

OVER THE MOON SERIES

EAT MY MOON DUST

ETTA PIERCE

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EAT MY MOON DUST

Over the Moon Series, Book 2

By

ETTA PIERCE

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Dedication

To my consultants: Dakota Chickeness and Holly Hanzo. Your voices made Tinsley and her family possible. Thank you.

Also to Mr Pierce, with whom I argued for *several hours* about the functionality of food bays. My idea is *still* better.
Lovingly, your wife.

Thank you, Natasha Snow and Chrisandra's Corrections, for your friendships, beautiful covers, and proofreading.

A Little World Context

In their own backyards, subway stations, bridges, and cars, humans of all ages and backgrounds were abducted for sale on the intersolar black market. With the help of a human woman named Olivia Loxley, the Intersolar Union was able to liberate over a thousand human souls from the sex trafficking ring parked outside the solar system.

The human refugees were relocated to Yaspur, a tropical moon in orbit around the water planet Big Blue in the Mandaahl System. They are on the mend, finding the light of day in the tropical heat of Yaspur's red jungles as they come to terms with never seeing Earth again .

And finding love, of course. Even amidst the uncertainties of life on an alien moon.

Please consider visiting my [Content Notes](#) for an in-depth guide on content details and trigger warnings for each of my books.

Characters (The Exhaustive List)

Characters introduced in this book do not include descriptions. Consider signing up for my newsletter to see species and human casting inspirations.

HUMANS:

a newly protected species in the Intersolar Union; uncanny resemblance to ancient venandi fertility gods

Tinsley Adams (30) : Canadian Woodlands Cree; talented baker and Omnira's former roommate

Bree Stewart (30) : New Yorker; mechanic-in-training under Hunar in the human colony; previously kidnapped by Siatesh and Elaxi; Aavar's *priya*

Amelia Ahlberg (34) : Swiss; physician in the human colony; Ezraji's colleague and very pregnant *priya*

Marcella Bianci (62) : (Mar- *chell*- ah Bee -*ahn* -key); Italian; elderly woman that has quickly become the colony's matriarch and has assumed the nickname Nonna

Omnira Shaw (29) : (Ohm- *near* -ah Shaw); Jamaican; braider and hair stylist; Tinsley's former roommate and Siatesh's *priya*

Imani James (32): (Ee- *mah* -nee James); Tanzanian; former wildlife ranger turned head of security in the human colony; Vindilus's *vira*

Naitee Patel (19) : (*Nye*- tee Pah- *tell*); Indian; saved in the mission to bust the trafficking ring; Rambir's big sister

Rambir Patel (12) : (Rum- *beer* Pah- *tell*); Indian; saved in the mission to bust the trafficking ring; Naitee's little brother and Pom Pom's best friend

Jihae Jeong (33) : (*Jee*- hay Jong); Korean

VENANDI:

(veh- *nahni* -dee); tall and muscular, plated with an exoskeleton similar to ballistics rubber; wide shoulders and a wasp waist; crown of spires, unique to each individual, rises like malachite from the forehead and their coloring is determined by their clan heredity; meritocratic with a rigid militaristic hierarchy

Vindilus Calgari : arms master on the *Palembre* , now heading up security in the human colony ; Pom Pom's adoptive father

SHILPAKAARI:

(shill-pah- *car*- ee); semi-aquatic and only slightly taller than the average human with a mane of tentacles atop their heads; two thumbs on each hand; while women have two arms, the men have four, adapted for life on a homeworld with very little land and a very many trees; matriarchal and known for their superior crafts

Hunar Fareshi : (*Hyoo* -nar *Fah* -reh-shee); chief engineer to the human colony

Jurek Zufi : (Joo- *wreck Zoo* -fee); ambassador from the human colony's host city, Samridve; oversees all colony delegates

Aavar Medansh : (*Ay* -var Meh- *dansh*); chief pilot to the human colony; Bree's coil

