly.

And domesticating forbidden pest species.

And falling for her Supervisor.

And keeping his telepathy a secret.

But none of that was the stuff of a rebel. It was just small acts of useless rebellion that added up to nothing.

The immersement was finally over. Tanadara got to her feet and filed out with the others, careful to leave enough space between people and do her best to float.

“What a great reel,” Dulie said, drifting a proper distance away down the wide corridor. “Don't you think?”

Tanadara wished she was telepathic herself, because she wasn't sure if Dulie was theatrically enthusiastic or actually genuine. She wasn't entirely immune to the brainwashing message of the immersion, because she found herself wondering if Dulie was with the rebellion, and looking for clues and hints. The avian was very hard to read, with feathers camouflaging most of her skin reactions and round, unblinking eyes that didn't have eyebrows.

"It was inspiring," Tanadara said blandly. "Very thorough."

Dulie seemed satisfied with her answer and they moved apart to resume their duties.

It wasn't like Tanadara would have turned her in even if she *did* think Dulie was with the Rebellion, which she didn't, exactly. But she could see how easy it was to encourage suspicion over trust, and that made her a little sad.

The paxolii came to cheer her up as soon as she was alone in the upper corridors, and she scolded them when she realized that they'd chewed up some of the wiring behind one of the panels. They flattened their ears and tucked their tails into points and chattered defensively while she replaced it.

"I'm almost out of this wire," she warned them. She could buy more from her personal accounts, so it wasn't missing from central supplies, but purchasing too much might flag her in the system. Perhaps she could take up a hobby that required an unspecified amount of wiring. Some kind of art? Sculpture was a respectable pursuit.

"I'll come back to fix it soon," she promised.

CHAPTER TEN

“REFRESHMENT?
HALLUCINOGEN?”

TRANQUILIZER?

Samath gave a policy-polite denial to the shuttle attendant, who shuffled off on four of his legs. Samath wasn't hungry, and he didn't like being inebriated. Although most of his telepathy strength was receptive, he was always afraid of losing control of it if he let himself daydream. The last thing he needed to do was make everyone on the shuttle fantasize about making love to a human woman.

And he caught himself daydreaming about Tanadara entirely too often.

Humans and his kind were generally understood to be compatible, and once he'd realized that, he couldn't stop *thinking* about it. He imagined what it would feel like to have her skin against his, to move inside of her, to bring her to passion. Every time she felt attracted to him, he wondered how far that could go.

Was it just that she felt safe because she already knew about his shameful powers? Was it because he was more vain than he realized and her interest was flattering? She never gave the slightest hint that she *guessed* he felt the same way, and he politely never let on how transparent she was about her desires.

He shook himself back to his work, poring over the service logs and reviewing reports. Were these power drains suspicious? Could he alter the records without raising

suspicion, in order to cover the damage being done by the paxolii?

What had it come to, that he was even considering such sedition to protect a few sub-intelligent lower species?

Sedition was perhaps a strong word to apply to adjusting a few numbers in a database, but Samath knew that the Oversight would come down hard on it if they caught him.

And Tanadara loved them.

She was absolutely unabashed in her affection for them, even though she admitted that they made her life harder and she knew it was forbidden.

Was it human nature to be attracted to that which was prohibited?

Samath scowled at the time readout on his tablet. They should have arrived at the station some time ago. He hailed the attendant. "Has there been some kind of delay?" he asked.

"We had to deviate from our usual route due to rebel activity," he said apologetically. "Something about protest barricades. It's very inconvenient."

"Indeed." Samath wouldn't normally care about the schedule, and the shuttle was as comfortable as his office, but he'd been away from the station for training for six cycles now. He missed Tanadara, and felt like he might burst from all the observations he wanted to share with her. When had she become such a fixture in his life?

There were no windows in the shuttle, but screens could provide realtime views of anywhere he wished so he thumbed on a human favorite - a beach with tall swaying trees and golden sand meeting a gentle turquoise sea.

It was a very bland setting, Samath thought. There were no earthquakes to ride through or volcanoes to watch exploding. No dangerous fauna, no bustling markets. But he could see the gentle beauty in it. Would Tanadara enjoy going to such a place?

If Tanadara was there, he didn't imagine it could be that boring.

He returned his attention to his work, just in time to get a holomemo that made his circulatory system run cold.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TANADARA WAS GIGGLING over little whiskered paxoly kisses when she heard footsteps, and she dropped to her knees so that they could scramble into a vent instead of having a repeat of her embarrassing first meeting with Samath.

But Chitters clung stubbornly to her, and Whiskers didn't take the chance to get away.

She understood why when Samath came through the portway, and Tanadara had a little sizzle of delight that she couldn't squash quite fast enough with nonsense noise in her head.

He'd been gone so long, she thought she must have built up in her head how handsome and funny he was. But seeing him again was like a jolt of ungrounded electricity.

He had to know what a ridiculous crush she had on him by now, but he never teased her about it. Sometimes she thought he might even reciprocate her feelings. But they never spoke of it, and if they made chances to run into each other a little more than most people, and they spoke together honestly when they were alone, it probably only meant that Samath liked her, not that he...*liked* her.

The paxolii squealed in greeting, and Whiskers scampered to Samath's foot and climbed up the leg of his modesty garment. Samath gave a little rumble of amusement and scooped him into a big hand to greet him properly, face-to-face.

It always made Tanadara feel a little weak inside to watch him being gentle with the tiny creatures.

“Did you come to supervise my work?” she teased him, holding up a portion of the ruined wire. “I’m repairing a section of wire that surely hasn’t been chewed by mysterious pest animals. Nothing more than normal wear and tear here!”

“Will it put you behind schedule?” Samath asked with concern.

Tanadara shook her head. “I’m very efficient. It shouldn’t affect my record.”

Whiskers had stretched to his shoulder and was crawling around the back of Samath’s neck to rub him affectionately and purr. That, along with Samath’s surprise appearance and the slightly muted hue of his skin, made Tanadara ask, “Are you okay?”

She regretted the question immediately. It was impolite to ask personal questions, and she was assuming too much.

But Samath looked grateful. “I got some bad news,” he admitted, scratching at Chitter’s head as he came to sit next to Tanadara on the workbench. “The Oversight suspects that there are paxolii on board.”

“Oh.” Tanadara felt her stomach drop and only belatedly remembered that she should try to cushion Samath with some nonsense verse.

“They don’t know for sure,” Samath hastened to add. “It’s just a suspicion right now, because of some power irregularities and a few reports from other technicians.”

Tanadara clung to Chitters. “Is there anything we can do?”

“I’ve already changed a few numbers,” he said. “It’s not much, but it might alleviate their suspicion.”

Tanadara was surprised. Aside from the telepathy, Samath was very by-the-book, and he didn’t seem like the type who would falsify records.

He let Whiskers make lazy, chattering loops around his wrist. “I had a *sheklen* when I was a boy, and it always made me feel better to cuddle with something for a while.”

“Touch is important,” Tanadara said wistfully. “I know that privacy and autonomy are the precepts of clean social order, but I feel like somewhere along the way, we lost...intimacy.” She groaned then. “I’m sorry, I’m probably a pain in your head right now.”

“Never,” Samath said, so quickly that she knew she must be.

“Do you feel all of it, or just a little?” Tanadara asked.

“Only strong feelings,” Samath said. “And really laser-focused thoughts.”

Tanadara told herself not to think laser-focused thoughts about kissing Samath.

“I felt *that*,” Samath offered.

They were sitting so close together that she could feel the heat of him through her modesty garment, and it didn’t quite surprise her when he leaned over so that he could put his mouth on hers.

The paxolii all gave happy little squeaks and scattered when Samath’s lips touched hers, and Tanadara barely noticed, she was so absorbed in how Samath smelled and felt and made all of her skin tingle.

At first it was just a caress of a kiss, gentle and slow, and Tanadara thought she had never felt anything so perfect and she *really* hoped she smelled as good to him as he did to her.

Then it was a harder kiss, and she was parting her lips and putting her hand on his shoulder for balance, because the whole station was tipping away from her as their mouths became a new point-source of gravity.

Doubt assailed her, and she jerked back.

“This is against the rules,” she reminded him breathlessly. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Right, right.” Samath looked as dazed as she felt, and Tanadara didn’t even try to keep her sizzling attraction from him. Was she influencing him with her own desire? “Supervisor and Subordinate. Regulations.”

“Conflict of interest,” Tanadara added. “Complications.”

She wasn't sure which of them reached out first, but they collided again in a passionate kiss that blew the first one straight out of the station.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SAMATH KNEW that he shouldn't be kissing the human woman.

It was wrong on every single level.

Humans were a protected class. She was his direct subordinate. She knew he was a telepath, which was complicated enough. He knew she was illegally feeding and befriending station pests. And she was his *friend*, a dear, true friend that he valued above status or reason.

He should not be making their weird relationship yet more confused by letting her see how crazy he was for her.

But he knew how much she craved him, in all the exact same ways that he craved her. He wanted the comfort of her touch and the excitement of her kiss, and he wanted to hold her and...

Her body in his arms was exactly as supple and curvy as it looked, and he could not resist pulling her close when he fell to the temptation of kissing her again, pressing himself on the length of her, feeling her mammaries—her *breasts*—against him.

Her kiss set him on fire, raising an undeniable hunger in his loins. Most species were sexually compatible, for recreation, if not procreation, and he was dying to explore all their similarities and differences. She must feel his physical reaction, they were so close, and she was *rubbing* herself against him eagerly.

This time the doubts were his own as Samath forced himself to push her away.

Because she wasn't wrong. "This is against the *rules*," he said harshly. He, of all people, was supposed to *uphold* the rules.

"There are rules for a reason," Tanadara squeaked, adjusting the collar of her modesty garment and wiping her mouth. "This would be a terrible idea."

But now that the terrible idea was bare between them, it was even harder to resist, and Tanadara hadn't backed away very far.

"It doesn't *hurt* anyone," he said, knowing that he was justifying infraction as he touched her again.

"It's good for morale," Tanadara agreed, leaning her cheek into his caress.

"Morale?" Samath had to ask.

"Well, *my* morale," Tanadara said, with that human quirk of her lips that was humor and joy.

He kissed her again, long and lingering, marveling at her teeth and her tongue and her temperature. She was grinding against him again, in undeniable interest, and Samath honestly could not remember why they shouldn't be doing this.

Rules?

Chain of command?

Why should he deny himself something they both wanted so badly?

It wasn't hard to slip their modesty garments beneath them, and if Tanadara was a sweet package of human flesh wearing them, she was even sweeter and fleshier without them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TANADARA WAS RELIEVED to find that Samath was basically as human as she was beneath his modesty garment. His body was even more ripped than she'd guessed beneath the unflattering fabric, and if there were some muscles that didn't quite line up with human physique in his sculpted abs, she was much more interested in what technically wasn't a muscle at all, somewhat further down.

He had a cock of an appropriate length and stiffness that proclaimed his interest in their activity, whether he was protesting the legality of it or not. It was perhaps a little thicker than Tanadara was expecting, and the head was little knobbier, but when she stroked the shaft of it, he responded with a shudder of anticipation, and the whole thing rather suddenly beaded up with a slick, hot layer of lubricant.

Not that he needed it. Tanadara was almost embarrassingly wet, and as Samath was exploring her body, pressing fingers at all of her openings to see how they excited her (he swiftly realized that her nose was not at all erogenous), he found that her vulva was slick and ready, and Tanadara was sure he didn't need to be a telepath to know how much she wanted him *inside* of her.

Samath lowered her down onto their modesty garments, kissing and caressing her, paying particular attention to her breasts...and that was when she noticed a very distinct difference between him and a human.

What she'd taken for testicles unfurled beneath his cock and proved to be mobile, undulating tentacles. They didn't

have suction cups, but they did have short little whiskers all over one side, like the tube feet of starfish.

Tanadara was alarmed at first, and Samath must have picked up on her change in mood, because he slowed in his advance. “You’re okay?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“I’m okay,” she assured him, but she took her time to acquaint herself with the unexpected appendages before going so far as to invite him *in*.

They were independently prehensile, and when she shyly stroked his cock and touched the tentacles, they curled around her fingers and gently tickled up her wrist. They tingled a little, like they were giving her tiny, pleasant electric shocks.

Well, testicles, tentacles—either way Tanadara was on absolute fire and she squirmed herself beneath Samath and he entered her at last.

It was slow and careful, neither of them quite sure how their coupling would go and not willing to make the other uncomfortable. He slipped in like she’d been waiting for him, the knobby head of his cock spreading her deliciously, and each stroke took him deeper.

He was hotter than human, and Tanadara feared that it might be painful, but it matched the heat of her need, and the tentacles were almost cooling with their exciting little sizzles. They stroked her thighs as Samath pushed further inside of her, and found her clit and teased it. One of the members slithered around to her backside and Tanadara cried out in surprise and pleasure as it entered her anus. It wasn’t big enough to hurt her, just enough to give her a whole new range of sensations.

And oh, he filled her so well!

At some point, their joining grew more frantic, his strokes were faster and harder and she clung to him and came, over and over to higher peaks and more beautiful tumbles of release, and at the end, he cried out in another language and seemed to become so hot inside her that Tanadara was afraid

she might burn away from within...and it was so exquisite that she genuinely wanted to.

And then, slowly, they came back to themselves, in a shuddering afterglow of pleasure and relief.

His cock slipped from her and reduced in size, and his tentacles curled up once more. Tanadara felt chilled without his furnace heat inside of her, and he gathered her into his arms as they caught their breath. What passed for his heart was hammering against her at first, then gradually slowed until they were both more or less back to normal.

As normal as they could ever *be*, after that.

“I’m not sorry,” Tanadara said, daring him to agree.

“I’m not sorry,” he said sincerely. “Maybe such small acts of rebellion are a good thing.”

Tanadara propped herself up on one elbow so she could look down on him. He was practically purring, and his face, relaxed, was even more dear and handsome than ever.

“How can you look at me like that?” he wanted to know.

Tanadara knew it wasn’t how she was looking, but how she was feeling, so full of affection and warmth.

And love?

Was this love?

The Oversight didn’t particularly encourage love, except for love of Duty and Service.

This...this was messy and true.

And particularly *messy*. Tanadara used a cloth from her kit to clean herself up as Samath, darn him anyway, seemed to absorb all of the excess moisture directly back into his iridescent skin.

“That must be convenient,” she observed. “Just being able to suck your fluids in and out through your skin at will.”

“I am...conveniently designed,” Samath said, sounding chagrined.

“Don’t feel bad,” Tanadara was quick to say. “Being genetically engineered shouldn’t be shameful.”

He gave her a suspicious sidelong look. “How did you know that?”

Tanadara shrugged. “I just guessed. You’re so...perfect.”

He looked down at himself in astonishment. “What?”

“I mean, look at you!”

He double-blinked at Tanadara in what she had come to realize was astonishment. Maybe his eyeballs dried out when he was surprised. “I look nothing like you,” he said.

“And isn’t that for the best,” Tanadara said, looking down at all her extra rolls. She gamely ate the right nutritional supplements even though they tasted terrible, and did the mandatory fitness regimen...but no more. Her plush curves were stubborn, and she had a shameful weakness for Fazian chips.

“But, you’re the human ideal, aren’t you?”

Tanadara was pretty sure he was making a joke, but he looked particularly grim and serious, so she wasn’t positive. “Ha, ha, ha,” she said without humor.

“That didn’t sound like your usual laugh.” His kind didn’t furrow brows in confusion, but Tanadara had come to realize that there was a particular twitch at his temple when he was trying to figure something out.

Was he serious? “I am the furthest thing from a human ideal that is possible,” she said in astonishment.

He double-blinked again. “Are you sure?”

“I grew up in an Oversight human refuge,” she reminded him. “Pretty sure I know what they consider attractive, and I’m not it.”

“They are clearly deluded,” Samath said, with such finality that Tanadara had to give a genuine laugh.

His temple stopped twitching. “That is your correct laugh,” he said with relief. “Let us agree to admire each other without

question.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AND ADMIRE each other they did.

They were impressively good at keeping their public interactions formal and impersonal, but Samath could always feel her warmth and affection and he indulged in appreciation of her form and her friendliness.

He reminded himself that he shouldn't be envious when she was interacting kindly with other station staff, and that he shouldn't like her sizzle of jealousy when he was speaking with other people. They couldn't claim each other, not publicly, but they could do it in private.

There were several decks far away from the gravity core that saw very little traffic, and he could lock the access doors and make sweet love to sweet Tanadara at every opportunity.

It wasn't just sex, though. Sometimes, they simply lay cuddled together in an abandoned corridor, drinking up the forbidden touch of each other. The paxolii often joined them, purring and kneading their tiny paws on their shoulders. Samath was delighted to find that they trusted him almost as much now as they trusted Tanadara, and would come out and chirp at him in fearless greeting when he got to a rendezvous location before she did.

He wondered if they didn't understand what he was trying to do and cast a sideways look at Tanadara on afternoon while Shimmies was licking the back of his neck and Whiskers was grooming himself in his lap.

“What do they sound like?” Tanadara asked wistfully. Envy wasn't a common emotion from her.

“They are mostly very, very quiet. Little whispers of hunger and happiness.”

“I like that,” she said, tickling Shivers’ belly. “Whispers of hunger and happiness.”

Samath had his own hunger, and it didn’t take long to chase off the paxolii and strip their modesty garments.

He had worried, somehow, that *novelty* or the fact that their dalliance was forbidden would be the only reason that Tanadara wanted him, but as they grew more comfortable with each other, they only seemed to grow even closer. He now knew exactly which parts she loved to have touched (not the nose), and how hard she liked it (rather hard, on occasion!). Likewise, she grew skilled in teasing him to heights of excitement and they never tired of experimenting with speed and pleasure and the beautiful, soul-filling meeting of skin against skin.

He lay inside of her some time after they finished and held her on his chest and stroked her hair. This part of the station was warm, not shielded as much from the harsh rays of the nearby sun, and it was comfortable for both of them without the modesty garment to moderate their temperatures.

“How did you learn to protect yourself from telepathy?” he asked gently. He knew already that she was definitely not telepathic herself, and that the topic caused her some pain, but the question had continued to metaphorically eat at him.

She stirred against him, but her discomfort was muted by her lingering euphoria. “My sister,” she said with a little ripple of grief. “My sister was telepathic. The Oversight didn’t find her until we were teenagers, so I got a lot of practice hiding pranks and crushes from her...before that.”

A teenager was late for a telepath to be discovered. Samath had a chilling feeling that he knew how this story would go, and he held Tanadara closer against him.

After a moment, she gave a little sigh. “They swore that the inhibitors wouldn’t change her, but they did. She was the

kindest, nicest person before they gave her the implant, always thinking of others, and afterwards...”

Samath was startled by the tiny feeling of feet on his arms as one paxoly and then another, drawn by Tanadara’s despair, came creeping out of the vents to curl up and comfort her.

“I barely knew her after that,” Tanadara said, cupping her hand around one of the cuddling paxoly and stroking it with one thumb. “She looked the same, and she was still...smart? It wasn’t like she was lobotomized, but she didn’t *care* about anything. She swore that she didn’t feel different, but she wasn’t my sister anymore. I don’t think she even noticed when I enlisted in technical school and moved to Glory Station.”

Samath cradled her against him and sighed into her hair. It was his deepest fear, that he wouldn’t be able to love if he couldn’t *feel*. And now that he *had* loved, he knew exactly what he might be missing.

He only belatedly realized that Tanadara could not *feel* all the tenderness she had unleashed in him, and he drew up to a sitting position, scattering squeaking paxolii. He took Tanadara’s face in her hands. “I love you,” he said earnestly, struggling to put into words all the emotions that he was feeling. He owed it to her to try. “You are my meaning and my freedom and my safety, all at once. You inspire and excite me like no one else I’ve ever met. I have been afraid to tell you, because now you have all the keys to me, every one of them.”

“I could not bear to lose you,” Tanadara said, her feelings like a great rush in Samath’s head that she made no effort to muffle or contain. “I love you!”

He kissed her and caressed her, possessive and painfully aware of how temporary everything could be.

They were breaking every rule in the book, having passion that was not only unprofessional, but unsanctioned. The Oversight didn’t want feelings so deep, Samath realized, because he was perfectly willing to break every rule between him and Tanadara’s happiness. But how could he go through life in a shallow approximation of what he knew was possible now?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TANADARA WASN'T sure why she'd ever disliked the arboretum.

The domed room was a perfectly reasonable place to linger between meetings and pretend to smell things while hoping to run into Samath when they were both off duty. It wasn't suspicious at all that they both happened to enjoy the place, and it was a very acceptable place to be social. The Oversight encouraged just the right amount of mingling.

She missed her family, but it had been too painful to stay with them and see her sister as someone else entirely. She couldn't pretend like the rest of them that nothing had changed when it so obviously had.

Tanadara had thought a lot about her sister since she met Samath.

Natural telepaths were one in a billion, maybe. What were the chances that she would meet two of them—one of them her sister, and the other her forbidden lover?

She was a technician, not a mathematician, but she knew slim odds when she saw them.

Maybe Samath had been created telepathic, or an ancestor had. It was just another thing she adored about him, because he was always using it *kindly*. Sometimes he recognized a bad mood before she did, and his consideration was such a beautiful part of such a beautiful person. She could tell when he used it with others, as well. She believed him when he said he never pried, but sometimes even mind deaf Tanadara could tell when someone in the mess hall or common area was

suffering, and he always went out of the way to set them on a happier path.

It went beyond a sense of duty, Tanadara thought. It was that he *cared*.

And she'd seen what could happen if that was taken from him.

"You're sad," he told her now, startling her. It was ridiculous how quietly and gracefully he could move.

"I was," Tanadara admitted, letting him feel the warmth she felt for him free in her head. It was hard to be unhappy when he was around, even when they were pretending to be doing nothing more than sharing an aesthetic appreciation for exotic flora.

They were very careful not to spend too much time together here, but even a short encounter where they spoke of nothing in particular was enough to soothe away all of Tanadara's rough edges. She went to her scheduled meeting with lighter feet and daydreamed through half of it.

"Technician? Technician?"

Tanadara shook herself. "I apologize, Director," she said. How much of the meeting had she missed? It was a good thing the Director *wasn't* telepathic, because she'd done an appallingly bad job of keeping her thoughts in order. "You were saying?"

"The exterminators will be arriving at the end of the cycle, I expect you to show them the areas of infestation."

Infestation?

The Director apparently took her silence for worry. "Don't fret, we'll have the paxolii removed well before the next inspection and it should not disrupt your work schedule in the slightest. Each of the corridors will be closed for gassing only a few rotations of time and will be staggered throughout the station to minimize the impact and prevent reinfection. We have the very best exterminators coming."

It took Tanadara a moment to put sense to the Director's impossible words, and she would not have been able to keep the zing of that realization from anyone telepathic with any amount of discipline. Samath probably felt her alarm from across the station.

Exterminators.

They were coming to kill her paxolii.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SAMATH DIDN'T NEED to be a telepath to know that Tanadara was upset.

He could feel her halfway across the station, all the prickly despair and anger and fear. But the moment he found her in the very lowest utility corridor, he could tell it from her appearance, too, every bit as keenly.

The flesh around her eyes and nose was puffy and red, and her shoulders were rolled miserably forward.

She looked up at him with fluids leaking alarmingly from her eyes. "They're calling in exterminators!" she wailed. "The whole station is going to be gassed!"

Samath pulled her into a hard embrace, nearly as alarmed as she was and not sure how much of what he felt was the influence of her feelings and what was his own dismay. He was honestly very fond of the paxolii by now and knew that they had personality and individuality. It was not just a shame to eliminate them, but also a tragedy.

She pounded on his chest with her fisted fingers. It didn't hurt, but Samath could tell that it made her feel less powerless. "They aren't hurting anything! They never did anything wrong! They use up less power than a malfunctioning circuit cycler! They're my friends!"

Then all the fight went out of her and she was limp in his arms, frail and unhappy and Samath would have done anything to spare her the pain that she couldn't—and wasn't trying to—hide.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a moment, wiping a hand across her seeping eyes. “You shouldn’t have to feel this.” Samath could feel her struggle to contain her emotions and bury them behind a blank wall.

“But I do,” Samath said, in some astonishment as he untangled his own emotions. “It’s not just what you’re feeling. I care for them, too. I am pained for the potential of their loss. It is...unfair. Unjust.”

“They aren’t a protected species,” Tanadara said. Her non-erogenous nose appeared to be leaking, as well as her eyes, and she blew out into a cleaning rag. “They’re classified as pests. There’s nothing we could do.”

“Can we shield them, somehow?” he proposed. “Or convince them to move from the areas under extermination ahead of schedule?”

“I thought of that,” Tanadara said, her voice sounding choked and tiny. “But they are overlapping the gassing corridors to prevent—” she seemed to be having difficulty with her words, probably because humans used breath organs for speech “—undesirable flight.”

“I’ve been trying to hide their damage,” he said mournfully. “But I couldn’t alter all the reports, and you couldn’t prevent them from doing it.”

“Can you convince the Director to withdraw the order?” Tanadara said with a sudden sizzle of hope. “Can you use your telepathy to *make* them change their minds?”

Samath flinched at the idea and knew she wouldn’t suggest it if she weren’t utterly desperate. “That’s not a thing I can do,” he said regretfully. “It isn’t like you see in the reels, with telepaths forcing people to do and think things they wouldn’t otherwise. That’s all just propaganda.”

The thread of Tanadara’s hope dissolved in worry and despair. “Of course. And you wouldn’t, anyway.”

“I might,” Samath said, holding her close and rocking her because that was something she liked. “For you.”

“I couldn’t ask you to,” Tanadara sobbed.

Samath took her face in both hands. “I will figure something out,” he promised. “I will find a solution and I will save them, somehow. I could ask the Director directly for leniency. Maybe get him to trap and relocate them.”

“They are pest class,” Tanadara reminded him. “Transporting them *anywhere* is illegal.”

“Then I’ll suggest that we isolate them and keep them as pets.”

Tanadara smiled sadly through her tears at him. “They’d never let you. They’d think you had gone mad. You’d risk your whole career. I can’t let you do that for a few...a few...” her face crumpled like wet paper.

“They are dear to you,” Samath said firmly. “They are dear to me. I will figure out a way to save them if I have to burn my Supervisor bars and take the station with them.”

He was pleased that Tanadara took his vow to heart and seemed a little lighter in spirit than she had been, though she was clearly still worried behind the shroud of concealment she carefully put over her feelings again.

Samath hoped with all his heart that it was a promise he could keep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“SAMA—” Tanadara drew up at the Supervisor’s door, because it wasn’t Samath behind his desk, and she should not be addressing him so casually in public. “Supervisor?”

The slim alien had Supervisor bars on his modesty garment, but that was the only similarity they had. It was a citizen who showed no obvious gender, with a number of extra appendages floating around at its sides. It had a few too many eyes to focus on, and all of them blinked at Tanadara in a way that she suspected was suspicious.

“I was here to ask Supervisor Samath some questions about the...ah...the extermination procedures schedule.” It was the technical truth, even if Tanadara’s questions had been about avoiding the extermination rather than executing it.

Spikes flared along its head. “Supervisor Samath has been replaced,” it said in a flat nasal voice, though it appeared to have no actual nose. “I am Supervisor Ioya and I can field your questions about the extermination.”

Replaced?

For a long moment, Tanadara simply stared rudely at the alien, trying to settle her churning belly. Samath was gone? Her ally and friend? Her...love? Tanadara realized that stupid silence was not serving her.

“I was...ah...wondering if I could get some time off around the extermination,” Tanadara fabricated. She was still toying with the idea of smuggling the paxolii off the station with her in some fashion.

Supervisor Ioya's mouth did a wriggly thing that Tanadara guessed was a frown as it punched a few keystrokes into the input board on Samath's desk—Tanadara refused to think of it as not being his. "We usually require junior technicians to be available during non-routine programs in case of complications," it said in neutral tones.

She probably wouldn't be able to get the paxolii through the checkpoints, anyway. And what would she do then? She didn't have enough credits to buy her way out of Oversight, or a shuttle, or a destination.

And if she didn't have Samath, she wasn't sure why it was worth escaping at all.

The paxolii, she reminded herself, not sure which part of all of this worried and hurt the worst. Samath was *gone*. Had he protested the extermination too strenuously? Had The Oversight found out about their fraternization? Surely she would have been called up on disciplinary action if that was the case.

Should she try to defend him? It would help if she knew what crime he'd been accused of...or even if he had. What if he was just on some kind of weird personal alien leave that was totally normal for his species? She might make it worse for him if she said the wrong thing.

But maybe she could still save her smallest friends. Somehow.

"I know it's not standard, but I'd really appreciate the time off," she said in her most hopeful voice. She made her fake smile show just the right amount of teeth.

Then Supervisor Ioya gave a tiny exhale of breath that Tanadara wasn't sure how to interpret. "You appear to have an exemplary record and a large unused leave bank. I see no reason not to grant such a request. File the necessary documents with the Citizen Wards."

"Thank you, Supervisor," Tanadara said numbly. "Can you tell me...where Supervisor Samath went?" That seemed like a safe enough question.

Several of the Supervisor's eyes closed. "That information is confidential," it said firmly. "You do not have the required clearance."

I have all the clearance I need to love him! Tanadara wanted to shout, but what was the point? To the Oversight, she was just another citizen. A very junior technician.

"Thank you, Supervisor," she repeated carefully. "I will file the necessary documents."

She was glad that her legs did not start trembling until she'd made it up a service hatch into one of the vacant upper decks, and she was not surprised when the paxolii were quick to find her and curl around her neck, comfortingly purring and whistling. She cradled them up against her and cried in agony.

She was on her own again, alone in a universe that only seemed to get larger and emptier with every breath.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SAMATH ANSWERED the Oversight summons promptly, striding down the dull hallways the way that Tanadara did, confident and solid on the grating beneath him. None of this walking lightly or trying to float nonsense. *This is the weight that I have in this gravity*, Tanadara had said, her face split to show her happy white rows of ectodermal organs. *Why pretend to be what I'm not?*

“We just have a few questions for you,” The Queror told him in a manner that was not at all comforting as Samath was greeted at the door. “Step this way.” The Queror was a broad, humanoid alien with bristling spikes and several rows of teeth.

“I’m happy to comply,” Samath lied. He walked firmly through the door and was unsurprised to find a chair waiting for him. It didn’t have cuffs...but it did have rings where they could be hooked. How much would they learn from his mind before it broke? What did they think that he knew?

“There is a technician that you have been spending a great deal of time with,” the Queror said, as Samath settled obediently into the chair, trying to squash the flare of alarm that the Queror’s words lit up in him. Was Tanadara in trouble? He’d assumed that he was the sole problem, but if he’d somehow implicated her, he’d never forgive himself. Was this about the paxolii? Had he agitated a little too much for their comfort? “It is non-standard.”

“She is a human,” Samath said casually, wrenching his thoughts back into order. “A novelty.”

“Ah,” the Queror said in agreement. “We don’t have many on the station. Have you fraternized?”

Fraternized?

Samath was outraged by the idea that their sweet love could ever have such a cavalier name. He’d never been so happy as he was pleasing her and pleasuring himself in perfect unity. But he wasn’t here to defend her honor, he was here to protect her, and he wiped the offense from his mind. “We have enjoyed conversations,” he said blandly. “She was raised in a human refuge and has many quaint ideas.”

“She is anomalous.” That seemed to satisfy the Queror. “She will be corrected, in order to fit in better. Do you know why you are here?”

Samath was desperate enough to open his mind to the Queror, and alarmed to find a stunning blankness there.

“We know you are telepathic,” the Queror said off-handedly.

Samath had always dreaded this. He’d lived in fear of it for fifteen solars.

The Queror was still speaking. “This room is inhibited. We also know that you are working for the Rebellion, and you will have to be used as an example.”

Samath barely heard him, he was so outraged over the idea that they would *correct* Tanadara. She was perfect exactly like she was and she didn’t need improvement or obedience. They would brainwash her into being something other than *herself* and the whole universe would be less bright because of it.

“Do you understand the gravity of this charge?” the Queror asked, sounding puzzled. Was he expecting Samath to grovel or beg for leniency?

And Samath was a danger to the Oversight now, as a deviant telepath. He considered his options. “I am loyal to the Oversight,” he said coaxingly. “I would not betray it. There is no need for drastic measures, and my unique skills can be useful for our cause.”

The Queror hesitated and for a moment Samath thought he might be able to bluff his way out entirely. If he could protect Tanadara...

The Queror's face settled into skepticism. "We will require the memory block as well," he said, and he lifted a chilling object from the tray by the chair: an inhibitor. It was a metallic half-collar, and Samath knew that it would be grafted directly into the skin of his neck. Never again would he hear the hungry-happy whispers of the paxolii, or the caress of Tanadara's adoration.

That was when he realized that the Queror had made one critical error: Samath hadn't been restrained yet.

Was it conceit, because the Queror was so much larger and stronger than Samath? Carelessness, because rebellion had been so trained out of the Oversight's citizens?

But Samath knew passion now, and he had the advantage of surprise when he launched himself straight out of the chair to scramble for the memory block that was lying on the tray near the inhibitor.

His chances were slim, but his need was equally desperate.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“SUPERVISOR SAMATH IS BACK,” Dulie told Tanadara with a sly clack of her beak a few cycles later. Gossip was discouraged, and teasing even moreso, but Tanadara knew that there had been some talk in the technicians hall about how much she’d been seen with Samath, and how suddenly he’d been replaced.

Tanadara was sure that her ill-concealed despair over the extermination of the paxolii, exactly timed with Samath’s sudden disappearance, looked very suspiciously like fraternization indeed...and there was some truth to it, even if it wasn’t the whole story.

Tanadara felt her heart lift in her chest at Dulie’s news, but tried to look properly bored as she put the advised portions on her meal platter. “That sounds acceptable,” she said as casually as possible.

Avian aliens couldn’t exactly smirk, but Tanadara thought Dulie did, a little, as she moved away with her own tray.

Tanadara didn’t even *look* at the Fazian chips. Who needed crunchy, sweet-salty starch flakes when *Samath* was back? She had clearly fretted for no reason. Maybe he had an alien-smart masterplan for saving the paxolii. She felt like she was floating, like they’d turned down the gravity *even more* and she didn’t have to try to step lightly.

The mandatory meal was slow torture, trying not to rush, not to look the slightest bit suspicious. Or excited. Or anxious.

Tanadara reminded herself that these were weak human emotions, and she shouldn’t get her hopes up. Feelings were

supposed to be muted. Everyone was supposed to behave with distant carelessness.

But behind her measured bites of food, her mind was racing. Had Samath been disciplined? Had he managed to stop the extermination? Had he missed her as much as she missed him? Should she go by his office? Look for him at one of their rendezvous places? Fabricate a reason to call him? Wait in the arboretum until they happened to see each other?

Her communicator gave a little burble. *Report to Supervisor*, the screen read. Tanadara's heart hammered in her throat. This saved her having to find an excuse to go to his office, at least.

She made herself hurry just the right amount as she put her tray to be recycled and then she was walking as lightly as she could manage down the corridors to his familiar door.

It slid open in recognition and Tanadara had a rush of relief and joy at the sight of him standing at his desk, frowning in familiar fashion at his bookshelf of antiques.

Then he turned, and the glint of gold at his throat stole all of her breath. An inhibitor, like a badge of shame, circled half of his neck, and Tanadara's heart seemed to seize in her chest.

There was no warm greeting or secret slight smile at the sight of her, no telltale darkening of his skin color. She may as well have been any junior technician.

"Supervisor Samath," she managed to say, strangled with despair. "You hailed?" Her stomach was cold and her meal sat at the bottom of it like a block of ice. This was not her Samath. She felt as if the last solid part of her world had crumbled beneath her and she was in freefall.

"I will need you to report to the Queror for correction," he said flatly.

Correction. "Is this about...the paxolii?"

"I kept your illicit animal activities from our conversation," Samath said, "in consideration to your discretion on *other matters*."

Other matters. Is that what he was calling it? Other matters like laughing together in joy like Tanadara had never known before, and learning ways to make her own body sing in bliss with him? She thought it had been love. Now, it was reduced to *other matters* and traded for silence.

“Of...course,” she stammered. If she was smarter, she might think of something clever. A cutting final remark, maybe. But she couldn’t think around all the emotion in her chest and the emptiness of knowing that Samath couldn’t feel it from her. She didn’t have to try to hide it, so she didn’t.

“I understand that you have requested leave,” he said blandly. “I have approved this request and granted transport on a shuttle tomorrow at first bells to an Oversight recreation planet. Your correction can commence upon your return.”

He was scheduling her a *vacation*? Maybe he wanted her off the station because of the shame she’d cast on him.

She couldn’t save him now, but she rallied herself for one last fight. “The paxolii don’t deserve to die, Supervisor,” she said. “They’re living creatures and they siphon less energy than a faulty capacitor junction, of which we have several. It’s not *logical* to exterminate them.”

Was there a flash of something in his iridescent face? Tanadara’s sister had been able to feel anger after her inhibition, just not love. Maybe he was mad at her for shaming him. As fast as the expression was there, it was gone again and Tanadara wasn’t positive she’d interpreted it correctly, anyway.

“You are dismissed, technician,” he said offhandedly. “Don’t pursue the topic again.”

Tanadara staggered from his office like the gravity was cranked up to one hundred and returned to pack her few belongings and retreat to her bunk to weep herself to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DECEIVING Tanadara was the hardest thing that Samath had ever done. Harder even than dredging down into the violence in his soul to shoot the Queror up with drugs and burn an inert Inhibitor into his own neck.

As soon as she left, her curvy shoulders rolled forward in the despair that he could feel like frostbite in his head, he sprang into action. He had to make everything about this convincing, before the memory block on the Queror wore off.

The thing about being a telepath, probably the thing that scared the Oversight the most, was that he knew what made people tick. He knew their little fears and foibles. It didn't take much, a guilty soul over here, a lustful thought, a deep desire. He could offer what people wanted most, threaten them with exposure...or simply pluck the information he needed from their head.

And he'd never have used it for anything but good, until they threatened to take it away from him, to destroy innocent creatures, and to break the heart of the plucky human woman who had taught him how beautiful feelings could actually be.

The Transportation Supervisor was surprised to see him, and even more surprised when Samath led him through a conversation that involved security codes. He never had to actually ask for them, just innocently talk about how they compared to the security in his own department to get them to bubble to the surface of the man's mind.

Samath left feeling faintly dirty, because the man had been flattered and intrigued, and Samath felt like he'd used him

poorly. This was exactly what he'd never wanted to do. But he'd do it for Tanadara. He'd burn the station for Tanadara, he realized. He'd burn the entire system if that's what it came to, and question every one of his morals.

That brought him to the lower levels, where gravity was high and the lighting higher.

He paused at the vent, remembering how he'd made love to Tanadara at exactly this intersection, hoping that if he failed on this whole mad gambit, she would remember him like that, not breaking her heart in his office.

Come, he called with his mind. *Urgent-come-now-must*.

They didn't think in words, and Samath had to stop himself from trying to command them. He had to *persuade* them.

Danger! Leave! Friends!

How do you convince a prey animal to go with a predator? Aside from Tanadara, they had no allies in the universe and Samath's kind had trapped and killed them.

Would they trust him?

Samath felt them approach before he saw them, and had a moment of relief a moment before a furry little head popped from the open access vent, and then another.

Their thoughts were like a carbonated drink, all skittering thoughts and sensation with no substance. They were wary, and wondering, and confused.

Samath had never come here without Tanadara, and they felt different without her. Would he be successful in persuading them of his earnest need? They trusted *her*. That didn't mean they would trust *him*.

Have to leave, he tried to impress on them. *Danger coming! Let me take you*. He had a soft bag that he spread out on the floor.

They seemed to want to play with the bag, and Samath let them get comfortable with it, exploring the folds and chewing on the ties.

“I’m sorry to do this,” he said out loud, but before he could scoop them into the bag and secure it, they scattered up into the mechanical systems, leaving behind a spatter of *fear-run-hide-danger-danger* thoughts in their wake until they were too far away to sense. He had spooked them instead of convincing them.

It wasn’t that they actively disbelieved him, Samath thought. It was that they didn’t *understand* him. They were, at the end of the cycle, not *intelligent* creatures, and their harmless foolishness was part of their charm. He wouldn’t have time to try to capture them again, he feared, checking his chronometer.

He would have to try to get Tanadara out alone, and he felt a stab of uncertainty. Would she even want him if he couldn’t save her little friends? He didn’t particularly want to face her without them and indecision kept him at the service vent much longer than his plan had dictated.

Samath was about to admit defeat and leave the access corridor when something teased at the edge of his senses. Resignation, maybe? *Acceptance*? It was a weird feeling of *yes-but-wary*, in the slithery little semi-sentient way that the paxolii felt in his head, but amplified.

He waited, and realized why they felt stronger than before when more of them than he expected scampered from the mechanical workings and swarmed up his legs to rub his face.

He recognized Shimmies, Whiskers, Shivers, and Chitters, but there were a dozen others, smaller and sleeker.

They were babies, Samath realized, and they were baby-clumsy and baby-shrill as the adults herded them into the bag that was waiting for them in the corridor. They could cling to things as well as the grown-up paxolii could, but their movements were jerky and unsure.

“You really were an infestation,” he teased Whiskers, who scolded him and purred in joy.

Now he had to hope that the rest of his plan worked, or he was going to be caught red-handed trying to smuggle *breeding*

paxolii off the station.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TANADARA KNEW that the checkpoint would search her bag before she left. For safety reasons, of course. Was there some way to hide the paxolii? Even if she could keep them still long enough, a paxolii didn't really look like anything else. Maybe she could stuff them into a pillow or something. She only knew that she had to try.

The point was moot.

When she went to the corridors where they usually came to her, there was no answer to her mental call.

“Whiskers? Chitters?”

The service corridor, brighter than she was used to thanks to Samath's kindness, was still and empty.

“Shivers? Shimmies?”

Well, if she couldn't smuggle them out, maybe she could sabotage the extermination itself.

The gassing equipment was already set up outside the service corridor, and at a complete lull in the minimal traffic, Tanadara popped open an access hatch and found a few critical bundles of wire that she could saw off with her personal tool, roughing the edges a little to make the damage look less deliberate.

It was something that could be easily repaired, she knew, but maybe it would slow them down. Maybe the paxolii would understand the urgency of her call and make some kind of last-minute appearance.

Maybe... Tanadara realized that there were tears blurring her vision and heard light warning footsteps just a moment before Dulie came around the corner. She just got her tool in her pocket, but there was no time to get the cover to the extermination machine back on.

“Oh, Tanadara,” Dulie said. “Aren’t you catching the shuttle in just a few clicks?”

“I was just...” Tanadara cast about for any reason she would be there with her bag, the damaged extermination equipment open in front of her.

“You are so diligent,” Dulie chirped admiringly. “It looks like something damaged the equipment and you’re trying to fix it before you go.”

“Of course,” Tanadara said faintly.

“You don’t want to be late,” Dulie scolded her gently. “I will finish the repair. Those pesky paxolii must have gotten into it over the down cycle. It’s a good thing we’re getting rid of them.”

Was Dulie trying a little too hard to get her to go? Tanadara wondered when she’d become so suspicious. It was just as likely that Dulie was thinking of the greater good. Everyone in the Oversight looked out for the Oversight, so the Oversight could look out for them. Dulie was being genuinely helpful, the way she’d praised Tanadara for being.

“Enjoy your vacation!” Dulie said, kneeling to repair the damage that Tanadara had just done. “Return refreshed!”

Tanadara gathered up her bag and staggered away, her last hope for saving the paxolii dying with Dulie’s cheerful, well-meant labor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SAMATH'S BAG of paxolii felt like a blinking spotlight as he headed through the corridors towards the shuttle. There was still one major flaw in his whole crazy plan, and he didn't know how to get around it.

He continued to walk slowly along his usual work route, stopping to have civil conversation where it was necessary, checking his communicator clock obsessively. Everything depended on perfect timing.

His circuit took him through to one of the junctions where the extermination machinery was waiting for deployment, and was surprised to find Dulie working studiously at an open panel.

"Supervisor," she greeted courteously. "I regret to report paxolii damage in this machine. I should have it repaired soon enough that it doesn't disrupt the schedule."

Samath made himself not glance at the suspicious bag of paxolii he was trying to inconspicuously carry. Were they smart enough to know that equipment was there to bring about their own end? They were clever, but distinctly sub-sentient.

Had Tanadara decided to sabotage it to try to save her little friends? It was just like that plucky, wonderful human to attempt such an act!

"Good work, Technician," Samath said mildly. "Carry on."

He had to reposition the bag so that its wiggle wasn't obvious and try not to lengthen his stride until he was well out of the way. It was almost time, now...

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TANADARA CLUTCHED her bag close and stared around at the half full shuttle, knowing full well that she must look like a terrible mess. She was not exactly improving the public image of humans, with her red nose and weeping eyes.

She couldn't save the paxolii—she was right that she could never have gotten them through the transportation checkpoint—and she couldn't save Samath. She had half-formed ideas of joining the rebellion while she was on vacation at the Oversight retreat, but even that seemed hopeless and out of reach. What would the rebellion want with her, anyway? She wasn't the brightest human of the race, and she had no particular skills or specialties. She could follow technical manuals and withstand medium-high gravities, but she didn't think that made her any prize for a revolution.

She was alone and without a friend again.

“It's a human!” an alien child whispered to its parent. “And it's leaking!”

“Humans do that,” the parent said dismissively. “Don't stare.”

Tanadara took her assigned seat, stowing her bag and entertainment tablet before her. The rest of the aliens on board ignored her, most of them plugged into their entertainment consoles already.

The pilot took the forward seat, his many-armed copilot oozing into place beside him.

Safety buckles extended from the sides of the chair and Tanadara let them clasp around her. It reminded her of Samath's strong embrace, but was bitterly different and impersonal.

She tipped her head back on the supports and gave a sigh. Maybe she could sleep during the trip. She should request a tranquilizer when the refreshments were served.

But before she could even close her eyes, there was the blare of an alarm and the restraints released. "Due to safety protocols, all living beings are required to exit the shuttle immediately," a bland voice directed from the speakers. "Please move to the exits in an orderly fashion."

She even imagined Samath's voice in safety recordings, Tanadara thought with a sigh. She gave everyone the polite distance and privacy, picked up her bag, and filed with the others from the shuttle. It wasn't like she thought she could enjoy her tropical vacation, really, but she had hoped that she wouldn't be forced to remain on the station while her only remaining friends were wiped out of existence.

Not everyone was so careful, and someone moving against the flow of traffic bumped into her with a soft-sided bag.

"Excuse me," she said automatically, trying to get out of their way, but they crowded her impolitely off to the side, and she looked up with surprise, alarm, and a jagged slice of hope into Samath's dear face.

He looked just as cold and distant as he had in his office, and just as Tanadara felt her hope crystalize into pain, he impersonally herded her out of the stream of passengers and back towards the shuttle, thrusting the bag into her arms.

It was heavier than it looked, and she nearly dropped it as Samath made polite murmurs of nonsense explanation to the aliens around them about a gas leak or an air impurity or an electrical short, flashing his badge—which should have no weight in transportation departments at all. No one bothered giving it a second look, however, or questioned the alarm klaxon.

Then she was backing into the shuttle and Samath was closing the door on them and dropping a hard-sided suitcase in the luggage compartment. The bag Tanadara was holding was wriggling.

“You can let them out,” Samath said, sweeping forward to the pilot’s seat. “Pick any seat you like, this is now a private expedition. I can pilot, but I could use an extra set of eyes from the copilot’s chair if you don’t mind. We’ve still got a few hurdles to get past.”

“Samath?”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you earlier. I was quite sure my office was being monitored, and I wanted you to have plausible deniability if things went sideways. I wasn’t sure—I’m still not sure—if I would be able to coordinate it all at once and thought it would be cruel to get your hopes up if it didn’t work out.”

Those hopes were choking Tanadara now, and she clutched the bag against her, feeling it swarm in protest. There were too many in there to be just *her* four paxolii. And smuggling paxolii at all...she plucked at the containment ties and Samath worked with feverish concentration at a communications console.

The top of the bag opened and a familiar whiskered head greeted her with a squeak of accusing protest. Another followed it, and another. Tanadara sat in the copilot’s chair and scooped them back into the bag one by one as they tried (not very hard) to escape, chattering. There definitely appeared to be *extras*, and they were *adorable!*

“Are we stealing the shuttle?” she asked in astonishment. “Samath, your inhibitor?!”

Samath touched the metal traces along the side of his neck. “It will probably scar,” he said mournfully. “It’s a good thing I’m not vain.”

“How is this possible?”

“I knocked the Oversight Representative over the head with a mental probe, gave him a memory block, and installed a

dummy inhibitor in my neck. Without anesthetic, I might add. I was very stoic.”

“Samath, you didn’t!”

“I did,” Samath said firmly, sparing her a sideways glance. “I couldn’t let all the paxolii die and I never want to stop caring about you.”

“But...regulations!” Tanadara protested, still in shock.

“Screw the regulations,” Samath said firmly. “I don’t need regulations to tell me what’s right, and maybe it’s time to pursue the right thing instead of the thing I’m told to do.” He paused with his hands on the console. “But do you want to come?” His fathomless eyes drilled into her. “I understand if you don’t want to go on the run with me. I can’t let you off now, but I’ll tell them I was using you for a hostage and set you at any station you want. Your record will be clean.”

“I don’t want a clean record!” Tanadara cried. “I want freedom. I want to go somewhere that we don’t have to hide what we are or who we care about!”

His face split into a smile that Tanadara had been afraid she would never see again. “Oh, good. I was hoping you’d say that. Being telepathic doesn’t mean I could guess that you’d be on board with this crazy plan!”

Just as suddenly, he frowned. “There is still one small hole in my plan,” he said honestly, returning to punching data into the dashboard.

The shuttle gave an unexpected jolt and Tanadara squeaked. Her armful of paxolii dove back into the shelter of the bag and she clutched it close.

“Hold on,” Samath said. “I ran a dummy program in the transportation matrix. The station thinks that the shuttle is about to explode.”

“Explode?!”

“It’s not, don’t worry. But hopefully the station is going to eject the shuttle at full velocity to protect the shuttle dock. Hang on, it might get rough.”

“That’s the worst part?”

“No,” Samath said. “The worst part is that it is part of the safety procedure to scan for lifeforms and if they sense us, they’ll try to abort the program to try to save us. Then, instead of ejecting the shuttle, they’ll find us here with breeding paxolii and we’ll got to jail for the rest of our lives. I’m trying to hack into the safety program, but the people I talked to didn’t have those clearance codes and I’m not having any luck...”

“I suppose it’s very civic-minded of them to check for lifeforms before ejecting us,” Tanadara said, trying to find a balance between squashing the paxolii in the bag and not holding it tightly enough. “No, get back in there.”

Then she had a sudden thought. “Wait, wait! The paxolii are shielded! The sensors won’t see them!”

“They’ll still see us,” Samath said.

“Can the paxolii shield us?” Tanadara asked. “Can you ask them to?”

Samath abandoned his attempts at the piloting computer and turned to where Whiskers was popping his head curiously out of the bag. “They might,” Samath said hopefully. “They might!”

Whiskers squirmed out altogether and scampered to Samath, tilting his little head from side to side curiously as Samath concentrated his attention on the paxoly. Chitters followed, scolding loudly, and the rest swarmed out of the bag and milled around the two seats.

“I think they can,” Samath said. “I’m not sure they exactly understand what I’m asking or are sure they can do it, but I think so!”

“We should be close together,” Tanadara said. “So they have less to protect.” She stood up, a paxoly on each shoulder, and went to sit on Samath’s lap. His restraints were flexible enough to accommodate a much larger alien, and the two of them together fit neatly under the straps. His arms around her felt so wonderful and right, and Tanadara had been so afraid

that she'd never feel them again. The paxolii wriggled around them, nestling down in the crooks of their elbows and between their feet, perching on their shoulders and the arms of the pilot's chair. They purred and squeaked at each other.

“How will we know if it works?”

“We'll know when they eject the shuttle,” Samath said. The lights suddenly went out.

“It's okay,” he said from the darkness near her ear. “That's standard procedure. They'll shut down the power to the shuttle. We can restart the internal power once we're safely away.”

It seemed like they were in the dark, nearly deafened by the alarm, for a very long time, and Tanadara clung to Samath's hand like it was an anchor. Was the clanging going to precede an invasion of security officials to arrest them? The shuttle gave another mighty jolt and Tanadara whimpered in fear and anticipation, then reminded herself that she was probably giving Samath a head full of her terror. Trying to mute it at least gave her something to do while she was waiting for death or arrest.

The ejection was not as smooth as a launch would be, but it was wildly welcome, with a sudden woosh as Tanadara was driven back into Samath's strong chest. She heard the paxolii give shrill little alarm calls as their claws scratched for purchase on the chairs and floor. She heard one of them flying through the air, giving a squeal that sounded as excited as it did afraid. There was a thump as it hit a chair or wall, and a surprised chirp.