Piro Miatazi : (*Pee*- row Mee-ah- *tah* -zee); lieutenant pilot to the human colony

Ezraji Zarabi : (Ez- *rah*- jee *Zah*- rah-bee); medical delegate to the human colony; toxinologist (a researcher of the organisms that produce toxins); Amelia's colleague and coil

Bajora Oilan : (Bah- jor- ah Chee- lawn); engineering delegate to the human colony; culinary specialist that repairs and programs food bays

Pom Pom : young girl with a chronic leprosy-like disease; works in armory inventory for the security team; Vindilus's adopted daughter

Siatesh Dalal : (See- ah- tesh Dah- lahl); Lost Soul refugee and former assassin; Omnira's coil

Corsa

Virhek : (Veer- ehk)

Reha : (Ray- hah)

Ladhran : (Lah- dran)

Tahavir : (Tah -hah-veer)

HJARNA:

(hee- yarn- ah); evolved from pachyderms with camel-like feet and blunted herbivorous teeth; incredibly intelligent with a bone fan that splays across the front of the head to protect the brain; exceptional ultraviolet eyesight with multiple pupils in each orb that allow them to focus on up to six subjects at once; superiority complex with a strong instinct towards scientific pursuit; highly social

Yulang : (You- long); Lost Soul refugee and former researcher of unknown discipline

UIDS:

(weeds); similar to orcs with imposing tusks and four slanted red eyes set in protruding ridges of the skull; naturally bulky with varying grey skin tones; competition over female uids left many of them dead in the skirmishes, now women are prized and precious; tend to form male partnerships but prefer large territories away from other uids

Kokebe : (Koh- *kay* -bay); Lost Soul refugee that currently works on Wade's construction crew

Ngozi : (*Goh* -zee); Lost Soul refugee that currently works on Wade's construction crew

BILONGS:

(*Bill*- longs); often misconstrued as a drake the size of a horse, with scythe-like claws and two-tonal fur; feared for their thousand-tooth grins, which unzip in a Y-shape down their necks and rattle eerily on the hunt; they can and will eat *anything* ; known for being solitary and hostile

Sizzle : (Sizzle); brute enforcer serving on the *Mummer*, now assigned to the security team in the human colony

PROLOGUE

I'd like to say a quick thank you to Dakota Chickeness for helping me bring Tinsley Adams and her community to vibrant life. Thank you for your warm guidance and patience as I navigated Tinsley's Cree cultural roots.

Before you dig in, please know that there's a handy little summary of the world, species descriptions, and character info before this prologue! Please check it out, if that tickles your detail-oriented book brain. Enjoy!

) TINSLEY (

“Hup!”

I lifted the heavy slow cooker from beneath the old brass National cash register and teetered on my tiptoes to roll its base onto the countertop. The contents sloshed against the heavy lid and my mouth instantly watered as I pulled the old power cord out of the outlet with my toe.

“Careful, Tinsley. You’re gonna strain your back doing that,” Sam chided, making his steady way across the cement floor with his mop.

I spit my long dark brown ponytail from my mouth with an unlady-like *pthhhhft* and put my hands on my hips.

“Nonsense! I’m young and sturdy.”

He snorted. “And the size of a chihuahua.”

I squinted at his fatherly amusement with disapproval as I slowly pulled two ceramic mugs from the shelf behind the register. His grin only widened, carving into the aged lines of his warm cinnamon features. He’d pushed his short mane of straight black and silver hair back from his face with one of those springy headband combs from the 90s, and it perfectly accentuated his mischief. Sam *loved* getting a rise out of me.

I popped my lips together, making up my mind. “No hot mulled cider for you then.”

“Personality of a chihuahua too,” he murmured immediately, pausing to watch my reaction with a glint of anticipation.

My eyes flew open with indignation. I cocked one hip and opened my mouth, about to take his bait when Adam strolled out of the kitchen, flannel-lined coat in tow.