“He's okay,” Samath told her, and then the ejection was over and Tanadara could breathe again. Gravity was at minimum, and she floated oddly in Samath's lap against their restraints. “We should wait for a few minutes before we fire up the power again,” he said, squeezing her hand. “Let them think we're drifting.”

“Won't they try to salvage the shuttle when we don't explode?”

“I convinced the system that it had been booby-trapped by the Rebellion,” Samath said. “Any attempts to tamper might set it off.”

Tanadara giggled helplessly, feeling hysterical and relieved and exhausted. She wasn't sure what Samath would think of her feelings because she wasn't sure what she was even feeling.

The restraints released, and they were floating together in the dark. “Oh, Samath,” she said, sagging into his embrace. “I was so afraid I'd never have you back again.”

Little claws dug into the leg of her modesty garment and two paxolii scrambled up her entire body to purr and scold her and twine around her neck.

“I can think of something we can do in the dark without power and gravity,” Samath suggested near her ear. He stroked a finger down the side of her neck in a way he knew excited her. Tanadara could feel his cock against her through their clothing, his tentacles wriggling eagerly. The paxolii fled back to the bag, her four favorites herding the babies ahead of them with chirps and whistles.

“I think that's an excellent idea,” Tanadara agreed with a purr of her own.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

TANADARA WASN'T sure what to expect from Kagada, the planet they'd chosen from the database. She'd been planetside before, but only within the Oversight itself. This was the edge of the known universe. There was probably violent unrest and vandalism and unlawfulness everywhere. Maybe they'd be robbed. Everyone outside of the Oversight was out for themselves, constantly fighting and struggling for survival.

And now they were going to be a part of that unending strife.

It was exciting and terrifying, but with Samath at her side, she felt like she could do anything.

Samath landed the shuttle according to the directions from the landing authority and they walked into a domed lobby of the terminal.

There didn't seem to be a central check-in, or any kind of official authority, just a few competing businesses trying to sell them vacation services and spa treatments and food. Tanadara stopped to gaze at the star map above them. "It doesn't look like any map I've ever seen before," she said, trying to pick out a landmark she knew. "Where is Glory Station?"

"You folks from the Oversight?"

Tanadara spun to face an alien half again as tall as Samath, covered in lumpy, armored skin, with long limbs and green foliage shooting out the top of his head. A face peered curiously down at them.

Tanadara glanced at Samath, but he seemed to be at ease, so probably this alien didn't intend them harm. "We might be," he said evasively.

"Yeah, you lot tend to be pretty twitchy," the tree creature chuckled. "There's the Oversight, that corner there. We're at the bright spot just off from it."

Tanadara stared. They were at the fringes of a universe that was a thousand times larger than she'd ever imagined. The Oversight, now that she recognized the planets in the system, was a tiny handful of stars in an unbelievable field. They weren't at the end of the known universe, they were at the start of a whole galaxy that she'd simply never heard of.

"Do you get a lot of Oversight authority here?" Samath asked.

"They recruit here sometimes," the alien said with a shrug.

"And the Rebellion?" Tanadara asked, before she could remember that she probably shouldn't.

"What Rebellion?"

"The Rebellion trying to dismantle the Oversight," Tanadara said hesitantly.

"No one here cares about the Oversight," the tree man guffawed.

It occurred to Tanadara that a nebulous Rebellion could be as much of a tool of control as an inhibitor collar ever could. It was a simple thing to pit citizens against each other, just a little, and prevent them from trusting each other or developing true friendships. She wondered if Dulie might have been a friend under other circumstances, or if she really was an agent of chaos, or if Dulie would have reported Tanadara for correction. Everything that she'd taken for granted so long seemed suddenly fragile and uncertain, and it was very unnerving.

"We'd like to sell the shuttle we arrived in," Samath said, while Tanadara was still trying to make sense of her new perspective. "Perhaps we could make a trade?"

“Trying to unload a hot stolen ship?” The tree man gave a noise like a gruff laugh and he elbowed Samath rudely in the side with a branchy elbow. Tanadara wasn’t sure what was more impolite, the unrequested touch or the nosiness, but Samath still seemed to take it in stride.

“We’d just like to...blend in,” Samath said mildly, but his mouth gave a twitch of amusement.

“I’m ribbing you,” the alien said with another tree chuckle. “We get a lot of people here who want to leave their old lives behind. This is like the last frontier! Or the first frontier, to you folks! I’ll take a look at your shuttle. Name is Greatstalk.”

“Junior Technician Tanadara,” Tanadara said reflexively. “Ah, just Tanadara.”

Samath gave his own name, and Greatstalk surprised them by clasping their hands and giving them each a brisk hug. It was curious to be so casually touched, but Tanadara decided she liked it. Greatstalk smelled like moss and mushrooms.

Greatstalk looked over the passenger shuttle, popping open the engine cowling, and mulling over the innards. “It’s in good shape. I can get you a fair price for it. Enough to get you passage to another system, or a small cottage here.”

As well as being a peddler of ships, he was apparently also involved in private real estate, which Tanadara was only faintly aware was even a thing. Before she could really process what was happening, they were on a skidder heading out of the terminal to inspect housing choices.

The paxolii were getting restless, and Tanadara found herself the object of Greatstalk’s rude curiosity. “What have you got in that wiggling bag?” he asked bluntly.

“They are...pets,” Tanadara said, clutching them closer.

Greatstalk gave a shout of laughter. “Stealing shuttles and smuggling animals!” he said approvingly. “You’ll fit in just fine here.”

Samath convinced the paxolii to calm down, and Tanadara gave them a little breathing space at the mouth of the bag without exposing them.

The first place was a charming little block of simple rooms nestled up with several others. It reminded Tanadara of being on the station, with everything close together and efficient. But the second house...

“Oh,” Tanadara said, squeezing the bag of paxolii too tight and making them squeak. “It’s amazing.”

It was on an island covered in huge fan fungus, with a dozen little cottages tucked privately away from each other. A red sand beach met lapping turquoise water just a few paces from the front steps. It was a simple structure with very basic amenities, up from the ground on sturdy-looking stilts. There were only two rooms, plus necessities, but a beautiful view of more scarlet islands dotting the blue sea.

“This one’s a little pricier,” Greatstalk warned from the doorway. He was too tall to come comfortably in, and stood outside on the narrow porch looking in. “The shuttle will get you a down payment, but you’d probably have to get jobs and work off the rest of it. You have qualifications?”

“I am a Supervisor,” Samath offered.

Greatstalk was unimpressed. “Not much call for that,” he said with a shake of his head.

“I am a Junior Technician,” Tanadara said, desperately in love with the little house already. Maybe she could even get a license for a *garden*. “I can fix systems.”

“Might be able to find some work at the terminal,” Greatstalk said skeptically.

“Is there a planetary manual?” Tandara asked timidly. “About jobs and rules and manners?” She’d feel better with guidelines to follow.

Being stared at by a tree was a little unnerving. “Rules about manner? Nah. That lady in the next cottage, she’ll cry if you speak above 30 decibels to her. Five houses down, that guy considers it disrespectful if you aren’t yelling. They’ve been courting each other three years now. Everyone just gets along the best they can. I’ll give you some time to look around.”

Greatstalk backed down the steps and walked straight out into the water, looking to Tanadara like he'd just put roots down. Maybe he was drinking that way; the water was fresh, not salty like many seas. There were a few boats off the shore, a rainbow of aliens fishing and frolicking in the glassy water.

"I like this," Tanadara said. It wasn't as perfect as Oversight housing. She could see where the corners didn't quite meet square in all places, and there were natural knots to the wood paneling.

Samath was watching her, drinking in her delight and excitement. She wouldn't influence him with her preference, would she? Maybe he'd be more comfortable in the block housing. Maybe he'd regret leaving the Oversight with her. Maybe this was all a terrible mistake.

"We could get a little energy unit for the paxolii and put it there," he suggested. On cue, Whiskers popped his head out of the open bag and crawled to Tanadara's shoulder.

"Do you like it?" Tanadara asked, trying not to beg.

"I love it," Samath promised, and Tanadara had to believe him by the color of his skin and the stillness of his temples. "I love you, and I see how happy this makes you."

"It's more space than I've ever had," she said, putting the bag of paxolii down on the floor so she could pace the length of the room and marvel over the size. "A whole house."

"A whole house of ours," Samath added, and Tanadara ran her last few steps so that he could catch her up in his arms and kiss her.

"What's that, then?!"

For such a large alien, Greatstalk moved silently, and his face was peering rudely in the door at Whiskers and the paxolii who were escaping from their bag and swarming curiously up the walls. His voice was booming in the empty space.

Would this ruin their chance at happiness, having a pest-class pet? And not just one, but a dozen of them? Would they

be ejected from the planet altogether for harboring contraband animals?

But Greatstalk didn't look appalled, he looked amazed.

“You've got wiggle kittens?” he said in astonishment. “Are they for sale? That's a breeding quad! How many have you got in there? I shouldn't be showing you these houses, I should be showing you the seven-bedroom mansions on the west bluffs. You don't have to work a day of your life if you're willing to part with some of those babies.”

“They're valuable?” Samath asked, equally surprised.

“Only the most sought after pet in the whole galaxy,” Greatstalk scoffed. “You could get ten thousand credits apiece for those beauties. Maybe more from a smuggler looking to protect a stash. Oh, I've always wanted one myself, but you almost never see them available and I'd never be able to afford one!”

Tanadara introduced him to Whiskers, who chirped shyly at the alien from behind her neck.

Greatstalk melted. “Oh, it's the most precious thing!”

It took a little patience, which Tanadara supposed she shouldn't be surprised to get from a tree alien, but by the time they were ready to leave, the paxolii were happy to climb Greatstalk all the way up to his bushy head, and were playing chase-and-catch games around all of his limbs. He agreed to trade the beachside house in whole for their shuttle and one paxoly baby, and put them in touch with a local peddler who would connect them with other interested buyers. Samath promised Tanadara that they would only pick owners for them who would genuinely care for them, and her four did not seem concerned when one of the fluffy babies went away with Greatstalk after a whirlwind shopping tour to supply their new house with bare essentials.

“We have a *home*,” Tanadara said.

Their mattress was on the floor, and the paxolii were crowded, chittering, around the single energy unit. There were no coverings on the windows and Tanadara suspected that

morning light would be problematic because planets had unmoderated sun cycles, but it was a home, and she was there with all the things in the galaxy that she loved best.

EPILOGUE

“HAVE A FISH STRIP!” Greatstalk offered. He only drank sunlight and water, but he supplied his guests with copious food, and Samath accepted the offering with grace.

“It’s delicious,” Tanadara said, chewing merrily on her own piece. She was wearing a skirt of bright yellow and a simple covering of her mammaries in a pattern of flowers. When she dropped a crumb down her cleavage, Whiskers chased it down and ate it.

One of the things that Samath liked best about Kagada was the clothing. There was no attempt to make everyone the same, and he could wear robes of flowing rainbow cloth, or stiff black leather, or nothing at all, and Tanadara could do the same.

It was curious, having so many options and opportunities, and Samath had been right that a leisure planet would never get boring as long as Tanadara was there with him. He reveled in her delight over everything, and gamely tried every food and entertainment she thrust at him.

It was dark now, the only light from dancing stars and the blazing fire that Samath and his neighbors were gathered around. The chatter was unmoderated, noisy, and at times, contentious, but everyone was cheerful and honest. Samath felt like any satisfaction he’d ever felt before was a pale sham of the true feeling, and he didn’t have to be a telepath to know that Tanadara felt the same.

They fit in well here, not because everyone was the same, or strictly followed the rules that were supposed to keep

everyone in harmony, but because they accepted that everyone could be different and still get along.

Samath was learning music from a teacher on the mainland and Tanadara had fallen face-first into a passion for gardening. Their little cottage was surrounded by lush lichens and little waterfalls. They kept three of the paxolii babies, and the wiggle kittens were popular in the neighborhood. Occasionally, they had to pay for damages, but if anything, Greatstalk had undersold their value. Samath screened potential owners very carefully, not only by their record, but by insisting that they meet before he agreed to an adoption.

No one batted an eye at his telepathy. Some of their neighbors even teased him with it, telling him one thing when they were aware he would know better. There were even others on their island with the same ability, and they taught him a few tricks that he hadn't figured out on his own.

Still, Samath wondered if there wasn't something missing.

Tanadara snuggled close to his side. There was a pang to her feelings, a thread of wistfulness that he had caught there before. Was something missing from their perfect life? Did she have regrets over leaving the ordered simplicity of the Oversight?

The party broke up as it usually did, with a slow trickle of island residents who had to get up for early work leaving first, and the rest reluctantly leaving in pairs and singles. The very quiet neighbor left hand in paw with the very loud neighbor, as they often did.

Tanadara's hand slipped into his quite naturally, and they wandered back through the fungus forest to the little cottage that had become home.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, as they paused on the beach, bleached black in the pale starlight.

Her thought was one of those lightning bolts that she couldn't quite catch before it hit Samath in the mind.

Babies.

Not paxoly babies, but a baby of theirs. A Samath and Tanadara baby.

“Sorry,” Tanadara was saying, though she didn’t feel particularly sorry. “I just remembered today that I should be reporting to the Oversight for a contraception renewal...and then realized that I didn’t have to, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.”

It occurred to Samath that he didn’t have to ask for permission or get a license or follow procedure. They could just...have a baby, if they wanted. A dozen, maybe. How did that work for humans? He’d have to research the topic, and prepare a nest, probably. Was the lighting on this planet appropriate for half-human children?

Tanadara was tapping his arm because he’d frozen in place. “Did I break you? We don’t have to do that, of course. I can ask Greatstalk if there’s a place I can get a contraception refresh here. And the house is really small for more of us, anyway.”

Samath felt her underlying wistfulness and was swift to gather her up in his arms and kiss his delight onto her lips. “I love the idea,” he said honestly. It felt like a final piece of code slipping into place, or the triumphant part of a symphony. “We can build another room onto the house. Two of them. *Five* of them. When can we start?”

“Maybe we should wait until daylight to start remodeling,” Tanadara teased. “But I suppose there are other parts we can practice now...”

Samath gathered her entirely up into his arms and carried her, giggling and glowing with joy, up the stairs to their home, with Whiskers chattering in delight on his shoulder.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elva Birch is an author of the impossible and irresistible who lives in Alaska and belly dances outside to twenty below. She particularly loves to write cinnamon roll heroes, competent heroines, adorable kids, and hilarious pets in feel-good paranormal fantasy romance full of humor and heart. [Sign up for her newsletter.](#)

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COSMIC CAPER

COLETTI WARLORDS
BY GAIL KOGER

DESCRIPTION

The only things standing between the vulnerable galaxy and murderous aliens are a kickass psychic, the hot Coletti warrior she wants more than chocolate, and an invisible pet. Too bad their only weapon is a cowardly, oversexed witch who wants to be a showgirl.

Casey is one of the infamous Jones girls, with enough psychic powers to move a mountain, or kill lots of vicious aliens who viewed human brains as edible delicacies. She is days, hours, and minutes away (not that she's counting) from being able to claim her soul mate. Unfortunately, she's currently stuck babysitting a hot mess of a fearful witch who would rather be a showgirl than the deadly weapon that the Earth alliance is counting on.

Coletti War Commander Hothar is done with the hunt-and-kill assignment that took him lightyears from Earth and the family he has vowed to protect. Especially the one family member who he can't get off his mind. He hadn't planned on their reunion being derailed by having to serve as bodyguard to a crazy, unpredictable witch who is tap-dancing on his last nerve.

A tactical raid on a cargo ship to rescue the crew from deadly alien critters gets Casey a new invisible pet named Hitch. He helps them infiltrate the brain-eating aliens base, and shows them just how deadly he can be. Can Hothar and Casey keep the witch upright long enough to save the galaxy? Only time will tell.

PROLOGUE

MY NAME IS CASEY JONES. I'm a psychic with kick-ass telekinetic powers. Some people call me a natural born snoop. Let's just say I'm inquisitive and I have the gift for getting people to talk. With a little mental push, they want to tell me their secrets, their desires, and their hopes. Uncle Saul said I was better than truth serum. Get me in a room with a suspect and they spilled their guts. Since I was only eleven at the time, it made me the perfect psychic detective and undercover agent for Central Command. No one thought a kid could be a threat. Snort.

For five long, bloody years Earth was attacked by two alien races. The Tai-Kok kinda reminded me of demented porcupines with all those metal spikes protruding from their skulls. Except these tall, hairless ghouls weren't cute or cuddly. They had three bloodred eyes, sharp metal teeth and they lived to eat. Their image is forever seared into my mind. How they found Earth or why they considered us so yummy, no one knew. It didn't matter if you were a kid, you either fought them or you died. My mother was killed in one of their raids and I take great delight in killing the monsters.

The other alien race is the Rodan. These monsters look like something a mad scientist cooked up, a weird mixture of a rat and a dinosaur with very sharp teeth. To them, a psychic's brain was a highly sought-after delicacy, and they go to great lengths to capture us.

I was sixteen when my sister, Kaylee, made the mistake of psychically connecting with Talree, a Coletti warlord. It turned into one hell of a first contact. The alien warlord immediately

claimed her as his mate. My family was furious, but Kaylee had mentally bonded with the jerk and there was nothing we could do to break the link. I wanted to give it a try, but Uncle Saul put his foot down. He didn't want the Coletti warlords to know about my "special" talents.

Zarek, the Coletti Overlord, wasn't stupid. He soon discovered the Jones family's unique psychic powers and our blood's ability to heal cellular damage. After the Great War had decimated his planet and damaged their females' DNA, we were a godsend. The crafty bastard immediately seized control of Earth.

Everyone hailed Zarek as a hero for saving Earth from the Tai-Kok and Rodan. The good citizens conveniently forgot how many times the Jones family had saved their ungrateful butts and they just threw us to the wolves.

Voss, the Overlord's battle commander, took our family to their ruined home world, where Zarek gave us the bad news. Our fates were intertwined. For better or worse, to survive what was to come, we had to embrace our destiny and become something stronger, faster. In other words, allow the Coletti to insert their DNA into ours. If we failed to stop the Tai-Kok and Rodan, not only would Earth be destroyed, but countless worlds would fall too.

Most of my family were in the military and duty was ingrained into their DNA. Once again, we had to stand against the alien invaders but this time the cost would be our humanity. *Hooyah.*

A female had to be twenty-one before a warrior could mate with her and since I had just turned sixteen, they couldn't touch me. I had five years to find a way to keep from becoming a war bride. Since Uncle Saul was going to be the Overlord's go-to guy on Earth, I went home with him.

The alliance with the Coletti turned out to be a Godsend. With the help of the Askole, Gorum and Katanic shape shifters, the Tai-Kok were wiped from existence. Unfortunately, the Rodan stepped up to fill the void. Their attacks always coincided with our planetary defensive systems

going down, which gave the mutant dinosaurs time to capture several hundred people before retreating. It didn't take my uncle, the four-star general, long to realize most of the individuals being taken had psychic abilities. He knew we had traitors in our ranks, and he needed my "special" talents to find them.

During my investigation I discovered a splinter group of Earth First who were aiding the monsters. These fanatics wanted our world cleansed of all psychics and the Rodan were the perfect solution. Their leader went by the laughable title of The Supreme One. Seriously, someone had delusions of godhood. Somehow this fruitcake managed to shut down our weapons satellites, giving the Rodan ample time to capture as many humans as they could take. This Judas goat was also being paid fifty pounds of gold for every captured psychic.

Even though the Coletti Empire had control of Earth we still had to pay taxes. Guess who neglected to pay taxes on all that gold. Yep, the Earth First idiots. And that was how I tracked them down. The Supreme One turned out to be none other than the delusional General Martha Douglas. The crazy lady also had a vendetta against Uncle Saul and me. In her mind, I had screwed up her imaginary relationship with Uncle Saul. She also blamed me for getting her arrested and being busted down to a one-star general. Hey, what the heck did she expect? She's the one who had a public meltdown in the nude. Her tirade even made the evening news.

Furious at me for sic'ing the tax man on them, Earth First put me in their crosshairs and that's how I ended up bailing out of a burning C130 cargo plane. Eight thousand feet above the Pacific Ocean, I met Hothar, my soul mate. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. Me? Hook up with a Coletti warlord? Never going to happen. Okay, Hot Lips has the cutest dimples, and we make a great team.

Since Hothar and I were only nineteen, we weren't allowed to mate yet. Uncle Saul set down the ground rules. "No heavy petting, necking, mental sex or nooky of any kind. You may kiss, but no tongue."

Unfortunately, our raging hormones made that a bit impossible and after we got busted a couple of times for mental sex, Hothar was assigned to hunt for Rodan bases on the far side of the galaxy. I got stuck doing background checks until a witch by the name of Aphrodite Davis needed a bodyguard.

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER 1

APHRODITE DAVIS WASN'T what I expected. After all the horror stories about her screaming meltdowns at the sight of anything scary, like cats, bananas, or aliens, I thought she would be a scared little mouse. She was anything but mousey with her blonde hair in a trendy up do and her overdone makeup. The wannabe love goddess's bloodred catsuit had a plunging neckline that barely contained her girls. Any sudden move and those puppies were popping out. Uncle Saul owed me big time.

Her bright red lips stretched in a grimace; Aphrodite tottered toward me on four-inch stiletto heels. "You're my bodyguard?"

"I am."

Aphrodite eyed my armor and let out a hyena-like laugh. "The General expects a midget to protect me?"

I'm a redhead and I have a bit of a temper. For a moment, I considered bouncing Aphrodite off the ceiling a few times to teach her a lesson, but it would piss off Uncle Saul. Making my uncle angry was something I avoided at all costs. "I might be short, but my telekinesis makes me a formidable warrior."

"Like I care. You're totally unacceptable. I told the General I wanted a warrior to keep me safe and take care of my needs."

I rolled my eyes. Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, had seduced the last two bodyguards assigned to her. "Where's your armor?"

"It's ugly, and besides I don't need it."

This ought to be good. I gave her a little mental push. "Why aren't you wearing your armor?"

"It hides my best assets."

“Which are?”

“My breasts. I’m a triple E-cup,” Aphrodite gushed proudly.

Nope, more like a C-cup. “You do remember General Jones telling you we are responding to a Kotsor sighting on the merchant ship Vakoch and armor is a necessity?”

“I’m not leaving Earth and I’m certainly not going anywhere with you.” Big crocodile tears rolled down her face. “I want to talk to Saul, he would never allow this to happen, he knows how delicate I am,” Aphrodite wailed.

Delicate my ass. “Sorry, princess, but you’re a witch and we need your magical skills to kill the nasty spiders and disarm any magical traps.”

“Kill Kotsors!” Aphrodite’s eyes rolled back in her head and down she went.

I stared at her in disbelief. She had to be faking it. I mentally scanned her. Nope. She had fainted. The guys might be willing to put up with her theatrics, but I wasn’t. Pulling a capsule of smelling salts out of my pocket, I broke it under her nose and stepped back.

With a screech, Aphrodite erupted to her feet. “What the hell?”

“Smelling salts. A word to the wise. Every time you faint, I’m gonna use it.”

“No, you will not. Mud gui sum,” Aphrodite shouted.

Her spell ricocheted off me. I watched in surprised delight as it slammed into the angry witch, knocking her backward into a wall. “I might have forgotten to mention Skye gave me a protection amulet. Any spell you use against me will boomerang back on you.”

With mascara running down her cheeks, a sobbing Aphrodite got to her feet. “You can’t treat me this way. I’m special.”

“Special.” I did air quotes. “Is one way to describe you. Dead is another if you don’t get your act together. Do you

want the Kotsors to overrun Earth?”

“It’s not my problem,” Aphrodite spat.

“So, a world full of giant-sized black widow spiders eating people is okay with you?”

“Yes! I’ll find a place to hide.”

“And you’ll watch your family die and do nothing?”

“I don’t know. I’m not brave like Skye or Ella,” Aphrodite cried.

I rubbed my aching forehead. The cowardly witch was going to get me killed. I was two months away from my twenty-first birthday and finally getting to have hot, mind-blowing sex with Hothar. “All you have to do is cast your spells. I’ll do the rest.”

“Fine.” Aphrodite tried to storm off, but the heel of her left stiletto had broken off. Step. Hop. Step. Hop.

I exhaled a long breath as her girls popped out of the catsuit. “And put your armor on. We don’t know how many Kotsors are onboard that ship.”

She gave me a one-fingered salute.

I linked mentally with Uncle Saul and shot him an image of her catsuit. “*This isn’t going to work.*”

“You might be right, but Zarek wants you to train her to fight.”

“Me? Train that cowardly witch to fight? Never gonna happen.”

“It’s not open for debate.”

The hell it wasn’t. I had learned a few tricks from watching Uncle Saul negotiate with some damn powerful aliens. “*You know, and I know, I’m the only one strong enough to deal with Aphrodite, except for Annie, of course. And I’m betting she has already turned you down. I’ll do it on one condition. You make Hothar my partner.*”

“You’re not twenty-one yet.”

“I will be in two months, and it’s been a year since I’ve seen Hothar. Either he’s my partner or you find someone else to deal with Aphrodite.”

Uncle Saul’s tone held a mixture of grudging admiration and annoyance. *“You’re getting better at negotiating. Hothar was just promoted to the rank of war commander for single-handedly destroying two Rodan bases. He’s due leave time. I’ll discuss it with Zarek.”*

“Make it happen or I walk.” Severing the link, I sagged against the wall and fought down my rage. Those bastards had deliberately kept me in the dark about how dangerous his missions were. To be promoted to war commander at his age meant Hothar had come close to dying. I gave myself a mental head thump. That explained why Uncle Saul had insisted I work out of his office. If things went south, he’d be there to keep me from following Hothar into the afterlife.

Damn them to hell. With the Rodan unleashing the Kotsors on the galaxy, their stupid rules made no sense. Hothar’s abilities were one of a kind and they knew we made an unbeatable team.

God, how I missed the sound of his voice, the way Hothar kissed me, the way his hands felt on my body and the warmth of his mind. Uncle Saul didn’t fully grasp how close to the edge I was. Not being able to mentally link with Hothar for so long had made me a tad homicidal. If Aphrodite kept pushing my buttons, they wouldn’t like the results.

My warrior’s bracelet chimed. I glanced down at the message. We had docked with the Vakoch, and the assault team was standing by. I typed my response and headed for Aphrodite’s quarters. She better have her armor on.

“Aphrodite lodged a formal complaint against you,” Uncle Saul announced mentally.

“For what?”

“Assault.”

I snorted. *“It was smelling salts and did the cowardly witch mention she attacked me?”*

“No, she did not. I take it Skye’s amulet worked?”