“Dishes are all done, Tin,” he announced with a reserved smile. Russet hair obscured his forehead, and all the gingery freckles on his teenage face warped with pride. “Have a good Christma- *wawoah!*”

I grabbed his sleeve and pulled him back.

“Oh no you don’t!” I exclaimed, shoving a mug into his lanky fingers. It was the buffalo plaid one, his favorite. “Cider first.”

“Really?”

“*Pfft*, duh,” I said, rolling my eyes with a smile. “C’mon, Sam, get over here!”

Neither of the men needed telling twice. Sam untied his red apron, wadded it up, and tossed it in the bin of rags by the kitchen as Adam set his coat down on an upturned oak chair and leaned in, taking a big whiff of the slow cooker.

“What did you call this stuff?” he asked, mesmerized.

“Mulled cider, apple cider’s sexier cousin.”

I bit my lip with excitement and lifted the lid. Steam rolled over the slow cooker like a heavenly cloud, revealing a mulled gallon of perfection. Star anise, cinnamon sticks, dried allspice berries, whole cloves, and nutmeg, stewing in a soup of unfiltered apple juice for three whole hours... Nothing in the world could ever smell more divine.

And from the way Adam’s throat bobbed, he agreed. I lovingly mixed the floating particles of spices back into the cider until it was a speckled swirl, then handed Sam the ladle. He doled out servings while I added slices of orange and whole cranberries to each mug.

“You can drink that part?”

“Of course!” I said, sucking citrus juice off my fingers. “It’s what makes it taste so good. Every sip is a little different, a little special.”

“Like orange juice with a little pulp,” Sam added, handing Adam his drink.

“Or honey with flecks of the comb in it!”

Adam blinked between us, then looked at his cider thoughtfully, inhaling the aroma as he brought the mug to his lips. He made a noise of satisfaction and pressed his mouth together, savoring the taste.

“Woah, this is amazing!” he said, eyes popping wide. He took a hearty gulp and chewed down an orange slice whole.

I held out my mug and clinked rims with both my employees, then held it between my palms, savoring the scent as Sam and Adam talked family plans. I settled back against the counter, feeling the hefty oak against the small of my back, the delicious ache in the balls of my feet.

My bakery, *The Three Sisters*, was my pride and joy, even when we mopped the floors, took out the trash, and counted the register after a long, hard day. All I had to do was look at the photo—*nohkōmipan*, or my grandmother, my mother, and ten year-old me, roasting marshmallows and sweet potatoes over the backyard fire pit one fall—that was hanging above the wheels of bannock and scones displayed along the wall to feel renewed.

Besides, my bakery was *freaking beautiful*. Everything about the interior had been chosen specifically for that sense of Old World wonder, with brass-frame counter displays and my growing collection of vintage teacups on high, hand-carved maple shelves. A few Métis Octopus bags made by a local master craftswoman completed the walls and stole the show with their intricate beading and eight “legs.” They were an expression of love and family that perfectly embodied the

roots of my bakery, and every time I set my eyes on them, my insides melted like syrup.

This was especially true during the holidays, when we closed the shop early to string up garland and twinkle lights, place red velvet cushions on every chair, fill polished copper bowls with striped peppermints, and have a party to decorate the Christmas tree with cloth birds and glass pinecones that glittered with snow. Then, after everyone else had left, I'd hang the beaded snowflakes I'd made with my mom as a kid, a chore I always set aside for myself. Putting them next to the bags on the wall made me sappy and nostalgic.

But the decorations had been out for a long while now. Today was the last day we'd be open for a couple weeks. Tomorrow was the day before Christmas Eve, and Sam and I would be driving up to Wahgoshig first thing in the morning, retreating into the beautiful snow-laden trees of the reserve to spend time with our families and friends. I wouldn't be unlocking the bakery doors again until after New Year's Day.

Which meant a whole week to eat my dad's cooking, to sleep under *nohkōmipan's* woven blankets, and to saw the top off of a balsam fir and decorate it inside our home, where the scent of terpenes would permeate my every pore...

As much as I loved my bakery, man, I couldn't *wait*. I needed this holiday more than anything.

Sam clapped Adam on the back and squeezed his shoulder as he poured him another mug. My father's friend had been my first employee once I'd realized in the spring that I needed help. The bakery had gotten too busy, and I was dead tired when Sam showed up, putting on an apron without a word. My dad had sent him, no doubt, but I'd never asked. Neither of us had taken a break since.

I bit the inside of my cheek, hiding the quiver of my bottom lip against my mug as I took another long, thankful drink of holiday spirit.

Sam had “moved away” from the reserve after the attempted genocide and mass graves of Indigenous children hit the news. The entire community had been bowled over with latent grief, their memories unearthed and bleeding fresh. I’d known—all of us had—but witnessing the impact on the older generations still felt like being punched in the heart with blocks of ice. I found out later that Sam had been a residential school survivor and remembering had been too raw. He’d fallen into the bottle and couldn’t pull himself out.

When he’d realized how badly it affected his family, he’d enrolled in a rehab program in Kingston and taken up morning yoga. The only time he’d spoken to me about it was a quiet summer morning before dawn in the kitchen, *nohkōmipan’s* favorite bluegrass album wafting through the lobby. I’d wiped a tear from my cheek on my shoulder, missing home as I made her sweet bannock recipe...

“Sometimes healing takes us far away,” Sam said, cleaning fresh strawberries with a soft bristle brush.

I sniffed the memories back, blinking away the next tear as I looked up at his shoulders. “Hmm?” I managed, my usual peppy self, preparing for him to turn around and put on a brave face. He didn’t though, and just kept carefully cleaning each strawberry.

“My wife told me that before I enrolled in rehab. And she was right. Every time I visit, the black cloud hanging over the house is a little lighter. Working at your bakery helps. So just take it day by day, wâpos, and your black clouds will lighten too.”

Sam—or I guess his wife—was right. My dad and I had tried to have a ship-to-order bakery in our house after *nohkōmipan* passed away, but I’d outgrown it and made the hard decision to move to Kingston to open a bakery. I’d felt so guilty, leaving him there alone. But I’d come to realize that staying would have been harder in the long run, and the good I could do here was fulfilling.

Like hiring and spoiling Adam, the foster teen the police chased off for loitering on the street corner.

I grinned, stepping away to unearth the gift bag stuffed with glittery white tissue paper from beneath a mountain of clean rags.

“Merry Christmas!” I announced, holding the bag out to Adam. He blinked at it, a blush racing up his neck. “Go ahead, open it.”

“For me?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, c’mon!” I shoved the bag against his chest and took his empty mug. “It’s nothing major.”

Adam pulled the tissue paper off the top of the contents and withdrew the fleece scarf I’d made last night. I clapped my hands together, trying hard not to laugh. He unraveled it, looking over the maroon and green plaid, its edges cut into uneven fringe with a pair of kitchen shears.

“Did you *make* this? No way you bought it...”

I couldn’t help but cackle with cheer. “It’s not perfect, but that’s what makes it special! Like an ugly sweater, right?”

Adam shook his head but couldn’t help an awkward, boyish smile. “Yeah, sure.” Then he wrapped it around his neck and struck a pose, the fringe sticking up at weird angles. We all laughed as I stuffed a bag of sugar cookies into his jacket pocket and zipped him shut.

“Go on before it gets too cold, okay?”

Adam dished out a couple of great hugs, tossed his ratty old backpack over his shoulder, and left with a bounce in his step. I washed his mug, following him with my eyes as he disappeared around the corner.

“Such a sap,” Sam teased.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I snarked, blotting my eye on my shoulder. We both looked up at the clock on the wall and Sam perked up.