“It sure did.” I banged on the door of Aphrodite’s temporary quarters. *“Get your ass out here.”*

“Aphrodite is refusing to work with you,” Uncle Saul quickly added.

“Tough.” Using my telekinesis, I blew her door open.

The cowardly witch screamed blue bloody murder and keeled over.

Uncle Saul spat, *“Have you lost your fucking mind?”*

“Yeah, I have, and it’s all your fault!”

“My fault?”

“You didn’t stop Zarek from sending Hothar to the far side of the galaxy.” I severed out link and examined the witch. At least she was wearing her armor. Pulling another smelling salts capsule out of my pocket, I broke it under her nose and in my best drill sergeant voice shouted, *“Get up. Now!”*

Aphrodite bolted upright.

If looks could kill, I would have been toes up. *“We are going over to that ship, and you are going to kill every one of those friggin’ spiders. Do you hear me?”*

“Yes, ma’am.”

“There are thirty crew members on the Vakoch and we’re going to save every one of them. Do you understand me?”

Aphrodite nodded.

“Good. Move it. Move it. Move it.” I fought back a grin as I double-timed the witch down the corridor.

Aphrodite took one look at the assault team and cried, *“Help me! Please, help me. “She’s crazy.”*

“You want to live lady?” Lieutenant Smith asked coldly.

The color drained from Aphrodite's face. "I do."

"Then do what Casey tells you. Mallox's creations are deadly."

"Who's Mallox?" Aphrodite, the clueless, asked.

My jaw dropped. "You've got to be kidding me. Have you been living under a rock or what?"

"The Navajo Nation is very remote, and I didn't have access to a vid screen."

I stared at her for a long moment. How could she not know who the most hated villain in the universe was? "Mallox is a Rodan scientist who is creating an army of mutants to unleash on the galaxy."

"Mutants?"

"Like the Kotsors?" Duh.

With a baffled expression on her face, Aphrodite shrugged. "Why would he do that?"

"So, they can eat our brains."

"Don't be silly only the Tai-Kok eat us, and I've never heard of this Mallox."

Okey-dokey, the brain-dead bimbo needed a little show and tell. I projected the image of a large rat with wormy growths covering its body into Aphrodite's mind. "This is one of his creatures."

She shrieked loud enough to raise the dead.

"And Mallox likes to use humans in his experiments too." Rubbing my ringing ears, I flashed her a picture of a naked male covered in tentacles. His enormous mouth was filled with hundreds of serrated teeth. Before she could scream again, I tapped my bracelet and a helmet formed around my head. "Got the picture now?"

Fear glittering in her eyes, Aphrodite just stood there with her mouth agape.

"You'll need your helmet."

“Why?”

I leaned over and hit her control icon. “To keep the Kotsors from eating your face off.”

Her moan was cut off as the helmet engulfed her head.

“When you’re ready, Smitty.” I grabbed Aphrodite’s arm as he opened the airlock. My stomach sank when it was empty. The crew members had been told to evacuate to the airlock.

“I’m picking up life signs on the bridge,” Lieutenant Smith advised.

I mentally scanned the ship for Kotsors. “The main concentration of Kotsors are in the cargo hold.”

“Copy that. We’ll get the crew off and then deal with them.”

“Hooyah.” Being in a family of Marines, I loved military jargon.

Aphrodite dropped to the floor. “No, I’m not taking another step.”

“Okay. Stay here, but Smitty needs all his warriors to rescue the crew.” I followed the assault team down the hallway.

“Wait! You can’t leave me here. I don’t have a weapon,” Aphrodite squawked.

“You’re a witch. You are a weapon.”

“But I’ve never fought the monsters before.”

“Then it’s time you started.” I turned my back on her and hurried after the assault team. I smiled when I heard Aphrodite following me.

Smitty held up an armored fist and growled, “Hostiles.”

Everyone stopped.

“What’s wrong Smitty?”

“We need the witch. Now!”

I dragged Aphrodite up to Lieutenant Smith and gasped. A human/Kotsor hybrid blocked the corridor. It had six black orbs for eyes, two articulated fangs protruded from its mouth and icky fleshy finger-like appendages instead of hands. Even creepier were the six spider legs sprouting from its human torso. Ugh. From the large dangly bits, it was male. “Burn it,” I commanded Aphrodite.

Thud.

“Wazzock’s piss.” I kicked her leg. “Get up!”

Smitty growled, “She’s fucking useless.”

“Yep.”

“Prepare to die,” the hybrid rasped and charged us.

Smitty and his team opened fire, incinerating the creature.

Six more rushed us and were met with a barrage of laser fire. A million fireflies danced in the hallway as they disintegrated.

Horror rolled over me as thousands of Kotsor hatchlings swarmed down the corridor. “Retreat!” I yelled and punched out with my telekinesis. The shockwave of energy smashed the little buggers against the walls and floor.

More of the creepy crawlies skittered toward us.

Smitty and the soldiers kept shooting, but there were too many of them.

I hit the mutants again and again and again with my telekinesis. Spider guts blanketed the hallway. “*We need reinforcements, Uncle Saul. Like now!*”

“*Where is the witch?*” Uncle Saul bellowed in my head.

I dodged a web ball. “*The last time I saw her, she was passed out on the floor.*”

A huge human/Kotsor hybrid with two heads crawled slowly down the hallway.

I did a double take. Holy hell, it was wearing body armor, but its heads and legs had been left exposed. Like that was

going to work. I filmed it with my warrior's bracelet and sent the vid to Uncle Saul. "*Houston, we have a problem.*"

"*Yes, we do,*" a harsh voice snapped.

"*Who said that?*"

Smitty and his men unleashed a volley of laser fire.

To my stunned disbelief, the laser bolts ricocheted off an energy barrier surrounding the creature.

"*Get down!*" the voice commanded.

"*Hothar?*" I hit the floor as sizzling beams of death missed me by inches. Two of Smitty's men weren't so lucky. "Wazzock's piss." I lashed out with my telekinesis and managed to stop the monster's advance. "*We need reinforcements. Now!*"

"No! I can't. Let go of me," Aphrodite shrieked.

I glanced over my shoulder. Uncle Saul had a firm grip on the loudly sobbing witch.

A low growl of aggression rumbled in my uncle's chest. "You will turn that monstrosity into ash, or you'll spend the next five years in an eight by ten cell. Do I make myself clear?"

Aphrodite nodded and quickly chanted, "Metieris solus!" A blinding flash of light was followed by a cracking boom. *Whoosh!* Brilliant amber flames raced along the corridor. The magical fire blasted through the monster's shield incinerating it and all the dead spiders.

I backed away when I realized the flames were getting closer and closer. "Stop the fire, Aphrodite."

Uncle Saul shook her. "Do you want to die?"

"*Ono maelot galles.*" A torrent of rain fell on the fire, extinguishing it.

I let out a shuddering breath of relief. My armor was good, but it couldn't withstand magical fire.

“I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home,” Aphrodite whimpered.

“Don’t we all.” Cold prickles ran up my spine and I quickly scanned the ship. “More of those creepy hybrids are heading our way.”

“Lieutenant Smith, I want you and your men to rescue the crew. We’ll deal with the hybrids,” Uncle Saul ordered.

Aphrodite did the wee-wee dance. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God. I just peed myself.”

“Thanks for sharing,” I sniped.

Smitty motioned to his men, and they rushed into an elevator.

An ominous yowl echoed down the hallway.

“That can’t be good.” I raised my laser pistol.

A moment later a horde of furry, white creatures rushed toward us.

I frowned. They kinda reminded me of a cat that had mated with a spider. The creatures had two big, green eyes and fat spider legs. Their eerie meowing sent a chill down my back.

“Kill them Aphrodite,” Uncle Saul roared.

Aphrodite took off running.

“Swell. Do you want me to chase her?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

I caught a flash of white out of the corner of my eye and spun to face it. Nothing was there.

Poof! Zarek appeared with a sobbing Aphrodite slung over one armored shoulder. He dumped her on her feet. “Kill the mutants, or I will kill you.”

I eased closer to Uncle Saul. I could feel Zarek’s fury, and it was scary as hell.

“Markoo thone giest,” Aphrodite cried.

The mutant spider whatever exploded. Disgusting gooey bits rained down on us.

Ugh. I flicked a leg off my shoulder.

His right hand clamped around the back of Aphrodite’s neck, Zarek forced her down the corridor. “When we reach the cargo hold you will exterminate the hybrids. If you fail, you die.” Zarek shook her. “Do you understand me?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Zarek dragged her over to an open hatch, threw her inside and closed the metal door.

I could hear Aphrodite’s muffled screams. “We’re not going to help her?”

“No. Two of Lieutenant Smith’s soldiers died needlessly. She will learn to fight, or she will perish.”

“Isn’t that a little harsh?”

“How many times have you fought our enemies alone?” Zarek countered.

I grimaced. “More than I care to count.”

“Exactly. I have assigned you to work with Hothar to find and destroy Mallox’s labs. If the witch survives, she will be part of your team.”

Lucky me. I flinched as Aphrodite let loose with a bloodcurdling shriek and pounded frantically on the door. “Sorry, but I’ve gotta help her.”

Zarek stepped in front of me. “The witch is powerful enough to destroy every mutant in the cargo hold. All she needs is the right incentive to do so.”

“Aphrodite’s a dangerous liability,” Uncle Saul added grimly. “I’m not losing more warriors because of her antics.”

A thunderous cracking boom sounded, and the ship shuddered.

I scanned the cargo hold. “I’ll be damned. Aphrodite exterminated all of them.”

“The fear of death is a great motivator,” Zarek replied.

Yes, it was. “You still expect me to train her to fight?”

“I do, and Casey, there will no sex of any kind with Hothar until you are twenty-one. Are we clear on that point?” Zarek rumbled.

“Yes, sir. When does Hothar arrive on Earth?”

“His Talon lands in two hours.”

“What? I can’t meet him covered in bug guts.” I grabbed Uncle Saul’s arm. “Can you teleport me back to the base?” I was practically vibrating with joy. “Please. Please. It’s been so long.”

“Take Casey back to the base. I will deal with the witch,” Zarek said.

Uncle Saul clamped his right arm to his chest. “Yes, my lord.”

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

Uncle Saul looped an arm around me and teleported me to my quarters.

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER 2

I WINCED when we appeared in my very messy room. “I haven’t had time to clean this week.”

“It didn’t get this bad in a week, Casey,” Uncle Saul countered.

Ugh. I hated it when he took that sanctimonious tone. “I’ll put it on my to-do list.”

“See that you do. Give me a holler when you’re ready.”

“It won’t take me long to change.”

Uncle Saul snorted.

“Ten minutes max.”

“We’ll see.” He teleported away.

I retracted my armor and once again caught that flash of white. Had I picked up a critter from the ship? I cautiously scanned my room. Zip. Nada. Nothing out of the ordinary. Weird. Unbraiding my hair, I took a quick shower and rummaged through my tiny closet. Hmmm. The green sundress or the sexy, black mini dress? Crap, what was I thinking? Uncle Saul would have a cow. I changed into a sundress and strappy sandals.

One look at the dark circles under my eyes, and I groaned. I looked like shit. I brushed my hair and hurriedly added some makeup. I studied my image in the mirror. Better. The pink lipstick brightened up my pale face. *“I’m ready Uncle Saul.”*

Poof. Uncle Saul teleported into my room and smiled. “You’re a beautiful young woman.”

“Thanks. Do you think Hothar will like my dress?”

He held out his hand. “Without a doubt.”

A loud hiss sounded in my ear. What the hell? “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” My uncle asked with a frown.

A nervous laugh broke from me. “It’s probably nothing. Aphrodite has me a bit stressed out. Plus, it has been a long time since I’ve seen Hothar.” I took Uncle Saul’s hand and an instant later we were at the spaceport’s landing pads.

“Relax. The bond between you can never be broken.” Uncle Saul pointed to a Talon fighter. “That’s Hothar’s ship.”

“Okay.” I looked around anxiously, but I didn’t see him. My uncle tightened his grip on my hand. I stared up at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Hothar is now a war commander. Combat changes people. He’s not the same man you remember.”

“I made my first kill at the age of eleven and I’m still the same.”

“That’s because you are one of a kind, sweetheart,” Uncle replied, releasing my hand.

“So is Hothar.”

Uncle Saul smiled and kissed my forehead. “Remember. No shenanigans.”

“Yes, sir.” I was a little surprised Uncle Saul teleported back to his office. I thought he’d hang around and make sure we didn’t do any touchy-feely stuff.

Purring sounded in my head.

What the hell?

The purring stopped abruptly.

I looked around for the source and once again didn’t find anything. My invisible hitchhiker wasn’t giving off hostile vibes. It was young and scared. I’d give it some time to get used to me.

My gaze fixed on a tall, brawny warrior dressed in a spiffy black uniform striding across the landing pad. God, why did he seem so familiar? I eyed the red chains woven into his

warrior's braids. He was one of Zarek's bad-ass warriors. My jaw dropped. "Oh, my God. Hothar?"

He stopped and turned to face me.

My affectionate companion had turned into a cold-eyed stranger. My stomach tied in knots; I walked over to him. "Hothar? Or should I call you War Commander, Hot Lips?"

The muscles in Hothar's jaw bunched. "I do not answer to Hot Lips."

"Don't I get a hug, Hot Lips?"

Hothar's hands fisted. "I gave my word to Zarek that I would not touch you."

"Well, I didn't." I wrapped my arms around him. "God, I've missed you."

"And I you."

Pain squeezed my heart at his cool, impersonal tone. He didn't sound like he had missed me at all. I still couldn't mentally link with him. His body remained stiff and unyielding. My God, he hadn't even smiled at me. I took a step back and smacked his chest. "You've changed your mind about us. That's why you never wrote or called or linked with me."

"I could not contact you. I was on an undercover assignment for the Overlord."

"And how many pleasure houses did that undercover assignment include?"

Hothar's hands closed around my arms and up I went. He held me at eye level. "How could you even think I would have sex with another female?"

"What am I supposed to believe? You cut me out of your life." I studied his stern face, hoping to find some sign of affection or love. "I thought you were the other half of my soul. Guess I was wrong."

A burning hunger exploded in Hothar's eyes. "Every hour of every day without you was pure agony." He gently shook

me. “You are mine and I will never let you go.”

“Glad to hear it.” I pressed my lips to his and kissed him hungrily. “You so much as look at another female and I will geld you.”

His face split into a wide grin. “There is my green-eyed vixen.”

“That’s me. Now tell me about your undercover mission.”

“Zarek wanted me to infiltrate a band of rogue Coletti warriors.” Hothar lowered me to the ground.

“Let me guess, Badon and his gang of murderous misfits, and you soon discovered they were in cahoots with the Rodan.”

“Surprise filled Hothar’s eyes. “Yes, but before I could kill Badon, he vanished.”

“That’s because Mallox had his eye on Pirate’s Keep, an impenetrable fortress, for another one of his labs. He sent Badon in to make it happen, but they hadn’t counted on Skye.”

“Skye?”

“A powerful witch who blew his plan all to hell. She’s mated to Vorian now. Maybe you’ve met him. He’s a war commander too.”

“I defeated Vorian in single combat,” Hothar said smugly.

“Oh, my God. You challenged him, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Vorian said Earth females were inferior.”

I patted Hothar’s fine ass. “A perfectly good reason to beat him up.”

“*Casey, Hothar’s backside is off limits,*” Uncle Saul warned.

“*Yes, sir.*” I removed my hand. “How did you get Badon’s goons to lead you to the Rodan bases?”

“I read their minds and used the fools’ passcodes to bypass the Rodan death satellites.”

“They didn’t catch on when you started blowing up the bases?”

A predatory smile curved Hothar’s mouth. “They were weak-willed and easily manipulated. I took control of their minds, and they did what they were told.”

“And that’s how you made war commander at the ripe old age of twenty-one.”

“I did not expect the promotion.”

“It’s well deserved.” I peered up at him. “I think you shot up another five inches.” I stroked his bulging bicep. “And bulked up too.”

Hothar shrugged. “All Coletti warriors have a final growth spurt at twenty-one.”

“Too bad humans don’t do the same. I could use another five inches.”

“You are perfect the way you are.” Hothar frowned. “But you have lost weight.”

“What can I say? It’s difficult to eat when the other half of your soul has cut off all contact.”

Hothar pulled a chocolate bar out of his pocket, unwrapped it and held it out to me. “It will not happen again.”

“You bet your sweet ass it won’t.” I took a bite of the chocolate and moaned. It was the good stuff.

Hothar touched the amulet around my neck. “What is this?”

“It protects me from magical attacks and boy does it work.”

“That witch attacked you?” Fury flashed in Hothar’s eyes.

“Aphrodite tried, but the spell boomeranged on her.” I grinned. “You should have seen the look on her face.”

“Zarek promised me they would keep you safe, but you almost died today,” Hothar growled.

“I’ll admit things got a little out of hand.”

“A little? I do not want you anywhere near that witch.”

“That’s gonna be a problem, Hot Lips. Aphrodite has been assigned to our team.”

Hothar bared his fangs in a snarl. “I will not allow it. She is a menace.”

“Zarek also wants me to train her to fight,” I added.

“All that fool will do is jeopardize our mission. We have no need for a witch.”

“Yeah, we sort of do.” I took another bit of chocolate.

Hothar scowled. “Why?”

“To disarm Marion’s magical booby traps, hexes and death curses,” I mumbled around the chocolate.

“I will kill this Marion.”

“You’re too late. Vorian and Skye already took care of Badon and the evil witch. We get to deal with all the crap Marion left behind. Like the horde of Kotsor hatchlings, the other monstrosities she created, and her magical traps.”

Hot Lips rubbed a hand over his face. “I have not been gone that long. How did all this magic come to be?”

“Earth witches have been around for hundreds of years. They’re just good at hiding in plain sight. Unfortunately, Mallox found himself a traitorous witch who wanted to live forever. He promised Marion immortality if she helped him build an army of mutant soldiers. The idiot believed him and magically created the Kotsor/human hybrids, along with some other nasty critters.”

“I will ask Zarek to assign us another witch.”

Leaning against Hothar, I reveled in the warmth of his body and the utter sense of belonging. He felt like home. “We aren’t sure how many witches are left.”

“What happened to them?”

“The Tai-Kok and Rodan killed a lot of them. The survivors went into hiding when Zarek took control of Earth.”

Hothar's large hand stroked my back. "Zarek's hunters have not found them?"

"Nope, and we're out of time. We managed to destroy all the Kotsors on Earth, which really pissed off Mallox and he has started sending more of his mutant spiders in the cargo holds of merchant ships."

"Do the captains of these ships know what they are transporting?"

"Mallox hides the Kotsor's egg sacs in boxes of rambutans. You know, the hairy fruit everyone loves so much, and by the time they arrive at Earth, the spiders have hatched. The only problem with Mallox's plan is the minute the crews open the cargo holds, the baby Kotsors swarm out and eat them. It's sorta a good news, bad news kinda thing. The Kotsors don't make it to the surface, but it forces Central Command to destroy the contaminated ships."

"How many ships have been lost?"

"Six."

"I want to meet this witch," Hothar growled.

I snorted. "Not when you're wearing your scary face. Aphrodite's a fainter."

"The sight of my face will cause her to lose consciousness?"

"Yep. Along with cats, bananas, balloons, and aliens of any kind."

"I will use mind control on her," Hothar stated.

"Her mental shields are unbreachable."

"Wazzock's piss."

"Exactly."

"*Come to General Jones's office immediately,*" Zarek snapped.

"*At once, my lord.*"

“That note of aggravation in his voice means Aphrodite has done something stupid.”

“I would not be surprised.” Hothar’s arms closed around me, and he teleported.

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER 3

THERE WAS a flash of black and poof! We were in my uncle's office. Aphrodite was wearing a bright pink catsuit which left little to the imagination. One look at her smug expression and my stomach knotted. What had she done?

Grrr!

Huh? My hitchhiker didn't like her either. So, the little guy was a good judge of character.

A lascivious smile curved Aphrodite's mouth as she examined Hothar. "He's perfect. Now get rid of the bitch."

My right hand balled into a fist. I was so going to enjoy breaking her nose.

Hothar wrapped his hand around mine. "I will handle this."

"Go for it." I stepped back.

Aphrodite's smile vanished when Hothar grabbed her around the neck and lifted her to eye level. "The next time you put my mate in jeopardy, I will kill you."

Aphrodite's eyes rolled back in her head as she fainted.

"Geeze, I told ya. No scary face."

With a grimace, Hothar dumped the wannabe goddess in a chair. "You expect us to work with her?"

"I do," Zarek said grimly. "Aphrodite is the only witch available."

"Lucky us," I groused and waved a smelling salts capsule under her nose.

Aphrodite's eyes snapped open, and she cowered in the chair. "Don't let him kill me. Please. Don't let him kill me. Please. Please."

“For God’s sake, stop acting like a spineless bimbo,” I snapped.

Aphrodite huffed, “I’m not a warrior. I’m a dancer.”

“Dancer? What kind of dancer?” Call me intrigued.

“A Vegas show girl. I’m beautiful and have perfect breasts.”

I fought back a laugh at the dumbfounded expressions on my guys’ faces. “Yeah, but can you dance?”

“I had an audition with Premier Talent Agency, and then the stupid Tai-Kok ruined everything.” Aphrodite buried her face in her hands and sobbed like her heart was breaking. “They ruined everything.”

I grinned when my hitchhiker made a gagging noise.

Hothar’s irritated gaze fixed on my uncle. “Is she at least a psychic?”

“She is,” Uncle Saul replied. “But she refuses to use mind talk.”

This ought to be good. I gave Aphrodite a mental push. “And why is that?”

“Because alien minds are icky,” Aphrodite snapped.

“Let me guess. You tried talking to a Rodan or Tai-Kok.”

“So? I thought I could reason with them.”

I threw my hands up in disgust. “They’re monsters who are only interested in eating us. They don’t care what we think or how we feel. We’re simply food.”

“Their minds are full of violence.” Aphrodite shuddered. “They crave our flesh.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Did you have a medic check the witch over for any signs of brain damage?” Hothar asked.

The look in Aphrodite’s eyes had me stepping in front of Hothar. “Don’t even think about it.”

“You see? This is how she treats me! I can’t work with someone who doesn’t respect me,” Aphrodite wailed.

What a narcissistic bitch. “Respecting someone who faints on the battlefield will only get me killed.”

“I should have never been put in that situation. I’m not a trained killer like you are.”

I put a hand to my chest and staggered back a step. “Ouch.”

“Enough,” Hothar bellowed.

Aphrodite shrieked and slid off the chair in a dead faint.

Zarek rubbed his forehead as if he suddenly had a migraine.

“What she needs is the proper motivation,” Uncle Saul announced.

“And what would that be?” I pulled out another capsule of smelling salts. “Threatening jail time or death doesn’t seem to work for very long.”

Uncle Saul’s lips twisted into a cynical smile. “Aphrodite wants to be a Vegas showgirl. We make her one.”

“A cunning plan, General,” Hothar commented.

A delighted smile curved my mouth. “It just might work.” I broke the capsule under Aphrodite’s nose.

She jerked upright, hissed like a cat, and swiped at me with her three-inch, bloodred fingernails.

Grrr.

“How badly do you want to dance in a Vegas chorus line?” Uncle Saul was wearing his friendly negotiator’s face.

Aphrodite sighed. “I’d give my right arm to be a show girl.”

Hothar and I exchanged amused looks. She had walked into that one.

“We will get you a job as a Vegas showgirl when you successfully compete the mission,” Zarek added.

Alarm flashed across her face. “Mission? What kind of mission?”

“Disarming magical booby traps, hexes, death curses, and killing any monsters we come across,” I answered.

Aphrodite chewed on her lower lip. “How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

“You question my honor?” Zarek growled furiously.

Thud.

I sighed. “Do you think Shrek can come up with something to keep her from fainting all the time?”

“An excellent idea.” Zarek picked Aphrodite up and teleported.

My stomach rumbled hungrily. “I’m in the mood for Mexican food.”

“Today is all-you-can-eat fajitas at Hilberto’s,” Uncle Saul advised happily.

“Perfect.” I wrapped my arms around Hothar. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER 4

THERE WAS a flash of black and we stood inside Hilberto's. Juan Hilberto had bought an old donut shop, painted it a glow-in-the-dark orange and turned it into a Mexican food restaurant without an ounce of ambiance. The walls were covered with awful velvet paintings of matadors, tigers, and Elvis. The Mariachi music was a tad too loud, but the food was to die for.

We ordered our fajitas and since the music was so loud, we took our trays outside to a narrow patio full of battered picnic tables.

Placing my tray on a table, I kept a wary eye on the wasps buzzing around a nearby bush.

"In his report, Vorian stated Skye gave Badon large female breasts and a huge butt," Hothar said.

"She did after he almost beat her to death."

Hothar's eyebrows rose. "I'm surprised she didn't kill him."

"Death was too easy. She wanted him to suffer." I waved my fork around. "I mean, who's going to work for a mercenary with ginormous boobies and a butt the size of a Buick?"

"No one," Hot Lips answered with a grin. "How did Badon die?"

I swallowed a mouthful of rice. "Devi ate him."

"Devi?" Hothar dumped hot sauce all over his steak fajitas.

Zap! Zap! Zap! Zap!

I glanced over my shoulder. Huh? All the wasps were gone. Guess my hitchhiker was hungry too. "Devi is a sentient Rui tree Skye rescued from Marion's lab." I flashed Hothar the image of a bushy, turquoise sapling.

“Did Devi eat the witch too?”

“Nope. Skye incinerated Marion and her hatchlings with a shitload of thermite grenades.”

“Our greatest fear is Mallox has cloned the witch,” Uncle Saul added.

Hothar grimaced. “Can magic be cloned?”

“That is the million-credit question.” My eyes widened in horror when Zarek teleported in with a smirking Aphrodite in his arms. “Oh, God.”

A growl rumbled in Hothar’s chest.

My hitchhiker let out a menacing yowl.

Uncle Saul drained his beer.

Aphrodite stroked Zarek’s massive chest. “Do you work out? You’re so muscley.”

I spewed my drink. Muscley?

Zarek dumped her on her feet and stalked over to us. “The witch wanted to join you for dinner.”

Oh, yay.

“Please, call me Aphrodite, sweetie. We are working together.” She trotted after him and patted his butt. “You’re firm all over.

My jaw dropped. Did she have a death wish or what?

A muscle twitched in Zarek’s jaw as he sidestepped her groping hand. “A word, War Commander.” Power roiled around him as he strode to the far side of the parking lot.

The smirk on Aphrodite’s face made me want to throw her in the nearest dumpster.

Hothar planted a kiss on my cheek and whispered, “Do not kill her.”

“No guarantees,” I whispered back.

Poof! Hot Lips appeared next to Zarek.

Sashaying like a street walker, Aphrodite strolled over to the table and sat next to Uncle Saul.

“He’s married and unless you want to die horribly, you need to stop groping my guys,” I said nastily.

She shot me a withering glare. “I’ll have a salad with low calorie, ranch dressing, Casey.” She thrust her girls out. “I need to stay in shape, unlike some people.”

The bitch!

Uncle Saul’s hand clamped down on my arm. “Salads are not on Hilberto’s menu, Aphrodite.”

“I guess grilled chicken will do,” Aphrodite huffed.

Ignoring the growling in my head, I snapped, “You order inside.”

“You expect me to pay for it myself?” Aphrodite squawked.

I rolled my eyes. God, what a pampered princess.

“I’ll get it.” Uncle Saul teleported inside the restaurant.

The coward had left me alone with the witch. I searched my mind for some harmless subject that would keep me from throwing her in that dumpster. “Skye said you’re a healer.”

“I’m the best of the best,” Aphrodite said arrogantly.

“And so modest too.”

“My talents aren’t highly overrated like yours.”

I bared my teeth in a predator’s smile. “You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“And we will keep it that way,” Hothar inserted as he sat down beside me.

“Spoilsport.”

Uncle Saul appeared next to the table with a plate of grilled chicken in his hand. He placed it in front of Aphrodite.

“What am I supposed to eat this with?” Aphrodite whined.

I pointed to two glass jars. One held forks, the other napkins. "Help yourself."

With a grimace of distaste, the witch grabbed a fork and poked at her meal. "Is this cage-free chicken?"

"Does it matter?" Zarek grabbed Aphrodite's plate and started eating her chicken with his fingers.

"Now that's just rude," Aphrodite huffed.

Menace oozing from every pore, Zarek snapped, "Shut up."

Aphrodite jumped to her feet. "I'm filing a complaint with the Overlord. You need to be taught some manners."

All of us stared at her in stunned disbelief.

Zarek seemed to be amused by her outburst.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get him on your communication thingy," Aphrodite demanded.

Not only was she clueless, but she also had a death wish. "Zarek *is* the Overlord."

Aphrodite frowned. "You're sure?"

"Very."

"Oh, my bad." Aphrodite eyed Zarek warily. "I need to pee." She rushed inside the restaurant.

Uncle Saul expelled a long breath. "Please tell me Shrek found a way to stop her constant fainting?"

"Aphrodite just saw Zarek at his most intimidating, and she did not faint," Hothar replied.

I started laughing. "Oh, my God, you're right. Shrek's a genius."

"Yes, he is." Zarek handed Hothar an injector. "She will need two ounces of fludrocortisone every other day."

Hothar tucked it away. "If she misses an injection, how soon before she starts fainting again?"

"Three hours." Zarek finished the chicken.

I took the last bite of my fajitas. “I have a hankering for some fried ice cream. Anyone else want one? My treat.”

“I’m not sensing the witch,” Uncle Saul said.

I mentally scanned the area. “Me, either.”

“She is not showing up on my scanner,” Hothar added.

I let out a long-suffering sigh. All I wanted was to spend some time with Hothar, but that wasn’t going to happen any time soon. “If she is using an illusion spell, we’ll never find her.”

“Check the lady’s room, Casey,” Uncle ordered.

“Yes, sir.” I hurried into the restaurant. One look at the empty women’s restroom and I knew she had flown the coop. A piece of metal on the floor caught my attention. I picked it up and linked with Uncle Saul, “*Aphrodite ditched her tracker.*”

“I’m not surprised. Check out the shopping center to the west. She can’t have gotten far.”

“*Yes, sir.*” I went out the back exit and noticed muddy stiletto tracks. The time I spent with the Chiricahua Apache had given me some awesome tracking skills. I followed the footprints to Candy’s Cabaret. A big sign declared, *Nude dancers!* Call me dumbfounded. No sane woman would pick a titty bar to hide in. Oh, wait. Aphrodite was crazy as a June bug. The thunderous bump and grind music shook the front door.

“Did you find her?” Uncle Saul demanded suddenly.

“Maybe. I’ll let you know.”

I opened the door and stepped inside. Dang. It was darker than Hades. I stood for a moment letting my eyes adjust. Just my luck, the place was packed with drunken, horny men who were fascinated with the well-endowed dancer shaking her booty on the stage.

A biker dude grabbed my arm as I walked by his table. “How much for a lap dance?”

“I’m not a dancer. Let go of my arm or I’m going to do the world a favor and neuter you.”

The biker dude laughed. “You’re kinda itty-bitty to be making threats.”

“It’s not a threat. It’s a promise.”

“Tell ya what. I’ll give ya twenty bucks, if you show me your titties.”

“No. Let go of my arm.” I sighed when the growling in my head started up again.

The biker dude’s eyes bugged out. “What the hell is that? What the hell is that?” He jumped to his feet. “What are you?”

What was it? I hadn’t a clue, but I knew my hitchhiker wasn’t a threat to me. The biker was another matter altogether. “My buddy doesn’t like you. I don’t like you. What am I? I’m a psychic assigned to Central Command. The better question is: Do you want to live?”

“Yes.” The biker stumbled backwards. “Keep it away from me.”

“Okay. Leave now or I’ll sic Hitch on you.”

The biker fled.

Loud purring filled my mind. “*Got a name?*”

The purring stopped.

“*I’ll take that as a no. How do you feel about Hitch for a name?*”

Hitch purred.

“*Good.*”

Hothar demanded suddenly, “*Did a male just touch you?*”

“*He did, but he’s gone now,*” I flashed him an image of the biker running for his life.

“*Why are you in a pleasure house?*”

“*It’s not a pleasure house, it’s a titty bar, and I’m looking for the witch.*” Hmm. I was surprised Hothar hadn’t sensed

Hitch.

“Why would the witch be in a titty bar?”

“That is the question.”

“I am checking the light rail. When I am finished, I will join you,” Hothar advised.

“Okay.”

“Next up is Aphrodite, Goddess of Love,” a voice shouted over the loudspeakers.

“No freakin’ way. The witch wouldn’t be stupid enough to audition as a stripper when we were hunting her, would she? Nah. It was just a coincidence. There were probably lots of dancers who called themselves Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love.

Aphrodite’s bell-shaped breasts bobbed wildly as she ran out on the stage, wearing only a pink G-string.

Hitch made a noise like a cat hacking up a hairball.

Yep, that summed it up. What had happened to Aphrodite’s dream of being a chorus girl in Vegas?

The men in the audience whistled and stomped their feet as Aphrodite humped the pole like an inebriated caterpillar.

“Move your ass,” someone shouted.

The witch twitched her butt spasmodically.

Holy hell. Aphrodite had no sense of rhythm, nor could she dance. Ugh. Enough was enough. I wound my way through the tables and jumped up onto the stage. “Are you insane? We’re leaving now.”

Aphrodite glared at me. “Go away.”

Dozens of cockroaches scurried over my sandals. “Wazzock’s piss!” I hopped around like a crazy person trying to dislodge the little beasts.

Hitch trilled in excitement and the roaches began to vanish.

The men shouted, “Shake it baby. Shake it!”

Aphrodite shoved me. “Get off the stage. You’re ruining my routine.”

“Routine?” I did a tap dance on the bugs. “This is a cockroach-infested titty bar, not Vegas.”

A man shouted, “Show us your knockers, red.”

“You’re spoiling everything,” Aphrodite snarled.

“You’ll thank me later. Where are your clothes?”

“I’m not leaving,” Aphrodite shrieked.

An older man with a bad comb-over and a beer gut that would give a pregnant woman a run for her money stormed onto the stage. “Yes, you are leaving. I’m the manager and I’m telling you to get out.”

“But the other guy gave me a job,” Aphrodite cried.

“Consider yourself fired. You can’t dance, and you have granny boobs.”

“Granny boobs!” Aphrodite let out a howl of rage. “Sonitum!”

There was a cracking boom, and the manager went flying. He crashed into a table, flipping it over and spilling the men’s drinks.

I frowned as the angry drunks jumped to their feet, grabbed the manager, and tossed him over the bar. The bartender pulled out a baseball bat and waved it at them. Great! The last thing I needed was for a fight to break out.

Hitch’s angry yowl raised the hair on the back of my neck.

“Look at me! Look at me! I am utter perfection,” Aphrodite shouted and started dancing.

Perfection? The witch moved like an arthritic seventy-year-old, and she was totally oblivious to all the nasty catcalls.

A man with a startling resemblance to a gorilla stormed onto the stage.

“You! You’re the one who told me I had a job here,” Aphrodite snarled.

The gorilla glared at her. “You need breasts implants, and dance lessons. Now get out or I’ll call the police.”

“Implants!” Aphrodite gestured with her hand and shouted, “Mensura lees sum!”

“Fuck!” The gorilla yelled as he was suddenly sailing across the room. His arms flailing wildly, he smashed face-first into the mirror behind the bar, shattering it. He slid slowly to the floor.

The bartender grabbed his bat and headed our way.

I glared at Aphrodite. “Have you lost your mind?”

“No one insults my girls.”

“Who cares what they think!”

“I do!” Aphrodite waved her hand and chanted, “Yankata throne wasr.”

The bartender’s bat caught fire. He shrieked and dropped it.

Flames spread across the booze-soaked floor, setting a table and chair on fire.

The smoke alarm began to wail.

The sprinkler system kicked in, drizzling water over the room.

Hitch meowed pitifully.

“It’s okay, little guy. It’s okay.”

Chaos erupted. The panicked patrons pushed and shoved each other in a desperate attempt to flee the growing fire.

Then again, maybe not.

Aphrodite jumped up and down on a horde of roaches. “I hate bugs! I hate bugs!”

There was something seriously wrong with the witch.

Hitch hissed in agreement.

The crazy wannabe dancer finally noticed the men running for their lives. “Why are they leaving?”

“Duh. You set the building on fire.”

Aphrodite blinked and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirrored tiles. The mascara running down her cheeks gave her the appearance of a demented clown. “My makeup is all ruined!”

“Put the fire out, you twit.”

“No! Let it burn.”

I jumped off the stage and headed for the fire extinguisher behind the bar.

“What is wrong?” Hothar asked.

“Aphrodite has lost her mind and the situation is deteriorating rapidly.”

Poof! Hothar was standing next to me. He quickly surveyed the growing fire. “Did the witch start the fire?”

“She did.”

Uncle Saul walked in, pulled his laser pistol, and fired. A crackling, red energy storm knocked Aphrodite down. Screams tore from her as violent muscle spasms contorted her body. Her arms and legs slammed repeatedly against the floor.

I winced. Being stunned hurt like a mother and I hadn’t seen my uncle this angry in a long time. “Now we know why Skye and Ella put her in a remote area of the Navajo Nation.”

Uncle Saul gave me the stink eye.

“Just saying.” I grabbed the fire extinguisher and sprayed the burning table.

Hothar pulled a cylinder from his right pocket and tossed it into the fire. Whoosh! A white mist exploded, dousing the fire.

“Cool. Can you get me one of those?”

Every inch the war commander, Hothar turned to me. “I can and why aren’t you wearing your armor?”

“Ah, well, I was going to be spending time with you and didn’t think I would need it. I mean you are the big, bad war commander,” I said.

Hothar frowned. “Would not need it? Wherever you go chaos follows.”

“I’m not responsible for this,” I protested.

“But here you are,” Uncle Saul snapped. “Wear your fucking armor belt.”

“Yes, sir.”

The gorilla got to his feet and swiped at the blood running down his face. “I want that crazy bitch arrested.”

I felt Hothar’s power surge. “You do not want her arrested.”

“I do not want her arrested,” the gorilla repeated.

“A cigarette started the fire.”

His eyes blank, the gorilla nodded. “A cigarette started the fire.”

“We were never here.”

“Never here,” the gorilla confirmed.

“Go get medical treatment.”

The gorilla left.

Zarek entered the bar, inspected the damage and his gaze settled on Aphrodite. “Can she dance?”

“She’s one of the worst dancers I’ve ever seen,” I answered.

Zarek grimaced. “Ella said Aphrodite is a skilled healer, but between her sense of entitlement and propensity to panic, she is impossible to work with.”

“Did you find another witch?” I asked hopefully.

“No. Bodhi is waiting for us in your office, General.”

From the look on Uncle Saul’s face, things had just gotten a whole lot worse. “Who’s Bodhi?”

“He is one of Sariel’s trusted commanders,” Hothar replied.

An Askole warrior was the last thing we needed. “We need to keep him away from Aphrodite. She’ll take one look at his tentacles and freak.”

A glittering blue light formed on the stage.

“Guess he’s eager to talk to you, Uncle Saul.”

Zarek’s mouth tightened into a hard line.

The light faded and a seven-foot-tall medieval knight, complete with a black helmet with horns and armor stood there.

Hitch growled menacingly.

Bodhi stared down at Aphrodite.

Aphrodite’s screams got louder.

“Any way we can talk Bodhi into keeping his helmet on?”
I asked Hothar on our private link.

“Unlikely. I want to know why Bodhi is here.”

I shrugged. *“A lot of Askole warriors are intrigued by human females.”*

“Aphrodite’s antics would drive away even the most determined Askole,” Hothar replied.

“True.”

Her body twitching madly, Aphrodite wailed, “Make it stop. Make it stop.”

Bodhi queried, *“Was it necessary to stun the female?”*

“Yes,” Uncle Saul growled.

I really didn’t like the possessive note in Bodhi’s voice. I gave him a predatory smile. *“Are you here to get yourself a hot-to-trot human female? Because if you are, it ain’t gonna happen.”* To my utter surprise, neither Hothar, Uncle Saul nor Zarek corrected me.

Snikt. Schlik. Schlik. Schlik. Schlik. Schlik. Within seconds his helmet retracted, revealing something out of a nightmare. Tentacles squirmed about Bodhi’s snakelike features. Instead of skin, he had black armor-plated scales. His determined

yellow eyes were fixed on me. *“Do you belong to the Jones clan?”*

“Casey belongs to me,” Hothar inserted.

“I am aware of your situation War Commander.”

I frowned. What was that supposed to mean?

Aphrodite’s wails got louder and louder. *“Make it stop. Please! Make. It. Stop!”*

“As you wish.” Bodhi knelt beside her.

Her eyes bugged and she screamed, *“Go away. Go away. Go away.”*

Bodhi totally ignored Aphrodite’s demands and let his tentacles nip at her neck.

The violent muscle spasms contorting her body stopped. With a shuddering sigh, Aphrodite’s eyes closed.

I walked over to the stage and scanned the witch. She was sleeping. I stared up at Bodhi. *“Why are you here?”*

“I need a witch to complete my task.”

“Which is?” I gave Bodhi a mental push.

Bodhi bared his lethal teeth. *“Kill Mallox and rescue my son.”*

I felt Hothar’s start of surprise and asked, *“When did Mallox capture him?”*

“Twelve hours ago.” Bodhi tentacles flared. *“I was told of your ability to loosen tongues.”*

I gave a slight bow. *“A small talent.”*

“There should be no secrets between allies,” Uncle Saul snapped.

Hothar scowled. *“Where was he taken?”*

“Dway was captured during the battle for Noxpa.”

“What makes you think he still lives?” Zarek demanded.

Bodhi tapped his gauntlet, and a three-dimensional vid appeared over the stage. A badly injured Askole warrior was strapped to an examining table. Using a universal translator, Mallox looked into the camera and said, "If you want your son back alive Commander Bodhi, you will withdraw your warriors from Noxpa. If you fail to comply, this is what I will do to your son." The camera focused on a Kotsor/human hybrid. "You have three days to comply." The vid vanished.

"When did you receive the vid?" Call me worried.

"Four hours ago."

Hothar interjected, *"Were you able to track the transmission?"*

"Mallox and my son are on Diza, the painted planet."

"And why do you need a witch?" I gave him another mental push.

Bodhi's tentacles squirmed wildly. *"Our scout was murdered by this female."* A three-dimensional image of a young Marion appeared above the stage.

Hitch shivered violently.

"Oh, hell. Mallox did clone the traitorous witch," I groaned.

Fury lit Zarek's eyes. *"How did she kill your warrior?"*

"With a strange amber fire that burned through his armor and turned him to ash."

I studied the image. This Marion was around twenty and her skeletal body was covered in open sores. *"She's dying."*

"I agree." Hothar pointed to the infected wounds. *"She has necrotizing fasciitis."*

Uncle Saul smiled grimly. *"Mallox's poor treatment of his test subjects will eventually lead to his defeat."*

"Time grows short for my son." Bodhi picked up Aphrodite and slung her over his shoulder.

“Wait!” I jumped up on the stage and grabbed her leg. *“Aphrodite is not a warrior. All she does is faint. Believe me, you can’t depend on her.”*

“I will do what I must,” Bodhi replied, and an energy field erupted around Hothar, Uncle Saul and Zarek.

“Have you lost your mind?” Before I could move, Bodhi’s armored hand clamped around my arm. *“Let go of me.”*

Hitch yowled furiously.

A glittering blue light engulfed us.

Wazzock’s piss! I couldn’t move. All I could do was watch my molecules whizz about. The War Commander’s battle cry echoed in my ears as the titty bar vanished.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER 5

THE LIGHT FADED and we were standing on an icy cold transporter platform. A heavily armed Askole warrior stood at the control console.

“Send me back. Now!” I demanded.

Bodhi spouted a bunch of gobbledygook at the warrior and stormed off the platform.

“Wait!” I followed him. *“I know you’re determined to save Dway, but this isn’t the way to do it.”*

Bodhi went to hypersonic speed and zoomed off.

“Testosterone should be outlawed,” I huffed and trotted after him.

The Askole warrior suddenly blocked my way. *“You will come with me.”*

Hitch hissed threateningly.

“No. Send me back.”

“I cannot. We have left orbit.”

I tried to link with Hothar or Uncle Saul, but something was blocking my telepathy. I tried my warrior’s bracelet commlink, but it didn’t work either.

“You are pretty for a soft skin.” The warrior’s lustful gaze roamed over my body.

Just what I needed. A horny male without a lick of self-control. *“My mate is a war commander; General Jones is my uncle and Zarek is a friend of the family. Are you trying to start a war?”*

“War? I think not and you are not wearing an ownership band.”

I stared at him in alarm. Crap. I touched my protective amulet. *"This is my ownership band."*

The warrior gave me a toothy smile. *"No, it is not."*

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"Yes." He touched my hair. *"I am unmated."*

"Whoopee. I have a mate. You touch me again and I will kick your ass."

"A tiny human female cannot defeat an Askole," the warrior smirked.

I sighed. My sundress and sandals only added to my harmless air. What the butthead didn't realize was warriors came in all shapes and sizes. *"Hothar is a war commander and believe me, you don't want to fight him."*

"Have no fear, little one, I will defeat him."

"No, you won't, but if you feel the need to challenge the war commander, go for it. Now, can you show me a commlink? I need to contact General Jones."

"Not until I claim you."

You can't cure stupid, and I was done with being treated like a brainless sex object. *"Let me be perfectly clear. Your touch makes me sick to my stomach. Hothar and I have a mental bond that only death can break. Now back off or suffer the consequences."*

"You may call me Zayn." He stroked my hair again. *"Soft."*

Little legs moved in my hair and my hitchhiker let out a menacing growl.

Zayn's tentacles knotted and his right hand dropped to his weapon. *"What is that?"*

Hell, if I knew. *"That is my friend Hitch. Now back the hell off. Your touch disgusts me."*

"Not for long. Once I inject you with my pheromones, you will be eager to mate." He held out his hand. *"Submit. I do not*

wish to bruise you.”

Hitch’s yowl sounded like something out of a horror movie.

“Easy Hitch. I’m about to teach the moron a lesson.”
Hmmm. Mind control or telekinesis?

Hitch meowed his answer.

“Telekinesis it is.” I punched out with every ounce of power I had.

An astonished look on his face, Zayn flew down the corridor and slammed into the far wall. He slid to the floor and didn’t get up.

I walked over to him and took his laser pistol. “I might be small, but I’m meaner than a hungry Gorum.”

An alarm sounded.

Hitch meowed in apprehension.

“Yep, we’re about to get company.” I noticed the emergency light bar at the top of the walls was flashing too. A computerized voice bellowed Askole gobbledygook. A bit of overkill for little ole me.

I brightened. Maybe Bodhi had detected Hothar’s ship in hot pursuit. That would be so awesome. I tapped my warrior’s bracelet. Crap. The communication relays were still blocked. What I really needed were the schematics for the ship. Using Detja’s hacking program, I got into their system. Bodhi’s quarters were two decks below me, and the holding cells were down this corridor and to the left. I headed for the holding cells. If Aphrodite wasn’t there, I would check his quarters next.

A black streak shot down the corridor.

Huh? Maybe all the fuss was about me. I hid the laser pistol behind my back.

Hitch burrowed into my hair.

The warrior was wearing full body armor. I guess they did consider me a threat.

Screeching to an abrupt stop, the warrior pointed his weapon at me and snarled something.

I shrieked and crumpled to the floor. Hey, it worked for Aphrodite.

The warrior mumbled something and poked me with his foot.

I played dead.

Zayn stumbled up and shouted something at the warrior.

I slid into Zayn's mind. *"He wants me for a mate."*

Zayn roared and attacked the warrior.

I scrambled out of the way as they exchanged brutal blows. While they were busy trying to kill each other, I'd check out the holding cells. Hopefully, they had a communications console.

Hitch meowed a warning.

"Yeah, I sense him too." Assuming Aphrodite's demeanor, I huddled against the wall and sobbed loudly.

Another warrior zipped up and stunned the combatants.

Dang, I hadn't been expecting that. Seizing control of his mind, I commanded, *"Drop your weapon."*

His pistol dropped to the floor, and with a roar he reached for me.

"Don't move!" I commanded.

The warrior froze. His tentacles squirmed wildly as he realized his muscles had locked up.

"Is there a communications console in the brig?" I gave him a hard mental push.

"Yes."

"What's the passcode?"

"2381."

"Remove your armor."

His teeth bared in a snarl; the warrior obeyed.

My eyes bugged. Not only was he naked, but his erect penis was huge. Guess he got off on combat.

Hitch meowed.

“I know. Kinda surprised me too.” I stunned the warrior.

The computerized voice spat more gobbledygook.

A prickly sensation shot up my spine. More warriors were heading my way. I hurried into the brig. Rats, the holding cells were empty. Bodhi must have stowed Aphrodite in his quarters. Would the idiot try to seduce him? Probably.

I blasted the door’s sensor pad. Hopefully, it will buy me some time. I hurriedly entered the passcode into the control panel. Once I had an open frequency, I typed in the numbers for Uncle Saul’s commlink. “C’mon, c’mon answer. I’m running out of time.”

Bang! The door shook.

“Casey?”

Oh, thank God. “Please tell me you’re tracking me.”

“We are.”

“Is Hothar with you?”

“No, he took his Talon fighter, and he should catch up with Bodhi’s ship in about ten minutes.”

Boom! The door shuddered.

Alarm filled Uncle Saul’s voice. “What was that?”

“The Askole warriors are a tad angry and they’re trying to break the door down.”

“How many warriors did you disable?”

I winced as a crack appeared in the door. “Three and one of them wants to mate with me.”

“Did you tell them you’re not twenty-one yet?”

“It didn’t come up and I don’t think Zayn would care.”

“I was afraid something like this would happen,” Uncle Saul grumbled.

A white mist spewed from the air ducts.

The room whirled around me, and my knees buckled. “I’m being gassed.”

“We’re coming for you,” Uncle Saul promised.

“Hide, Hitch.”

Hitch’s little legs dug into my hair.

“Smart baby.” Everything faded to black.

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER 6

AN URGENT MEOW penetrated my hazy mind. *“Tired. Go away.”*

Little feet patted my face.

I cracked open an eye. A white cat with green eyes stared at me. I frowned. Why did it have spider legs? Oh yeah, now I remember. *“Hitch?”*

Purring loudly, Hitch rubbed against my face.

“You, okay?”

Hitch meowed.

“Wake up,” a harsh voice demanded.

My little hitchhiker vanished.

What the hell? I could still feel his furry body pressed against my face.

“Wake up, Casey.”

I frowned. *“Hothar? Is that you?”*

“Yes.”

“You sound funny. What happened?”

“I was stunned multiple times,” Hothar rasped.

Color me confused. Wasn't he supposed to rescue me? *“Where are you?”*

“In the cell next to you.”

My eyes snapped open. *“You were captured?”*

“Yes.”

I bolted upright and quickly realized I was chained to the wall of a holding cell. *“Wazzock's piss!”*

“The warriors are returning. You need to free us.”

My temper flared to life. *“Who stunned you? Who?”*

“It does not matter.” Hothar mentally stroked my face. *“You are unharmed.”*

“It matters to me. Who hurt you?”

“My injuries are not severe, but I am incapacitated. Can you get out of your cuffs?”

“Yes. You know I don’t leave home without my get out of jail free card.”

“Use it. Now.”

I quickly scanned the area and grinned. Bodhi hadn’t left a guard. Big mistake on his part.

“Hurry.”

Pulling off my belt, I opened the buckle and took out my electronic lock pick. One tap and the shackles popped open. I scrambled to my feet and ran my lock pick over the holding cell’s sensor pad. The energy shield dissipated.

Hitch jumped on my head.

“Seriously little dude, wouldn’t my shoulder be better?”

He meowed.

“You can see better up there. Okay, whatever. Just don’t poop in my hair.”

Hitch let out an offended meow.

Hothar rasped, *“Do you know where they are holding Aphrodite?”*

“No, but my best guess is Bodhi’s quarters.” I turned off the force field on Hothar’s cell and stared at him in shocked alarm. He was buck naked and nasty bruises covered his body. The jerks had taken his battle armor too. Violent spasms shook his body. Hot Lip’s grunt of pain sent me scurrying over to him. *“When I find who did this to you, I’m gonna kick their ass.”* I removed his shackles.

“Not... Not necessary.”

“The hell it isn’t.”

A plaintive meow escaped Hitch.

“Yes, he’s family.”

Hothar bared his teeth in a snarl as another tremor shook him. *“That is not a Tabor.”*

“No, I think Hitch is a combination of cat and Kotsor.”

“Hitch?”

I shrugged. *“Seemed appropriate. He did hitch a ride with me.”*

“Where did you find him?”

“On the merchant ship Vakoch. I have a question. Where the heck is your armor?”

“I am not sure. One minute I was wearing armor, the next I wasn’t and then Commander Bodhi’s warriors stunned me.”

My gaze roved over Hothar’s heavily muscled form. Mine. All mine. I wanted to lick him all over.

A groan broke from Hot Lips.

I gave myself a mental head smack. This wasn’t the time to act like a horny teenager. I needed to figure out a way to get a six foot eight, three-hundred-pound warrior to safety.

“I cannot sense Hitch,” Hothar grumbled.

Crap. Being stunned multiple times was mucking with his psychic powers. Then again, maybe Marion had accidentally transferred some of her magical gifts to Hitch and when he was frightened, he vanished both mentally and physically. *“I think the little dude has some magical abilities.”*

“What type of powers?” There was a touch of alarm in Hothar’s voice.

“Invisibility for one. Neither Uncle Saul nor Zarek could sense him. Plus, he can understand me, and I can understand him.” My head snapped around. Several Askole warriors were heading our way. Huh? One of the warrior’s auras was familiar. *“Is that Tihar?”*

“Yes.”

“Oh goody. We don’t have to fight our way out.”

A rather large Askole warrior in full armor zipped in. *“Are you injured?”*

“I’m not, but they took Hothar’s armor and stunned him multiple times. Can you help him?”

“I can.” Tihar’s helmet retracted.

By the way his tentacles were squirming, I knew he was angry. Very angry. *“How’s Sarah?”*

He shot me a toothy grin. *“She is carrying our first child.”*

“Wow. Congratulations. Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A son,” Tihar said proudly as he knelt beside Hothar. His tentacles stung Hot Lip’s neck and chest.

Zayn appeared in the doorway. *“I claim the....”*

“NO!” Power crackled wildly around me as I punched him in the chest with my telekinesis.

Bam! The blow dented Zayn’s armor and hurled him backward into the corridor. He hit a wall with a tremendous thud and fell to his knees. Huh? Would you look at that? He had left the perfect imprint of his body on the wall. Kinda reminded me of those old Earth cartoons with the coyote.

Zayn struggled to his feet and shook his head to clear it. *“You are...”*

I socked him in the face.

His head snapped back, and he toppled to the floor. His yellow gaze fixed on me, he gasped, *“I will have...”*

I struck him again and again. *“No, no, and hell no.”*

Hothar wrapped his arms around me. *“Stop. If he tries to touch you, I will kill him.”* He kissed my ear. My neck.

I turned my head, and his lips met mine in a long, voracious kiss. His tongue swept into my mouth, stroking me.

Hitch started coughing up a hairball.

Uncle Saul's exasperated sigh sounded in my head. *"I said no tongue."*

"Yes, sir." I broke our kiss and grinned at Hothar. *"Woo-freakin'-hoo. Only fifty-five more days."*

He kissed the tip of my nose. *"An eternity."*

I shot Tihar a sheepish look. *"Sorry, I dented your wall."*

"And my warrior."

"I won't apologize for that. I told Zayn not to touch me, and he didn't listen."

"You have no ownership band," Tihar pointed out.

I countered, *"I'm not twenty-one yet. Any attempt to forcibly sever my bond with Hothar will result in my death."*

"And the destruction of this ship," Hothar warned.

"Plus, Sarah would be seriously pissed if you let me die. We are family after all."

Tihar grimaced. *"I will inform my warriors."*

"Thank you, what did Bodhi do with Aphrodite?"

"He sedated her and put her in his quarters."

"Is Bodhi still breathing?" Call me curious.

"Yes." Tihar's tentacles danced wildly about his face. *"We discussed his actions."*

"In other words, you beat the hell out of him." I smirked.

Tihar bared his teeth in a predator's smile. *"Yes."*

The intruder alert sounded again, and the computer spat more gobbledygook.

Hothar tapped his warrior's bracelet. *"The witch is in the transporter room."*

"What?" Tihar zoomed off.

I touched the medical icon on my warrior's bracelet and scanned Hothar. *"Your synapses aren't back to normal yet. Do you need some blood?"*

Hothar wrapped an arm around me. “Not yet. The witch is attacking Tihar.”

“Oh, hell.” There was a flash of black and we appeared in the transporter room.

Her bare breasts swinging wildly, Aphrodite threw a fire ball at Tihar. “I wanna go home. Now!”

Tihar dodged the fire ball and flames erupted on the wall.

“Enough!” Hothar snapped. “Earth is fifty thousand parsecs away.”

The ship’s automatic fire suppression system kicked in, spraying a thick, white foam over the room.

“Yuck.” I wiped the gook out of my eyes. One look at Aphrodite and I burst into laughter. She looked like she had been rolled in marshmallow cream.

“Are you laughing at me?” Aphrodite huffed.

“Yeah, I am.”

The witch burst into tears. “Everyone hates me.”

“If you stopped being such a bitch, you could actually make some friends,” I countered.

Hitch sneezed repeatedly.

Tihar’s tentacles stood out. “*What is that?*”

“*What’s what?*” I snatched Hitch off my head.

“*The creature you have in your hands.*”

“*Oh, him. His name is Hitch.*”

Tihar’s left hand dropped to his weapon. “*What is it?*”

“*Not quite sure.*”

Hothar interjected, “*He is one of Marion’s creations.*”

Aphrodite took one look at Hitch, her eyes rolled back in her head and down she went.”

Tihar quickly hauled her up. “*Why is she unconscious?*”

“Aphrodite faints in high stress situations. Bodhi stinging her must have neutralized the fludrocortisone,” I answered.

“Fludrocortisone?” Tihar queried.

“It stops her from constantly fainting. Which is a real pain-in-the butt, let me tell ya.” I released an exasperated sigh. *“I tried to tell Bodhi that taking Aphrodite wasn’t a good idea, but he wouldn’t listen to me.”*

Hothar interjected, *“She needs an injection every other day.”*

“Or she faints?” One of Tihar’s tentacles stung Aphrodite’s shoulder.

“You’ve got it.”

“Is there another witch available?”

I shook my head. *“Nope. All the witches working for Central Command are on the far side of the galaxy defusing a bunch of magical bombs. It would take them at least a week to reach Diza.”*

Aphrodite let out an ear shattering shriek and started smacking Tihar’s armored hand. *“Let go of me. Let go of me.”*

Tihar released her.

Aphrodite fell backward into the foam. *“Help! I’m drowning. I’m drowning.”*

“For God’s sake Aphrodite, just stand up,” I snapped.

Her head popped out of the suds. *“I want to go home.”*

“Don’t we all.” I gestured at the foam. *“How do we get rid of this stuff?”*

Tihar tapped his gauntlet. A bright blue light rolled over the room. The suds vanished.

“Oh, my God! He’s naked and where is his penis!” Aphrodite exclaimed.

I rolled my eyes. *“It’s shy. Really shy.”*

“Shy? It looks like he was castrated.”

Hothar gave her the stink eye.

What a doofus. “Coletti physiology is a bit different than a human male.”

Bodhi suddenly appeared in the doorway. His gaze fastened on the witch.

Aphrodite broke into a weird hip-hop dance.

“What is she doing?” Hothar asked, clearly perplexed.

“Dancing and can we get the witch some clothes,” I whined.

Eyeing Aphrodite’s breasts, Zayn staggered into the room. *“Has this female been claimed?”*

“She belongs to me,” Bodhi growled and dropped Zayn with one blow.

The smug smile on Aphrodite’s face had me rubbing my aching forehead. *“Please tell me you didn’t have sex with Commander Bodhi.”*

Aphrodite just shrugged. *“Men are more agreeable after a good fuck.”*

I groaned.

Tihar’s tentacles stood straight up.

“Do you have any idea of what you have done?” Hothar bellowed.

“We fucked. No big deal.” Touching several red marks on her neck and breasts, Aphrodite giggled, *“His stings launched me into orbit, if you know what I mean.”*

“Explain yourself Commander,” Tihar demanded.

“I need the female to rescue my son.”

Aphrodite frowned. *“Rescue?”*

“His son was captured by Mallox. You know, the evil Rodan scientist that likes to create monsters,” I replied.

“No. No. No. I didn’t agree to any rescue.”

My right eye started twitching. *“You mated with Commander Bodhi, which means he owns you now. The mating bond cannot be broken. Ever.”*

“Ever?”

“Let me put it this way. You are forever linked.”

“Forever! But...but we just had sex. Nothing was said about me belonging to him,” Aphrodite protested.

Bodhi held out his hand. *“Come female.”*

“Her name is Aphrodite, not female, and there are a few things you need to know about her,” I interjected.

Tears rolling down her cheeks, Aphrodite pleaded. *“Please don’t let him take me. Please.”*

“You will soon become Askole,” Tihar growled. *“Bodhi will guide you through the changes.”*

“Changes!” Aphrodite shrieked. *“What changes?”*

“Those stings also injected you with Askole DNA and soon you will no longer be human,” I answered.

Aphrodite stared at me in utter horror. *“That can’t be true. It’s impossible.”*

“No, it’s not. When Hothar and I complete our bond, I will become a Coletti hybrid, and I’ll be able to do cool stuff like teleporting,” I said. By the glazed look in her eyes, I knew Aphrodite was a bit overwhelmed. *“One good thing about becoming Askole is you’ll be lightning fast.”*

Aphrodite let out a sob. *“I just want to be a dancer.”*

“Well, that’s not going to happen now.” I looked up at Hothar. *“Any ideas?”*

“What has been done cannot be undone. She will learn and adjust,” Hothar responded.

Yeah, I didn’t see that happening. *“Commander Bodhi, I need to talk to you about Aphrodite’s little quirks.”*

“Quirks?” Aphrodite squawked.

His cold yellow gaze fixed on the witch, the Commander growled, *“She is my mate and will do as she is told.”*

Aphrodite planted her hands on her hips. *“Like hell I will. You will take me back to Earth and...”*

Bodhi snatched her up and kissed her hungrily. His tentacles kept stinging Aphrodite until she quit fighting him.

“We are approaching Diza,” Tihar announced.

Hothar surveyed my sundress. *“Do you have armor that will fit Casey?”*

“I do. Teleport to the bridge. I will meet you there after I deal with the Commander and his mate,” Tihar instructed.

Hothar wrapped his arms around me and teleported.

I caught a fleeting glimpse of the Commander and Aphrodite having wild monkey sex before we appeared on the bridge. Ugh. I was never going to get that image out of my head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER 7

THE INSTANT we appeared on the bridge, every Askole warrior went on red alert.

Even weaponless and nude, Hothar radiated menace.

I waved at them all friendly-like and gave the warriors my Debbie Sunshine smile. *“Which one of you assholes stunned Hothar and took his armor?”*

They all grinned.

Hothar grabbed me. *“Do not injure them. We need every warrior on this ship to capture Mallox and destroy his base.”*

“What? Little ole me hurt them?”

An older warrior missing some tentacles strolled over to me. *“I stunned your mate.”*

“That was a big mistake.”

“Are you challenging me, female?”

“I am.”

Hothar growled, *“No, she is not.”*

“I have heard Earth females are difficult to control.”

“You have no idea,” Hothar replied with a sigh.

“Har. Har. Very funny.”

“Casey, this is Enzo, he is the Askole version of a war commander.”

I gave a slight bow. *“It is an honor to meet such a distinguished warrior.”*

“Why is your mate smiling like a hungry Gorum?” Enzo asked.

Hothar answered matter-of-factly, *“She is eager to kill Mallox.”*

“As we all are.”

My attention was caught by the viewscreen. Diza was a planet filled with stunning candy-colored sandstone mountains.

Hitch yowled.

“Mallox is near a pink lake?”

Hitch meowed.

Enzo pointed at Hitch and demanded, *“What is that?”*

“His name is Hitch and he says Mallox is by a pink lake,” I advised.

“You can communicate with the creature?”

“I can.”

“Your female is proving to be useful,” Enzo told Hothar.

“Gosh, I’m good for something other than bedsport. Who knew?”

Hothar shot me a dirty look and hit an icon on his warrior’s bracelet. A three-dimensional map of Diza appeared. *“The lake is at latitude 33.575.20 and longitude 12.212.70.”*

Enzo walked over to a security console, entered the coordinates, and focused the scanners on the area. *“There is a grade ten forcefield protecting the buildings. Commander Bodhi’s son is in building two.”*

“Is he still alive?” I asked.

“Yes, but he needs immediate medical care.”

“Good thing Aphrodite is a healer.” I just hoped she didn’t faint at the sight of blood.

“How good a healer?” Enzo wanted to know.

I shrugged. *“I’ve never seen her work, but Skye says she’s first-rate.”*

“They have created a kill zone with dozens of automated laser cannons on the surrounding hills,” Hothar advised.

Hitch meowed loudly.

“According to Hitch, the power generator is outside the forcefield.”

Enzo tapped an icon and sneered. *“Mallox does not think like a warrior. The generator is only protected by an electrified fence.”*

The lift doors opened and out stalked Tihar. His tentacles churned wildly around his face.

I bit back a laugh. *“Wonder what Aphrodite did this time.”*

“Only the Goddess knows,” Hothar replied.

“We have the coordinates for Mallox’s base and Dway will die unless he receives immediate medical care,” Enzo announced.

“I have informed Commander Bodhi.” Tihar handed me an armor belt. *“I will watch over Casey while you visit the armorer, Hothar. Mowat has your armor belt and weapons. I am gifting both of you with a new Sturm laser pistol.”*

“We appreciate the gifts.” Hothar warned on our private link, *“Do not attack anyone while I am gone.”*

“I reserve the right to defend myself,” I shot back.

“Tihar is more than capable of protecting you.” Hothar teleported away.

Tihar gave me a toothy smile. *“The armor belt comes with the jackal helmet you like so much.”*

“Oh, cool.” I wrapped my armor belt around my waist and triggered it. *Snikt. Schlik. Schlik. Schlik. Schlik. Schlik.* Within seconds black armor covered me from head to toe. I took a couple of experimental steps. The armor fit perfectly, and the heads-up display had some new functions.

Hitch squeaked frantically.

“Oops, sorry.” I retracted the helmet and scooped him off my head. *“You okay, little dude?”*

He meowed his displeasure.

I stroked him. *“You’ll have to ride on my shoulder.”*

Hitch hissed at me.

“Okay, okay. You can ride on top of my helmet.”

Bodhi and Aphrodite exited the lift.

Hitch jumped on my head and yowled at them.

“Get that monstrosity out of here,” Aphrodite demanded.

I sighed. On the bright side, she was wearing her armor and she hadn’t fainted. Yet. *“No can do.”*

Aphrodite grabbed Bodhi’s arm. *“Make it go away, Pickles.”*

Pickles? I gave Bodhi my best predator’s smile. *“Shall we see how well your armor stands up to my telekinesis?”*

Bodhi took a step toward me.

“We need Casey alive and unharmed to rescue your son,” Tihar snapped.

Commander Bodhi focused his attention on the viewscreen. *“How many warriors does Mallox have?”*

“There are fifty Rodan soldiers, over two hundred mutant fighters and countless Kotsor hatchings,” Enzo replied.

Yikes. We were a wee bit outnumbered.

Bodhi clamped a hand to his chest. *“My assault team is ready.”*

“What?” Aphrodite gasped.

“Before y’all beam down, Aphrodite needs to scan the area for magical traps,” I interjected.

Aphrodite blinked. *“I do?”*

“Yeah, you do. Unless you’re ready to become one of Mallox’s science projects.”

“No. Oh, no.” Aphrodite’s eyes darted around the bridge as if she were looking for a place to hide.

Bodhi took Aphrodite’s hand. “*Scan Mallox’s base. Now.*”

“*I don’t know how,*” Aphrodite whined.

I bit back a giggle as Bodhi’s tentacles stood straight up. He had finally realized his *mate* wasn’t the warrior he thought she was.

“*Casey, link with Aphrodite and help her search for the traps,*” Tihar commanded.

“*What?*”

Hothar, in full battle armor, appeared by my side. “*You heard him.*”

“*Do I hafta?*”

“*Yes.*”

Swell. Like I knew what magic looked like.

Bodhi ordered, “*Lower your shields female.*”

“*No, I don’t want her in my head,*” Aphrodite snapped.

“*The feeling is mutual, but we’re here to save Dway.*”

Bodhi stung Aphrodite’s neck. “*Lower your shields and search for magical traps.*”

“*Yes, Pickles.*”

To my amazement Aphrodite lowered her shields. I reluctantly linked with her. Dang. All that power and her career goal was to be a stripper. What a waste. I helped her focus on Mallox’s base. “*Skye said Marion’s magical bombs and hexes have an icky purple aura around them. Do you see anything like that?*”

“*Yes. The room where they are holding Dway has one on the door. There are several more in the hallway leading to the lab.*”

“*You need to defuse them.*”

“I’ve never deactivated bombs or hexes before,”
Aphrodite wailed.

I felt Hothar link with us. *“Ella says to use this spell. Aliud Markoo giet.”*

“You got that Aphrodite?”

“Yes. Aliud Markoo giet.”

In my mind’s eye I watched as one by one, the witch disabled the magical bombs. *“Good work, Aphrodite.”*

“I did it! I did it!”

“Yep, now all you need to do is heal Dway.” I could feel her concern as she scanned him.

“He’s dying.”

“I know.”

Hothar asked on our private link, *“Did Aphrodite disable all the traps?”*

“Yes.”

Enzo and I are going to teleport down and disable the power generator.”

Hitch yowled urgently.

“What? Are you sure?”

Meow. Meow. Meow.

“Okay. Okay. Hitch says most of Mallox’s lab is underground and there is a large cavern full of mutated Kotsors.”

“Like Hitch?” Hothar queried.

A picture of a Kotsor spider with a strange bulbous head and two red fly eyes formed in my head. A tube-like tongue shot from its mouth and impaled a lab rat. Within seconds the rat had been reduced to a desiccated corpse. *“No.”* I shared the horror show with Hothar, Tihar, Bodhi and Enzo.

“Hitch is a handy companion,” Enzo commented. *“Are there more like him?”*

Hitch meowed sadly.

“That’s a no.” God, had I killed them all?

The images of Rodan soldiers eating Hitch’s brothers and sisters flashed across my mind.

“I’m so sorry, little dude.”

Meow.

“Once Enzo and I take out the power generator, you will beam down with Tihar, Bodhi and the assault team,” Hothar informed me.

Like hell. *“We’re partners. Where you go, I go. Hitch will be able to warn us about Mallox’s critters and you never know when my telekinesis will come in handy.”*

Enzo eyed me. *“Where can I get a female like her?”*

“Casey is one of a kind,” Hothar answered proudly.

“Aw.” I gave Hothar a mental kiss. *“I love you too.”*

“My son is dying. We need to attack now!” Bodhi bellowed.

“It’s okay Pickles.” Aphrodite wrapped her arms around him. *“We will save Dway, but you need to let them do their job.”*

My jaw dropped. Holy cow! The self-absorbed twit almost sounded caring. Maybe Bodhi was good for her.

Hothar wrapped an arm around me. *“Under no circumstances remove any part of your armor or the sand hoppers will attack.”*

“Sand hoppers?”

The image of egg-shaped crab looking critters popped into my mind. *“They are bloodsuckers.”*

“Gotcha.” I frowned and plucked Hitch off my head. *“Will the sand hoppers attack you?”*

Hitch hissed haughtily.

“Oh, you eat them. Works for me.” I put him back on my head.

“I am ready,” Enzo stated.

“Me too.”

Hothar clamped a hand on Enzo shoulder and the bridge vanished.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER 8

WE APPEARED BEHIND A SIX-FOOT TALL, rust-colored geyser. It spewed pinkish water high into the air.

Huh? A thermal lake, and oh yay, the minerals in the water interfered with my scanners. My gaze focused on the bubbling watermelon-pink lake. A few funky bottle-shaped trees with coppery bark and orange leaves dotted the banks.

I switched my attention to the towering mountains rising out of a glittering white salt plain. The stripes of cerulean blue, magenta, canary-yellow, and blood-orange seemed almost mystical, as did the heat waves quivering across the terrain like restless spirits.

“Beware, little one,” Enzo cautioned, *“this beauty hides many dangers.”*

Hitch meowed in agreement.

“Paradise with a bit of a bite, huh?”

“Very much so,” Hothar added as he tossed a small device into the geyser.

Boom! A thick cloud of smoky vapor poured out, obscuring the area.

“Today Mallox dies.” Enzo zipped away.

Hothar teleported us to the electrified fence.

The mist parted revealing four headless Rodan soldiers sprawled on the ground.

Askole warriors were lethal.

“Fence is de-energized,” Enzo advised and swung the gate open.

Dropping me on my feet, Hothar pulled his laser pistol and commanded, *“No wandering off.”*

Grrr. Doing my best dimwitted impersonation, I gushed, *“Gee, I was hoping to take a couple of selfies with the pretty pink lake in the background.”*

Hothar gave me the stink eye. *“Behave.”*

“Right back at ya, Hot Lips. I’m not twelve.”

With an aggravated sigh, Hothar trotted through the gate.

Enzo inquired, *“Hot lips?”*

“He’s a great kisser.” I frowned as Hothar placed what looked like two thermite grenades next to the power generator. *“Are those grenades?”*

“Yes.”

“Holy hell! Is he nuts, we’re too close.”

“Run!” Enzo zoomed away without offering me a ride.

“Jerk.” I ran for my life. *“Stay put he says.”*

Hitch yowled at me.

“I’m running as fast as I can.”

“What happened to your kamikaze courage?” Hothar asked as he scooped us up.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. *“I might be crazy but I’m not suicidal.”*

“You still take too many risks.” Poof! We were back at the geyser.

“So do you, big guy.”

Kaboom! The power generator blew. A rippling fireball rose high into the sky.

I flinched as rocketing shards of metal pelted the ground around us.

Hitch yowled in alarm.

Hothar curled his body around us. *“I won’t let anything happen to you.”*

“Yeah, but who’s protecting you?”

“Tihar gave me one of their prototype battle suits to try out.”

“Guinea pig, huh?” I frowned as prickles of alarm skittered up my back. Something horrible was heading our way.

Enzo zipped up. *“Mallox has released the mutant fighters.”*

“How many?” Hothar set me on my feet.

“All of them.”

“We need to get to Dway before they kill him,” I interjected.

Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.

“What? A secret passageway? Show us.”

Hitch hopped down and scurried over to a raised sentry post. He stopped on top of what looked like a sewer grate and hopped up and down.

“There’s a tunnel underneath the grate that leads directly to Mallox’s lab,” I translated.

Purring loudly, Hitch scrambled up my body and took his spot on my helmet.

Enzo vaporized the grate and dropped into the tunnel.

“And you think I take unnecessary risks.”

“Askole warriors are extremely hard to kill, and you are not.”

“Am too.”

“The way is clear,” Enzo called.

“Copy.” Hothar’s hand closed over my shoulder and poof! We were in the pitch-black tunnel.

My helmet’s night vision automatically kicked in and I gasped. There were chopped up bodies everywhere. My gaze locked on Enzo’s bloody sword. Hyper-speed did have its advantages.

Hothar's bracelet beeped. *"Tihar is going to destroy Mallox's laser cannons."*

Thunderous explosions shook the tunnel, raining dirt and rocks down on us.

I checked my scanner. There were some sizeable cracks in the ground around us.

Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.

"I know the tunnels aren't stable. We will leave as soon as we retrieve Dway."

Meow. Meow.

"We are going as fast as we can."

Hitch suddenly let out an urgent yowl.

Wazzock's piss! Mutant spiders with bulbous heads were swarming down the tunnel.

"Ask Hitch what weaknesses they have," Hothar ordered.

Before I could ask Hitch began meowing.

Enzo inquired, *"What did the creature say?"*

"We need to turn their intense craving for food against them."

"Did he say how, Casey?"

"They have a hive mind with some basic telepathy. We hook into that and drive them mad with hunger. Hitch says they will turn on each other."

Hothar slid into my mind, and I felt him connect with Hitch. *"Link with us Enzo."*

There was a tickling sensation as Enzo's mind joined ours, and together, we projected an intense ravenous hunger.

The mutant spiders went crazy. Within two minutes all the spiders, but one, had been reduced to desiccated corpses.

Enzo skewered the remaining spider.

"You are such a smart little dude." I gave Hitch a big mental kiss. *"And I love you so much."*

Hitch purred.

“You love him? You have known him for only a day!”

The disbelief in Hothar’s voice had me grinning. Few Coletti warriors had pets. We were adopting Hitch whether he liked it or not. *“I’ve always wanted to have a cat, but Uncle Saul is allergic to them. Now Hitch can be a part of our family.”*

“He is useful,” Hothar agreed.

“Dway’s life signs are fading,” Enzo abruptly announced and zoomed into the lab.

We sprinted after him. I grimaced at the crunching noise the spider bodies made beneath our boots. Hothar came to an abrupt halt, and I slammed into him. *“Ouch! Why did you stop?”*

“Marion’s clone has Enzo trapped in some kind of energy field. She is threatening to kill Dway if we come any closer.”

“Gotcha.” I linked with Aphrodite and passed the information on. *“How do we free Enzo?”*

“Dunno.”

“You’re a witch. You have to know some basic spells.”

“Mud twine lees sum,” Aphrodite chanted.

I was suddenly freezing. *“What did you do?”*

“I made you invisible.”

“What?” I look down at myself. Dang, I was invisible. Weird, but kinda cool. *“Okay, how do we neutralize Marion’s clone?”*

“I’m not a trained killer. You figure it out.” Aphrodite severed our link.

That bitch was going to be the death of me. I linked with Enzo and Hothar, *“Aphrodite made me invisible and I’m going to take out the clone.”*

“Don’t kill the clone. Zarek wants to interrogate her,” Hothar replied.

I rolled my eyes. Of course, he did.

Meow. Meow.

“She hurt and starved you?”

Meow.

My temper flared to life. *“Don’t worry. She won’t ever harm another living being.”*

Meow?

“I promise.” I eased around Hothar. A glittering purple energy field held Enzo immobile. Marion’s clone held a laser pistol to Dway’s head. Her hand shook so badly I was afraid she might shoot him by accident.

Meow.

“I’ll be damned, you’re right. She doesn’t have a shield up. Bad decision.” Then I noticed the clone’s deathly pallor and that her oozing sores had gotten a lot worse. Why hadn’t she tried to heal herself? She had to be hurting.

Meow.

“Yep, she is struggling to maintain the energy field around Enzo. Which is good for us. She doesn’t have enough power left to attack Hothar or us.” Did I feel sorry for her? Hell, no. Anyone who hurt helpless critters and created monsters deserved what happened to them. A piece of her nose fell off. Yuck! Karma sucked.

“You fools thought you could defeat my master. Soon our warriors will feed on you and your children,” Marion’s clone rasped.

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. I lashed out with my telekinesis.

The clone flew backward and crashed into a large cage filled with rotting bodies.

The energy field around Enzo vanished.

Hothar picked up her laser pistol and examined it. *“It has been disabled.”*

“Huh? I guess Mallox was afraid she would use it on him.”

“If Zarek wishes to interrogate the female, he should hurry. She will be dead within an hour,” Enzo advised.

Hothar nodded. *“I will inform him.”*

Part of the wall slid back. My eyes widened in horror when Mallox stepped out with his weapon pointed at Dway. *“Move and he dies.”*

With an ear-shattering yowl, Hitch jumped off my helmet and attacked him.

Mallox staggered backward and grabbed at his face. *“Get it off. Get it off.”* White foam suddenly spewed from his mouth, and he collapsed to the floor.

Whoa! I instinctively kicked Mallox’s pistol out of his reach.

“Don’t bother. He is dead. Hitch injected him with a neurotoxin that resembles Tabor venom.” The surprise in Hothar’s voice was almost amusing.

A triumphant yowl sounded from Hitch.

“You okay little dude?”

Poof! He was sitting on Mallox’s head, calmly washing his paws. Meow.

Enzo added, *“And that is not Mallox.”*

“Great, another friggin’ clone,” I grouched and picked up Hitch. *“Do you have any idea if the real Mallox is here?”*

Meow.

That was a definite no. God, how many times had Mallox cloned himself?

Hitch’s tail rose high in the air. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.

“What? Really? Where?”

“What did he say?” Enzo wanted to know.

I grinned. *“Hitch says there is a room full of cryogenic tanks filled with Mallox’s extra clones.”*

“I have informed Zarek,” Hothar said.

Marion’s clone twitched.

“You need to cuff her. Witches use their hands to cast spells,” I warned.

Hothar quickly slapped handcuffs on her and added a gag.

“Gags don’t work on Ella or Skye, and they might not work on her either,” I said.

Hothar shrugged. *“Cannot hurt.”*

Enzo announced, *“They are coming.”*

Multiple glittering blue lights formed. The minute the transporter beams faded away; Aphrodite started in. *“I don’t like my molecules whirling about like that. Why do I have to wear armor? It’s so confining.”*

“You think she has an off button?” I asked Hothar.

“Doubtful.”

Tihar snapped, *“Be quiet female and heal Dway.”*

“Are you going to let him talk to me like that, Bodhi?” Aphrodite huffed.

I grabbed Aphrodite by the arm and jerked her around. *“Stop being such a selfish bitch and do your fucking job.”*

“I hope you like being invisible.” Aphrodite snapped and hurried over to Dway.

I could feel her magic flare. The gaping wounds in his chest closed and his breathing steadied.

“I will contact Ella and ask her to reverse the spell,” Tihar promised.

“Thank you.” My gaze focused on Dway. He had opened his eyes.

“Trap,” Dway whispered mentally.

“Wazzock’s piss,” Hothar and I said in unison.

The walls slid back and out poured dozens of Mallox's clones. Every one of them was armed to the teeth.

Chaos erupted. It was the most terrifying, heart-stopping madness I had ever known. Deadly laser beams zinged in every direction. The Askole warriors were flashes of black as they went to hyper speed and skewered the clones. The gargling cries of the dying vied with Aphrodite's shrieks of horror.

A laser bolt hit me dead center in the chest, knocking me back a step. To my relief instead of turning into a zillion fireflies, my spiffy Askole armor had dissipated the energy.

My eyes widened in horror when eight clones jumped Hothar. "Cowabunga, mother truckers," I yelled and lashed out with my telekinesis, sending Mallox's replicas flying.

"That is not a proper battle cry," Hothar grouched.

"Why don't we discuss it later when you're not getting your ass kicked."

"My ass is in no danger."

I could feel Hothar's immense satisfaction as he beat the hell out of the clones. Having a mate who enjoyed his job was a prerequisite for a successful relationship, or so Uncle Saul said.

Hitch yowled.

"What?"

Crap. One of the clones had Aphrodite slung over his shoulder and was running down the hallway with her. For a moment, I considered letting him take her. If they cloned her, the Rodan Empire would fall within weeks.

Meow?

"No, I don't want to rescue her, but I will. It's my job." I ran after them. If I didn't let Hothar know what I was doing, he would have a meltdown. I quickly linked with him. Dang, he was busy fighting off a bunch of clones. So was Enzo, Tihar and Bodhi. Rescuing the witch should be easy enough. I mean, I was invisible.

Mallox's clone disappeared through a wall panel.

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER 9

I SKIDDED to a stop and scanned the wall. Huh? I didn't see a sensor pad.

Meow. Meow. Meow.

"Hold you up to the wall?"

Meow.

"Okay." I lifted him up.

Hitch reached out with a paw and tapped the wall. The panel slid back.

"Good job, little dude." I grimaced as the stench of death hit me.

Meow.

"Yeah, smells worse than the insides of a Tai-Kok slaughter ship." I scanned the area ahead of us. All I could sense were lots and lots of dead things. The only signs of life were Aphrodite and her captor. A door opened and bright sunlight suddenly flooded the corridor. My helmet adjusted and I watched the clone run toward a shuttle. *Crap!* I reached out mentally. *"Stop! Drop the witch."*

He kept running.

I upped my power and tried again. Nothing happened. Wazzock's piss. He had to be wearing one of those high-tech discs that blocked mind control. I sprinted after them.

Aphrodite's head jerked up and she looked around wildly.

I linked with her. *"C'mon fight him. Bite his ear. Zap his butt. Just do something to stop him from getting you in that shuttle. C'mon, you can do it. I know you can."*

"Bite his ear? Ewww, gross."

"It's better than him biting you." I flashed her an image of his serrated teeth.

She wriggled frantically. *"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"*

The clone growled at her.

Aphrodite fainted.

I rolled my eyes. How had she survived this long? You'd think that Askole DNA Bodhi had injected her with would give her a spine, but it hadn't.

Meow? Meow?

"What's my plan? I'm gonna whack the hell out of him with my telekinesis."

Meow.

"Yeah, you can bite him too."

Hitch purred loudly.

I increased my speed as Mallox's clone reached the shuttle. *"Wake up and fight Aphrodite."*

"Huh? What happened?"

The witch had a mind like a sieve. *"You were captured by a Rodan. Fight or die,"* I bellowed.

Her entire body went stiff. *"I don't know how to fight. I'm a dancer."*

"Use your magic or prepare to be eaten alive or turned into a monster," I spat.

"But I'm wearing armor."

"He can easily remove your armor." I knocked her captor's legs out from under him with my telekinesis. He fell backward and somehow Aphrodite ended up straddling him.

Shrieking like a crazed banshee, Aphrodite bitch-slapped the clone repeatedly.

Oh, dear God. Like that was going to work.

Meow?

“No, you can’t bite Aphrodite.”

Meow?

“Because we are supposed to protect idiots like her, not kill them.”

Meow.

“I agree, it is a stupid rule.”

The clone used his arms and legs to flip Aphrodite over his head.

Aphrodite did a spectacular somersault, rolled to her feet, and took off running.

Color me surprised.

Mallox’s clone tackled her.

Aphrodite shrieked.

“Use your friggin’ magic,” I yelled.

“I don’t know how to fight. I’m a dancer,” she cried.

If she said that one more time, I was going to shoot her myself.

Meow?

I nodded. *“He’s all yours.”*

Still invisible, Hitch attacked Mallox’s clone.

The witch scrambled out of the way.

The clone’s shrieks were louder than Aphrodite’s as he tried to pry Hitch off his face.

Aphrodite boogied across the sand, singing, “Earth girls rule! Mallox drools. Oh, yes, he does! Oh, yes, he does! Earth girls are the best. Oh, yes, we are. Oh, yes, we are.”

Hitch scampered up my body and let out a confused meow.

“I think it’s her battle cry.”

Meow.

“Yeah, it’s lame alright. She needs to shut the hell up before....”

Three Rodan soldiers rushed out of the shuttle just in time to see the clone convulse and die. Roaring furiously, they started shooting at Aphrodite.

The witch ran this way and that, waving her arms like a crazy woman, trying to avoid getting vaporized.

To my utter amazement, not one of their shots even came close to hitting her.

“I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home,” Aphrodite wailed.

“Don’t we all?” Unleashing my telekinesis, I bounced the soldiers off the shuttle until they stopped moving.

“Where is Bodhi?” Aphrodite demanded. “He should be here, keeping me safe.”

“You’re a witch. Maybe he thought you can defend yourself.”

Aphrodite let out an indignant huff. “Me? Fight?”

“Yeah, what was I thinking? Bodhi is a little busy killing the Rodan right now.” I frowned at the sound of a laser cannon being powered up. Crap. There was a pilot, and he was getting ready to shoot us.

The cannon moved toward us.

“Duck!” I knocked Aphrodite to the ground.

She wiggled wildly. “Get off me.”

“No. Stay down.”

“Why?”

The shuttle pilot unleashed a barrage of laser fire, but the only thing he hit was sand and the three Rodan soldiers running for their lives.

Hitch clung to my helmet. Meow! Meow!

“Yes, it is a good thing he’s a piss-poor shot.” I jerked Aphrodite to her feet. “Get in the shuttle.”

“What? Why?”

A laser cannon bolt zinged over our heads. “That’s why. Now move it, move it, move it.”

Aphrodite bolted up the landing ramp.

I was right on her heels when the ramp rose abruptly, knocking me off balance and sending me tumbling into the witch.

Aphrodite squawked as the pilot did a vertical launch.

The G-forces slammed us to the floor.

Aphrodite gasped, “Where is he taking us?”

“Somewhere awful.” I caught a glimpse of the viewscreen. Mallox spat a bunch of gobbledygook at the pilot.

“Is that another clone?”

“Good question.” Since I was invisible, I snuck up behind the pilot and bashed his head against the console.

Instead of knocking him out, it only pissed him off. With an enraged roar, he jumped up and pulled his laser pistol.

I kicked the pistol out of his hand. “*Are you nuts?! You could hit the engines.*”

The shuttle went into a sudden nosedive.

“Wazzock’s piss!”

The pilot and I jumped for the controls at the same time. I bounced off him and landed on the floor.

He leveled out the shuttle, grabbed his pistol and fired at Aphrodite.

Her armor dissipated the energy blast. Aphrodite stared in disbelief at the glowing red metal on her chest.

“Don’t you dare faint. Do you hear me? Don’t you faint,” I yelled.

The pilot spun around and fired again.

The blast missed me by a good foot but punctured the hull. A cry of horror broke from me as a piece of the fuselage tore

away, leaving a ragged hole edged with twisted metal and torn cabling. The shuttle rapidly depressurized. The rushing air sucked me against the hole. *“Are you that stupid or do you have a death wish?”* Using my telekinesis, I managed to stop the air from escaping and started for the pilot.

The idiot raised his laser pistol.

“Sic ‘em Hitch.”

With a shriek of agony, the pilot grabbed his face, made a gurgling noise, and dropped dead.

“Good boy, Hitch.”

Hitch let out a worried yowl as the shuttle abruptly plunged toward the surface at terminal velocity. The shriek of overstressed metal became horrific. Acid smoke fumes filled the air, searing my eyes and lungs.

“We are not going to die. Nothing is going to stop me from having hot, monkey sex with Hothar.” Somehow, I managed to pull myself into the pilot’s seat, and fasten the battle harness. I took one look at the red warning lights blinking frantically on the console and groaned in dismay. The power relays were damaged. I had about ten minutes to land before they stopped working altogether. Then it would be a fast ride to eternity.

Hitch let out a demanding meow.

“Give me a break, my Rodan is not that good.” My hands flew across the control console. *“C’mon. C’mon, level out.”*

Hothar linked with me, and I could feel his startled horror. *“How did you end up on a badly damaged shuttle?”*

“Long story. I’ve never flown a Rodan shuttle before. How do I keep from crashing this damn thing?”

“Use the braking thrusters to slow your speed,” Hothar instructed calmly.

I studied the console. *“Which one is the braking thrusters?”*

“Second icon on the left.”

“*Gotcha.*” I brought the thrusters online and the roar of the engines became deafening. G forces slammed me back against the seat. My teeth slammed together as the shaking grew worse.

Aphrodite started screaming, “I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die!”

“Shut the hell up. You’re messing with my concentration.” The shuttle’s violent vertical descent slowed and began to level off.

Aphrodite kept screaming.

“*Quiet female,*” Hothar commanded.

“*I don’t want to die.*”

I snapped, “*The only ones dying today are the Rodan.*” I let out a sigh of relief when the stabilizers came online, and the crushing centrifugal force eased. Stunning candy-colored sandstone mountains rose to greet me.

“*Alter your flight path fifteen right.*”

I did as he instructed and blew out a long breath. I would clear the mountains.

“*Is Aphrodite with you?*” Tihar suddenly demanded.

“*Yes.*”

“*Is she damaged?*” Bodhi asked.

“*Not yet, but that depends on if I can land this shuttle in one piece.*”

“*What?*” Bodhi bellowed.

Hothar growled, “*Aphrodite allowed herself to be captured by a clone. Casey rescued her and is now trying to pilot a damaged Rodan shuttle.*”

“*What are they doing on a Rodan shuttle?*” Tihar wanted to know.

Like I had time for all these questions. “*The power relays will fail in sixty seconds.*”

“Bring the nose up. It will increase your glide path,” Hothar directed.

Tihar interjected, *“I will beam them onboard my ship.”*

“Whatever.” Burning blue sparks spewed in every direction as systems blew. Rocks clawed at the bottom of the hull as I skimmed over a mountain ridge. *“C’mon, c’mon, just another hundred feet and we’re home free.”*

“The iridium in the mountains is making it difficult to get a lock on them,” Tihar advised.

“You’re gonna get us killed,” Aphrodite shrieked.

“If you think you can do a better job, get your ass up here and fly this thing.”

“I’m not a pilot. I’m a dancer.”

“Then shut the hell up.” I eased the shuttle down. It bounced several times, skidded wildly across the sand and slowly came to a stop. *“God, do I need some chocolate.”*

“I will bring you some.” Hothar’s mental kiss had my toes curling. God, he was a great kisser.

“This is not the time to be making out,” Uncle Saul snarled in my head. *“There are eighteen Rodan soldiers ten clicks from your location.”*

“Yes, sir.” I unbuckled my harness. *“They won’t be a problem. I really need to kill something.”*

“Hothar and Tihar will handle the soldiers. Your job is to keep Aphrodite safe,” Uncle Saul added.

Hitch hissed.

“Seriously?”

“According to Yan, Tihar’s medic, Aphrodite is pregnant,” Uncle Saul replied.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. They’ve been going at it like rabbits.”

“The mountains are full of iridium which will make it difficult for the soldiers to find you. I located a small cave

about eighty feet up the ridge. Hide there until we come for you,” Hothar instructed, and the coordinates appeared on my warrior’s bracelet.

“Will do.”

“Do not remove your armor under any circumstance,” Uncle Saul inserted. *“The area is infested with sand hoppers.”*

“Yes, sir.” I looked over at Aphrodite. *“Did you get that?”*

“Yeah, yeah. Sand hoppers. Whatever they are.”

Hothar shoved the mental image of a desiccated corpse into Aphrodite’s mind. *“Think of sand hoppers as a type of Earth vampire. In a very short time, they can drain every ounce of blood in your body.”*

“Vampires? Take a chill pill, for Christ’s sake.”

My blood pressure shot up and I snapped, *“Do it for your baby then.”*

“Baby? What baby? I don’t have any kids.”

“You’re pregnant,” I shot back.

“Pregnant!” Aphrodite screeched. *“No friggin’ way. I’m on the pill.”*

“Askole sperm negates Earth birth control,” Hothar replied.

“Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shit! Why is this happening to me?”

“Because you had sex with Commander Bodhi.” I lowered the landing ramp. *“C’mon Aphrodite. We need to get to our hiding place.”*

“I’m not going out there.”

Hitch hissed at her.

“I see. How are you gonna feel when Mallox turns you and your baby into tentacled monsters?”

“You’re sure I’m pregnant?” Aphrodite’s voice wavered.

“Yes.”

“Get your ass up to that cave,” Uncle Saul thundered.

Aphrodite huffed, “He can’t talk to me like that.”

“I’m done.” I threw my hands up in disgust. “You wanna stay here and die. Go for it, but I’m leaving. When Mallox cuts the baby from your womb, remember it was your choice.” I handed her a laser pistol and walked down the ramp.

“You can’t leave me here alone!”

I kept walking. “Yeah, I can.”

“Wait! Wait for me,” Aphrodite trotted after me.

Uncle Saul announced, “Eight of the Rodan soldiers are on speeders and closing fast.”

“Hurry up, the Rodan soldiers are getting closer.” I jogged up the mountain side.

“Where’s the cave?”

“See that ledge up there?” I pointed at it.

“Yeah.”

“That’s where we’re going.”

“Way up there? That’s too far. I’m already getting hot and sweaty,” Aphrodite whined.

I won’t shoot her. I won’t shoot her. I won’t shoot her.

“I need to rest.” She plopped down on a boulder.

One hundred yards and she was tired? My right hand dropped to the butt of my pistol. I could shoot her. I’d be doing the universe a favor.

Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.

I sighed. “You’re right. I could never let anything happen to the baby.”

Meow.

“I know. I know. I shouldn’t let her push my buttons.”

Meow. Meow. Meow.

“You think she’s not as helpless as she acts?”

Meow.

“Huh? You might be right. How she’s still breathing is a mystery.”

Eight Askole fighters streaked toward us.

I grabbed Aphrodite’s arm and dragged her off the boulder.
“Move it. All hell is about to break loose.”

“You’re sure?”

The fighters strafed the Rodan soldiers.

The Rodan soldiers shot back, and a vicious crossfire erupted around us.

“Move it. Move it. Move it.” Pulling my laser pistol, I scrambled up the rocky hillside and to my surprise, Aphrodite kept up with me.

Meow!

“What?” I looked over my shoulder. Three Rodan soldiers were running after us. “Wazzock’s piss.”

Meow. Meow. Meow.

“The soldiers aren’t wearing armor?” I took another look at them. Dang, they weren’t. *“Any sand hoppers in the area?”*

Meow.

“Good.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Keep moving,” I ordered. The last thing I needed was for her to faint again.

An energy beam zinged by us.

I turned and fired.

A soldier dove for cover behind a boulder. A few seconds later, he jumped to his feet and frantically batted at the sand hoppers swarming over him.

His buddies watched in horror and didn't notice the hundreds of egg-shaped crab critters erupting from the sand.

"Get in the cave," I shouted.

Aphrodite took one look at the sand hoppers and skedaddled up the ridge.

Color me surprised. I followed her.

"*A squadron of Marauders are closing on your location,*" Hothar advised.

"*Copy that.*" Using my telekinesis, I heaved Aphrodite up the mountain and into the cave. I scrambled after her.

"Well, that was rude," Aphrodite grumbled. "Did you forget I'm pregnant?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm trying to keep you from being vaporized."

On cue, dogfights erupted between the Askole fighters and the Rodan Marauders. The Askole were the better pilots and fireballs mushroomed in the sky. Pieces of flaming debris rained down over the endless sand.

Several damaged Marauders began spinning and twisting violently in a rapid vertical descent. They hit the mountain and exploded in brilliant balls of orange flames.

The ground shuddered beneath our feet.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God! We're gonna die!" Aphrodite shrieked and pointed at ten Rodan soldiers climbing up the ridge.

I scanned the area. We couldn't outshoot them but there was a shitload of boulders and rocks perched on top of the ridge. Drawing on my telekinesis, I gave them a nudge and triggered an avalanche.

Aphrodite did a happy dance as the rocky landslide quickly buried the soldiers. "Earth girls rule. Yes, we do."

A huge boulder crashed down on the ledge, blocking the cave's entrance.

Dang.

A shriek erupted from Aphrodite. “We’re trapped!”

“The War Commander knows where we are. When the fight is over, he’ll come for us.”

Aphrodite paced the small cave. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, I am.” In my heart, I knew Hothar would never abandon me.

“Is it me or is it getting stuffy in here?”

I sighed loudly. “Your battle armor provides breathable air for up to two weeks.”

“Oh.”

Glittering blue lights formed around us.

“Ha. Bodhi is rescuing us first.”

Meow!

“Maybe, but Tihar said they couldn’t get a transporter lock on us.” I watched my molecules whizz about. The cave vanished.

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER 10

THE LIGHTS FADED and we were standing on an icy cold transporter platform. Dread knotted my stomach. None other than Mallox himself was standing at the control console.

The dude next to him resembled an evil scientist straight out of a horror vid with his wild, white hair and thick bushy eyebrows. The bloodred rose on the lapel of his white lab coat gave me the willies. That and the blood splatters. Ick! I tried to mentally link with Hothar to give him the wonderful news, but something was blocking my psychic abilities.

“That’s not Bodhi,” Aphrodite squeaked.

“Let me introduce you to Mallox and his henchman Giovanni Dragos.”

“He’s not a clone, is he?”

A shudder shook me. “Nope. Mallox is the real deal.”

“Fuck and the other one?”

To my surprise, Aphrodite hadn’t fainted yet. “Giovanni is a clone.”

“What do you want?” Aphrodite demanded.

I shot her a disbelieving look. When had she grown a pair?

Mallox bared his sharp teeth in a scary smile. *“To rule the galaxy and your magic will enable me to do that.”*

I snickered.

Hitch’s meow was almost gleeful.

The most hated male in the universe turned his cold gaze on me. *“You find this amusing?”*

“Yeah, I kinda do. Aphrodite here is nothing like Marion.”

Aphrodite nodded. *“I’m a dancer.”* She did a little tap dance. *“See?”*

“It matters not!” Mallox spat. “The DNA I extract from your fetus and the Jones female will be used to create unbeatable fighters.”

“I’m going to have so much fun with you.” Giovanni giggled madly.

I just had to ask. *“Fun?”*

“I do so enjoy dissecting my subjects alive.” An expression of ecstasy crossed his face. *“Their screams are utterly divine.”*

Oh swell. I eyed the heavily armed soldiers behind them. Taking them out shouldn’t be a problem.

“Is he for real?” Aphrodite wanted to know.

“Unfortunately.”

To my stunned amazement, Aphrodite broke into the Texas two-step, with a bit of hip-hop thrown in. “What are you doing?”

“I’m showing him my dance routines.”

“Seriously? That’s not gonna help.”

“Can’t hurt.” Aphrodite boogied toward the control console, singing, “Earth girls rule. Yes, we do. Oh, yes, we do. You are messin’ with the best. We’re smarter than you, you dumb fuck.”

I shrugged. What the hell. I needed a distraction, and this worked perfectly. I joined her in the Texas two-step and sang, “We are women. We are strong. We are invincible. No nasty ass alien is gonna keep us down.”

Hitch yowled loudly.

Yikes! Poor thing couldn’t carry a tune.

Mallox, Giovanni and the soldiers stared at us in utter disbelief.

“Hear us roar!” I yelled and whacked the two Rodan soldiers with my telekinesis. They crumpled to the floor.

“Earth girls rule and today you die. Sufflamine yankata,” Aphrodite shouted and gestured with her right hand. Amber colored flames engulfed Mallox and Giovanni.

I backed away as the weird inferno crackled over their bodies like St. Elmo’s fire.

Their mouths opened in silent screams as their skin began to bubble and melt. Within a minute, nothing was left but a gooey bit of whatever and their bones.

I tried to wrap my mind around how easily Aphrodite had killed the deadliest villain in the universe. A slightly hysterical giggle escaped me. No one would believe me. I needed proof. I tapped an icon on my warrior’s bracelet and recorded the icky mess on the floor.

Meow?

“I’m documenting the end of Mallox.”

Meow?

“How? I’m taking a vid of the remains, scanning the bones, and getting a DNA sample too.” Hitting an icon on my warrior’s bracelet, I quickly sucked up some of the goop. I couldn’t wait to see the expressions on Hothar’s, Zarek’s and Uncle Saul’s faces when they found out. “Gotta say I’m impressed Aphrodite.”

Hitch meowed in agreement.

Aphrodite studied the mess with a great deal of satisfaction. “The curse has its limits.”

“Curse?”

Aphrodite’s laugh reminded me of a mad hyena.

“You, okay?” She was acting weirder than normal.

“When it’s that time of the month, I get a bit homicidal, but pregnancy is bringing it to a whole other level.”

I sent her soothing vibes. “I hear ya. Sometimes chocolate is the only thing between me and life in prison.” Was she cursed? It kinda made sense. I’d have to ask Ella or Skye.

“That ass will never threaten another kid.” A demented smile formed on her mouth.

“Nope. Mallox forgot the cardinal rule. Never, ever piss off a momma bear.” I mentally scanned the complex. All I could sense were hundreds of mutant fighters, thousands of Kotsors spiders and a shitload of dead things. “We need to blow this place to kingdom come. There is an armory down this corridor. Let me see what kind of goodies they have.”

Aphrodite’s eyes suddenly began to glow. “Do you know how to work the transporter?”

“I do.”

“I’ll take care of blowing up the complex. You get us out of here.”

The note of command in Aphrodite’s voice was a bit unsettling. “Okey-dokey.”

Meow.

“Yeah, she’s kinda freaking me out too.” I walked over to the control console and studied the scanners. “All of Tihar’s ships have their shields up, but I can beam us to a spot about a mile away.”

“Make it ten miles from here.” Aphrodite stepped up on the platform.

I typed the coordinates. “Done.” I added a thirty-second delay and hurried over to the transporter platform. “Send them to hell.”

“Aga Markoo thone wasr giet,” Aphrodite chanted.

A glittering blue light engulfed us, our molecules whizzed about and seconds later we appeared on top of a small reddish-orange hill. The salt flat stretched out before us in a shimmering haze of heat. Nothing moved. No birds. No insects. No animals. The only sound was the moan of the wind.

I glanced down at my warrior’s bracelet. We had been standing here for a good two minutes, and Mallox’s base still

hadn't blown up. Had I made a mistake letting Aphrodite handle it?

"Ticktock. Ticktock. Ticktock. Here comes vengeance with a big kaboom!" Aphrodite cried.

All hell broke loose as the mountain to the north of us blew with a thunderous *cracking boom*. The ground shuddered and shook as blazing debris flew in every direction. Thick black smoke blotted out the sun.

"You did it! You did it!" I hooted.

Aphrodite shouted, "Earth girls' rule!"

Another titanic explosion erupted, sending pieces of metal whooshing high into the sky.

"Whoa! How many photon torpedoes did they have?"

"A shitload!" Laughing like a crazy woman Aphrodite boogied to the left. "Ding-dong the wicked Rodan is dead." She boogied to the right. "He's gone, gone, gone. Ding-dong the wicked Rodan is dead."

I joined her dance and added a bit of an Irish jig. "Ding-dong the wicked Rodan is dead. Ding-dong may he roast in hell. We are women. We are strong. We are invincible. No nasty ass alien is gonna keep us down."

Yowling at the top of his lungs, Hitch danced alongside me.

Hothar, Uncle Saul, Zarek, Tihar and Bodhi teleported in and watched us boogie for a long moment.

"*Have you lost your minds?*" Uncle Saul demanded.

Zarek cocked his head. "*Did Mallox gas you?*"

"*No. Ding-dong the wicked scientist is dead, dead, dead.*" I danced over to them. "*You'll never guess what happened. Just call Aphrodite the Exterminator.*"

Hothar growled, "*Did Mallox inject you with something?*"

"*No. What part of Mallox is dead don't you get?*"

“Dead? Are you sure?” Hothar’s tone was one of disbelief.

“Very. Mallox’s dead, and he wasn’t a clone. He was the real deal.” I climbed Hothar like he was Mount Everest and wrapped my arms around his neck. *“I knew you would find me.”*

Hothar hugged me tightly. *“I will always come for you.”*

“Can’t breathe,” I squeaked.

He loosened his grip and gave me a long, voracious mental kiss.

Hitch started hacking up a hairball.

Uncle Saul sighed loudly. *“Do I have to remind you this is a battle zone.”*

“There aren’t any bad guys left,” I pointed out as Hot Lips gently set me on the ground.

Bodhi glanced up at the black smoke darkening the sky. *“Aphrodite killed Mallox and blew up his complex?”*

“With her awesome magic and I’ve got proof.”

“What kind of proof?” Tihar asked.

I tapped my warrior’s bracelet and projected a hologram of Mallox’s icky remains. *“That’s what’s left of Mallox, and I took a DNA sample.”*

“Send it to all of us,” Zarek instructed.

“Okey-dokey.” Watching Aphrodite dancing her little heart out, I quickly sent the sample analysis to all of them. *“Y’all need to thank her.”*

Another explosion shook the ground. The blast belched blazing shrapnel, bodies, and pieces of machinery.

“Whoa! Mallox’s stockpile of thermite grenades is going, going, gone.”

“Along with our chance to search his computers and lab,” Zarek growled.

I glared at him. *“Our options were limited, and I wasn’t about to get dissected.”*

“The DNA is Mallox’s,” Uncle Saul inserted.

Violent tremors continued to shake the area.

Zarek commanded, *“Share your memories of the incident with Hothar.”*

“You think I’m lying?”

“No, but we are skeptical of Aphrodite’s abilities,” Hothar said.

I snapped, *“She acts like a loon because she’s cursed.”*

“Cursed?” Uncle Saul repeated.

“That’s right. Cursed. She managed to break free of it and saved our butts.”

Hothar slid into my mind and reviewed my memories. I could feel his surprise. *“Casey is correct. Aphrodite killed Mallox and destroyed the base.”*

“Told ya. So, unless Mallox has a twin brother, the biggest threat to the galaxy has been eliminated, and you owe Aphrodite big time.”

“We do,” Uncle Saul agreed. *“And Mallox does have a twin brother.”*

“Well, hell.”

“Spiders!” Aphrodite shrieked and started running.

Hothar raised an eyebrow. *“She is cured?”*

“Sorta. Maybe.” I watched Aphrodite zigzag across the sand. *“I wonder if throwing holy water on her would help.”*

Uncle Saul snorted. *“Doubtful.”*

The Kotsors swarmed up the hill.

As one, we all pulled our weapons and opened fire.

Fireflies filled the air as we vaporized the kissing cousins of the black widow.

“I will retrieve my mate,” Bodhi said and zoomed after Aphrodite.

I smacked Hothar’s chest. “Where’s my chocolate?”

“You can’t eat it until we are back on the ship.” He motioned to the sand hoppers popping out of the sand.

With a hiss, Hitch scurried up my body.

“Too many for you to eat?”

Meow.

“Okay, we’ll go back to the ship and party like it’s spring break.”

“You still have six weeks left before you can party or drink,” Uncle Saul growled.

“Fine, then I want the biggest piece of German chocolate cake the replicator can make.”

Hothar scooped me up. *“As you wish, my love.”* He teleported us to the mess hall on Zarek’s ship.

Meow? Meow?

“Can the replicator make cat chow with mealybugs?”

“It can,” Hothar replied.

“Good.” I retracted my armor and gave Hot Lips a come-hither look. One kiss wouldn’t hurt.

“Your uncle is coming,” Hot Lips advised and walked over to the replicator.

“Rats.” I mentally stroked his fine ass. “Soon.”

A shudder shook Hothar.

Hitch rubbed against Hothar’s legs as he typed instructions into the replicator. Meow?

“Yes, the biggest mealybugs we have,” Hothar answered.

Huh? Hot Lips could understand Hitch.

Uncle Saul teleported in and snapped, “Stop acting like a hormonal teenager.”

“Hormonal teenager?” My frayed temper broke. “I’m a grown-ass woman, and it’s time you started treating me like one.”

“You’re not too big for me to put over my knee.”

I gave Uncle Saul my best challenging stare. “Try.”

“You think you can stop me?” He retracted his helmet.

“Damn right I do.”

Hitch ran over to me. Meow! Meow! Meow!

“Listen to Hitch.” Hothar quickly placed a huge piece of German chocolate cake on the table in front of me. “Eat your cake before you do something foolish.”

I took one look at the predatory glint in my uncle’s eyes and sat down. “Fine.” I took a big bite of cake. God, that hit the spot. “What are we going to do about Aphrodite’s curse?”

“It’s not our problem,” Uncle Saul responded.

Grrr. My uncle could be such an ass. “The hell it isn’t. Aphrodite took out Mallox. She deserves our help.”

Hothar interjected, “Since we have no magical abilities, Ella and Skye will have to help her.” He placed a bowl of mealybugs and cat food on the floor for Hitch.

Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.

I sighed and put Hitch’s bowl on the table. “*Fine. You can eat with us.*”

“*He has some Tabor in him,*” Uncle Saul commented.

I nodded. “*I wouldn’t be surprised.*”

Hitch hugged the bowl and chowed down.

“*Easy boy. No one is going to take it away from you.*”

Meow?

“*Yes, you can eat as much as you want.*”

Hitch purred loudly.

Hothar positioned a platter filled with hamburgers and French fries on the table and sat next to me.

I snagged a fry. “Betcha Marion is responsible for Aphrodite’s curse.”

“She would be the logical culprit,” Hothar agreed.

“Skye has Marion’s journals. I’ll ask her to check if the evil witch mentioned any curses she placed on people.”

“An excellent idea.” Hothar took a bite of my cake.

If I didn’t love him so much, he would be missing some fingers. I typed a message to Skye.

Hothar read it. “Ask how difficult it will be to remove the curse.”

I added his question to the message and hit send. “Where do you want to honeymoon at? The resort in Mexico or Zarek’s hideaway in Fiji?”

Hot Lips smiled. “Both have scuba diving and snorkeling.”

“Plus, horseback riding and sailing.”

“Check with Detja before you make any plans,” Uncle Saul interjected. “She’s in charge of all the bonding ceremonies.”

“I already did, and she’s even agreed to babysit Hitch.”

Meow?

“We’ll be doing a lot of kissing and stuff on our honeymoon.”

Hitch hissed in disgust.

My warrior’s bracelet beeped. “It’s Skye.”

“Put her up on the vid screen,” Uncle Saul ordered.

I tapped an icon and Skye appeared on the wall screen. “Let me tell ya. Marion was one sick bitch. She cursed over a hundred people and Aphrodite is the only one still breathing.”

“What did Aphrodite do to make Marion so angry?” Call me curious.

“According to her journals Aphrodite took Marion’s soul mate away from her.”

“Soul mate? Marion? Seriously? She was like a hundred years old.”

Uncle Saul interrupted me, “Who did she consider her soul mate?”

Skye sighed. “An Antonio Banderas look-alike named Juan Martinez. He was a professor in the Music, Dance and Theatre department at ASU. According to Marion, they were going to get married before Aphrodite showed up and spoiled everything.”

“I hear a but in there,” I said.

“She never dated him.”

My jaw dropped. “Never?”

“Never and Marion was about thirty years older than Juan.”

“And Marion was not a pretty woman,” I added.

“No, she wasn’t.”

Hothar asked, “Where did they meet?”

“At a student musical production of *Hansel and Gretel*, and according to her, it was love at first sight. She signed up for all of Juan’s classes and followed him everywhere.”

“The background check we ran on Aphrodite, showed she took dance and drama classes at ASU,” Uncle Saul advised.

I smacked Hothar’s hand as he stuck his fork in my cake again. “I’m surprised Aphrodite didn’t flunk out.”

“She was quite talented. That ended when Marion discovered Aphrodite had slept with Martinez,” Skye said.

“So, the curse took away her ability to dance and turned her into a narcissistic loon.”

“Exactly, and it also restricted her psychic powers.”

“What happened to Martinez?” Uncle Saul wanted to know.

“Marion unmanned and disfigured Juan. He died in a suspicious house fire two weeks later. Then the Tai-Kok attacked Earth, and Marion’s revenge took a backseat to the invasion.”

Hothar helped himself to more of my cake. “Can you reverse the curse?”

“I’m not sure. I’m hoping Marion wrote it down in one of her journals.”

Uncle Saul asked, “How many journals did you find?”

“Forty.”

“Yeow! Let Aphrodite know. She can help you go through them.”

“Oh, don’t worry. She’s gonna help.”

My fork clashed with Hothar’s. “My cake.”

“Mates share everything.” Our forks dueled for a moment.

With an exasperated sigh, Uncle Saul stalked over to the replicator and ordered more chocolate cake.

Hothar and I exchanged grins when Uncle Saul dumped the cake on the table.

“I expected better of you, War Commander.”

“War commanders take what they want,” Hothar replied.

Biting my lip to keep from laughing at Uncle Saul’s outraged expression, I asked Sky, “Are you and Ella coming to our bonding ceremony? It’s being held at Central Command’s base in Tucson.”

“I’ll be there alright,” Skye scowled. “Detja decided Vorian and I would have our bonding ceremony on the same day as yours.”

“Good.” I rubbed my hands together. “We can have a bachelorette party.”

Uncle Saul groaned. “The last bachelorette party you girls had was an unmitigated disaster.”

Skye laughed. “Sounds perfect. I’ll arrange for the strippers.”

“Strippers?” Hothar growled.

I patted his hand. “She’s kidding.”

Skye winked at me, and the screen went blank.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER 11

AFTER FIVE LONG weeks of dealing with Aphrodite, I was so ready for my bonding ceremony. It would be held in less than twenty-four hours and Aphrodite was not invited. I was nervous and excited at the same time. Tonight, was the bachelorette party. Detja and the girls had taken off to arrange the entertainment and food. Me? I got stuck rummaging through an old box of party supplies. I had just pulled out an enormous rubber penis when Hothar popped in.

“There will be no bachelorette party,” he stated firmly.

My eyes widened. He had on his scary war commander’s face. Like that was going to work. “Why are you so dead set against us having a party?”

Hothar raised an eyebrow and plucked the large rubber penis from my hand. “This.”

“It’s used in a game called pin the hose on the fireman.”

“The only hose you will be touching is mine.”

“Aw, c’mon, it’s made out of rubber and Detja gave her approval for the party.”

“Zarek revoked it.”

“What? He did? I bet he’s sleeping on the couch tonight.”

Hothar gave me his death stare.

“I don’t know why you’re so lathered up. After dealing with Aphrodite’s craziness, I need a little fun.”

“Fun? Watching a strange male strip?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Who told you that?”

Hitch peeped over Hothar’s shoulder. Meow.

“*You snitched us out?*”

Meow. Meow. Meow.

“It sorta slipped out and you’re really sorry?”

Meow.

“You’re only sorry that you got caught.”

Skye stormed in wearing edible underwear. “You won’t believe what that bastard did.” She skidded to a stop. “And I bet he’s in on it too.”

“He is. Hitch the snitch blabbed.”

Hothar’s impersonal gaze studied Skye as he sniffed the air. “Why does she smell like chocolate?”

“It’s my edible underwear,” Skye answered.

“Edible?” Interest filled Hothar’s eyes. “You have more?”

My body trembled at the thought of him eating it off me. “Boy, do I. You get to choose between chocolate and strawberry.”

“Excellent.” Hothar placed a series of slow, shivery kisses on my mouth. *“Soon, we will be as one.”*

I sucked on his tongue the way I would his penis. An evil smile curled my mouth as his hips bucked. *“I really, really need to party.”*

“And you will.” Hothar retaliated by stroking my clit until I moaned. *“Tonight, we are going on a date.”*

“Date?” I gasped out loud. “A real date? With dinner and dancing?”

“I am taking you to the Rusty Spurs.”

I did a little jig. “I love that place.”

“Sounds fun.” Skye sank down on a chair with a dejected sigh.

Vorian appeared in the room, and his lustful gaze roamed over Skye. “We are going too.”

“We are!” Skye shot out of the chair. “But I don’t have anything to wear!”

“Don’t worry. We’re the same size and I’ll get you decked out like a proper cowgirl.” I turned my gaze on Vorian. “But we’ll need to take him shopping.”

“Shopping?” The horror in Vorian’s voice was hilarious.

Hothar smirked. “I believe General Jones has provided you with the proper clothing.”

“Please tell me he’s not chaperoning us,” I groaned.

“I cannot, because he is.”

“Whoopee.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER 12

THE RUSTY SPURS resembled an authentic 1880's saloon right down to the cattle brands seared into the oak bar. An assortment of old wanted posters graced the aged brick walls and an antique wrought-iron chandelier hung from the ceiling. Battered tables and chairs were arranged around the dance floor. On the small stage, a live band played country western music.

I had to admit Vorian and Hothar made mighty fine cowboys. With their black hats, western shirts, jeans, and boots, they were smokin' hot. All they needed were six shooters to complete the picture.

Perched on my shoulder, Hitch proudly wore a miniature black cowboy hat. He watched the dancers doing an energetic Texas two-step. Meow. Meow.

"It's called the Texas two-step."

Meow.

"Yes, it's a lot of fun."

Skye's eyes widened when she spotted my uncle. He was wearing a white cowboy hat, a black T-shirt with Yee-Haw imprinted on the front, and well-worn jeans. "So, the rumors are true. Your uncle does own a cattle ranch."

"Among other things."

Uncle Saul motioned to us and took a seat at a corner table. I walked over to him. "Where's Annie?"

"She's dealing with a problem at Old Tucson," he replied.

A gleam of interest in Skye's eyes, she asked, "Wow, you actually let your mate work?"

"Annie's my equal. I don't dictate to her."

“Huh? Who would have thought an old foggy like you would be so progressive.”

Uncle Saul bristled. “Old foggy?”

“Annie’s a good influence on him,” I hurriedly interjected.

“I’ll bet. Is it true they call her the Grim Reaper?”

“It is.” I yanked out a chair. “Let’s order our food.”

“An excellent idea,” Hothar agreed, taking the chair next to me.

My internal radar went off. “Incoming hostiles.”

Uncle Saul, Hothar, and Vorian shot to their feet.

“What’s wrong?” Skye wanted to know.

“Them.” I pointed at four big warriors with long purple braids and pieced together armor standing at the entrance.

Skye frowned. “Who are they?”

“Those are Bjarke warriors,” Vorian told her.

I watched as they scanned the bar. “They’re hunting someone; the big question is who?”

“You. They are hunting you,” Hothar answered. He placed his hat on the table.

The older Bjarke warrior’s gaze locked on me, and he bellowed his war cry.

Hothar roared his answer.

Hitch yowled.

The dance floor emptied, and the music stopped.

I sighed. Our date night was going belly-up.

Radiating menace, Hothar stepped onto the dance floor.

The older Bjarke warrior pulled his sword and walked toward him. “*Give me the female and I will let you live.*”

I stood next to Hothar. “*Leave now and I’ll let you live.*”

Uncle Saul groaned.

“Once we are mated, you will do as I command,” the older Bjarke warrior snarled.

I started laughing. *“As if.”*

The old warrior eyed me warily. *“Has your mind been broken?”*

“Define broken.”

Hothar bared his fangs in an evil grin. *“Casey belongs to the Jones Clan, and she has defeated many warriors in combat. Are you foolish enough to challenge her?”*

“I can easily defeat her.”

Skye snickered. “Not too bright, is he?”

“Nope.” I lashed out with my telekinesis. The old warrior flew backward and slammed into his buddies, knocking them down like tenpins.

“Mensura veniunt aliud,” Skye chanted.

All four Bjarke warriors vanished.

Vorian inquired, “Did you drop them in a volcano?”

“Nah, I sent them to Antarctica,” Skye replied.

I noticed everyone was staring at us. “It’s okay folks. They won’t be back.”

The cowboys and cowgirls hooted and hollered.

“Drinks are on General Jones,” I added, grinning as everyone rushed for the bar.

Uncle Saul scowled at me.

My grin died as a glittering blue light formed on the dance floor. “Please don’t let it be her. Please.”

The light faded away and there stood Aphrodite, wearing red edible underwear and go-go boots. “The party starts now!” She spun in a circle. “Geendung tumlo mensura!” Thousands of butterflies appeared.

“I’m going to kill her,” Skye snarled.

“Why? They’re just butterflies.”

“With teeth.”

“What?” That’s when I noticed their fangs. “How do we get rid of them?”

“With great difficulty.”

I linked mentally with Hothar and Uncle Saul, “*Aphrodite just conjured up some vampire butterflies.*”

“*Armor up,*” Uncle Saul ordered as the little bloodsuckers descended on the crowd.

Batting wildly at the vampire butterflies, Aphrodite ran screaming into the night.

Skye conjured up a shield to protect the horrified patrons.

Uncle Saul came out of the kitchen area with three cans of bug spray. He tossed one to Vorian and Hothar. “This should slow them down.

“I have summoned Bodhi,” Hothar advised as he sprayed the bloodthirsty insects.

Using my telekinesis, I herded the little fiends into a storeroom, slammed the door, and heaved a sigh of relief. “Gotta say, this is one date night I’ll never forget.”

Hothar’s ghostly mouth closed over mine and he kissed me hungrily. “*You are everything I wished for and more.*”

“*Aw, I love you too.*”

“Skye said we must find and destroy the butterflies that escaped with Aphrodite,” Vorian declared.

“Wonderful. Just wonderful.” I stomped outside and looked around.

Aphrodite’s shrieks sounded in the distance.

“She is in a park one kilometer to the north,” Hothar advised and teleported us.

Aphrodite was running around in circles, trying frantically to brush the butterflies off her edible underwear.

“Lose the underwear,” I shouted at Aphrodite. “They’re drawn to it.”

The crazy witch stripped and threw herself at Hothar. “Save me. Save me.”

My gaze darted from the little buggers swarming Aphrodite’s underwear to Hothar. Grrr. The witch was wrapped around him like a leech. “Get your hands off my man. Now!”

Vorian pulled his laser pistol and vaporized the butterflies.

“Calm yourself female.” Hothar pried Aphrodite loose. “Your mate is coming.”

Sure enough. Bodhi zoomed up. “Why is she naked?”

“Long story. Get her out of here before she summons something harder to kill,” I snapped.

Bodhi picked her up, and off he went.

“Skye needs to find a cure for Aphrodite’s curse before she kills us all,” I groused.

Vorian nodded. “Her actions are unpredictable.”

We returned to the bar and found Skye healing the furious owner’s multiple bites. “Am I gonna turn into a vampire bug now?”

“No, not at all,” Skye assured him.

Uncle Saul handed him a business card. “Central Command will cover all the damages.”

“You’re damn right they will.”

Exhaustion rolled over me. “Take me home, Hot Lips.”

Hothar scooped me up and teleported.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER 13

WE APPEARED in my messy bedroom.

Hothar raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t even.” I fell face down on my bed.

Hothar lay down next to me. “I will plan another date night.”

“Just make sure Aphrodite is nowhere near us.”

“That I can arrange.”

“Good.” I crawled on top of him and closed my eyes.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The door shuddered under the blows.

“Oh, for God’s sake. We’re not doing anything,” I yelled.

Uncle Saul bellowed, “Open the door.”

“Stay.” I climbed off Hothar.

“I am yours to command.”

I threw open the door. “We were sleeping.”

Uncle Saul’s angry gaze settled on Hothar.

“See, we still have our clothes on.”

“We need to talk.” Uncle Saul looped an arm around my shoulders and teleported.

We appeared in a chamber that belonged in a fancy brothel. A huge four poster bed with red silk sheets dominated the room and the walls were covered with naughty tapestries.

“What is this place?”

“It’s the honeymoon suite.”

“Looks more like a room in a pleasure house.”

Uncle Saul bristled. “When were you in a pleasure house?”

“Before Wulf’s and Yakira’s bonding ceremony, Sarah said I needed to expand my horizons.”

“Has anyone explained the birds and the bees to you?” Uncle Saul asked out of the blue.

My jaw dropped. “What?”

“In five hours, you will become one with Hothar. I need to make sure you know what to expect.”

“You do know, I had sex education in high school, right?”

“Coletti warriors’ penises are different from humans.”

I stared at him for a long moment. Should I tell him I had already seen Hothar’s man parts?

“Do not,” Hothar warned. “The General will challenge me to combat, and I do not want to injure him.”

“I don’t want you missing any of your dangly parts either.”

Uncle Saul urged me over to the tapestries. “Zarek thinks the graphic sex scenes will show nervous brides what masterful lovers Coletti warriors can be.”

I snickered. “Most of the females in the galaxy would take one look at the tentacles on their enormous dicks and start screaming.”

“This isn’t funny.”

It kinda was. “You’re right,” I said seriously. “After the hell the Tai-Kok had put us through, we Earth females would be doing our level best to cut off the squiggly bits.”

Uncle Saul rubbed a hand over his face. “I just want you to be prepared.”

“Detja gave me the talk and even showed me pictures, okay? I patted his back. “It’s fine. Really. I know what to expect.”

“Good. Good. I’m glad we had this talk.” Uncle Saul vanished.

I heaved a sigh of relief. Boy, did I know what to expect. Hothar and I had done it several times mentally. Mind sex

rocked.

Detja, in all her royal glory, appeared in the room and held out a hand. “Come, it is time to prepare you for the ceremony.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MY CEREMONIAL TUNIC and leggings were black with a red design intertwined throughout the silky material. Completing my awesome outfit were ankle boots with tiny, jeweled daggers. I looked in the full-length mirror and smiled. I was almost beautiful.

“You are beautiful,” Hothar said.

I spun around. Hothar was wearing a black dress tunic that showed his massive shoulders and thighs. He had red chains woven into his warrior braids. “And you’re smoking hot. How did I get so lucky?”

“We were fated to meet.”

I laughed. “Eight thousand feet over the Pacific Ocean.”

“Are you ready to become mine?” Hothar held out his hand.

I took it. “I’ve always been yours.” There was a fleeting instant of blackness, and we were standing at the back of the ceremonial chamber. Uncle Saul and our families sat in the front row.

The ceiling resembled a night sky blazing with stars. Thousands of candles dotted the walls, illuminating charred tapestries.

Zarek suddenly stood on the raised dais at the front of the chamber. He wore an etched gold headband that denoted his rank of Overlord. Golden strands were woven into his gray warrior’s braids. His black dress tunic displayed the physique of a much younger male.

Detja stepped into the walkway and motioned to us.

Hothar and I followed behind her. We stopped in front of the platform. On a small ornate table was an onyx ownership band. Excitement swirled through me. Once it was placed around my neck, we could have sex. Lots and lots of sex.

“Females are a precious gift. They are our lifeline, our soul mates. Without them, we are nothing.” Zarek spoke with authority, his gaze focused on Detja.

She stepped up on the dais. “We share all that we are with our mates. This bond unites us for all time.”

“Today we are gathered here to join this warrior with his chosen mate.” Zarek picked up the ownership band and held it out to Hothar.

He took it and turned to me. “Your love is my anchor. Your trust my strength. You make my life complete. I will give you all my love until eternity ends.” Hothar fastened it around my neck. The warm metal band adjusted to fit my neck perfectly. “We are now one.”

I smiled up at Hothar. “I accept this band as a symbol of our love. It has no beginning and no end. I am yours for all eternity.”

The chamber erupted in cheers.

Hothar scooped me up. “Time for our honeymoon.” He teleported and we appeared in a honeymoon suite.

I pointed to the tapestries. “Can we try some of those positions?”

“Yes.” Hothar sat me on my feet and stripped off his shirt.

Meow. Meow. Meow. Hitch crawled up on the bed.

I gaped at him. “*What do you mean, you’re having babies? You’re a boy.*”

Hitch yowled and seconds later a silken egg sac appeared on the bed.

“*Holy cow! Where did that come from?*”

Meow. Meow.

“You’ve been carrying it with you? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Meow.

“You were afraid? Oh, sweetie, we’re family. We would never hurt you or your kids.”

Meow.

Hothar scanned the egg sac. “There are eight babies.”

“What do you need us to do?”

Meow. Meow.

I shot Hothar a horrified look. “They need to eat right away.”

He hurried over to the replicator and programmed a large bowl of mealy bugs.

The egg sac rocked back and forth.

Meow! Meow! Meow!

“Hurry.”

Hothar placed the bowl next to the pulsating egg sac.

The sac tore and eight babies scurried out.

Meow!

The babies jumped in the bowl and chowed down.

“Those are very pretty babies.”

Hitch puffed up with pride.

Hothar sat next to me, and we watched the babies eat. “I am beginning to think the Goddess is conspiring to keep us from physically consummating our relationship.”

“It does seem that way.” Hothar took my face in his hands. “I love you.” His mouth covered mine in a sensual kiss that stole my breath.

“Oops. Sorry to interrupt, but Bodhi said I needed to apologize,” Aphrodite announced.

I glared at her. “Now? We are on our honeymoon.”

“Oh, babies,” she cooed and picked one up. “Aren’t you precious?”

The baby mewled.

The door burst open, and Bodhi zoomed in. “*My apologies, I have come to retrieve my mate.*”

“*Can I keep him?*” Aphrodite held out a baby.

“No!” We all yelled in unison.

Hitch snatched the baby out of her hands. Meow!

Uncle Saul teleported in, took one look at the babies, and scowled. “How did this happen? I thought Hitch was a male.”

I started laughing. I loved every minute of my crazy-ass life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howdy. My name is Gail Koger and once upon a time I was a 9-1-1 dispatcher. Too many years of wild requests, screwy questions, bizarre behavior and outrageous demands have left me with a permanent twitch and an uncontrollable craving for chocolate. I took up writing science fiction romance to keep from killing people. So far, it has worked.

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Carol Van Natta took over Pets in Space starting with *Pets in Space 6*, and has contributed stories to most of the anthologies, including this one.