“Oh, you’re right. Last AA meeting of the year tonight. I’ll toss these in the wash then get going. Don’t wait up, okay? I think some of us are getting coffee afterwards.”

“Okay, but take some sugar cookies,” I said, nodding my chin at the displays. Sam packed up some cookies, coffee cake, and butter tarts, then saw himself out, smooching a toque onto his head.

I let out a little sigh, humming along with the holiday music echoing around the bakery and called my dad. He picked up the video call as quick as lightning, his nostrils taking up the entire bottom half of my phone screen.

“Heya, *wâpos*, how’s my girl?” he asked, getting the angle *almost* right. I dried my hands and set my phone on the shelf of glasses and mugs so he could see the displays while I pulled out the day’s leftovers.

“Good! Busy day, in a good way,” I said, setting a half-empty tray of butter tarts on the counter.

“You’re packing all those up for me, right?”

I wagged my finger at the screen. “Not *all* of them... but duh, of course.”

“Who’s getting the other half then?” he asked coyly.

I hefted out another tray, this one laden with neat rows of gingerbread boys and girls. They hadn’t been as popular as I’d expected, but that was fine. More for us.

“*Pff*, sorry to disappoint, Dad, but I’ve been a bit busy, y’know?”

“No boyfriend then?”

“Nope!”

“Damn. Why don’t you ever give me what I want for Christmas? You’d make a terrible Santa.”

I stuck my tongue out at him as I prepped my mom’s old Christmas tin with as many baked goods as possible. No one minded if the butter tarts were a little smooched, right?

“I go on dates,” I hedged.

Two. I’d been on two since moving to Kingston. And my dad *definitely* didn’t need to know they were basically dinner and a booty call. Ever since Sam moved into the little studio apartment next to mine above the bakery, I hadn’t had anyone over at all. Sam was wonderful, but he’d also snitch on me so fast, my dad would show up the next day in a cheesy button-down and his sherpa work jacket, asking to meet the poor guy.

“My daughter, the non-stick muffin pan,” Dad lamented with an exaggerated sigh.

Now *that* made me laugh. I tried to hold it in, but a low *hurhur* like Goofy’s giggle bubbled out of me anyway. What a terrible joke. A terrible, perfect joke.

“So what time you thinkin’ you’ll get here tomorrow?”

I shrugged, sliding a little fold-out display table out from beside the register. “That eager to see your muffin pan of a daughter, huh?”

“Just wondering if I should cut the tree beforehand. There’s a storm coming in. Sun might go down a bit after three if the clouds are thick enough,” he pondered.

I glanced out at the streets. The sidewalks glistened with freezing sludge from the mist of rain we’d had in the late afternoon, and now, just after six in the evening, the holiday lights twinkled in their full glory against a pitch-black sky. A couple walking by held umbrellas under their elbows, frowning at the closed sign hanging over my door.

“Oh,” I said under my breath, a bit disappointed. I loved dragging the top of the tree back to the house, shaking it out, and thawing my numb legs in front of a log fire. But I hadn’t had time to look at the forecast, and my dad would know best. So I gave him a smile. “Sure, go ahead. We probably won’t be there until almost sundown anyway. Just go with someone, okay?”

“Martin needs to do the same, so we’ll buddy up,” he agreed. “Make sure to check the forecast before you leave

though. Snow's coming in fast tonight. Could get nasty.”

I promised, blew him a big kiss, and ended the call, humming *Santa Baby*. Then I took my leftover cookies and mulled cider out onto the street to hand off to passersby until the incoming snowstorm chased all the couples away.

After all, making the season bright was one of my favorite things to do.



At three in the morning, I found myself wide awake with no recollection of why my eyes were wide open, staring into the corner of my bedroom. I blinked a few times, working the delicious sleep from my body one breath at a time, still nestled deep in my warm flannel sheets. The twinkle lights in the trees caught on the spiderweb of new frost on my windows, sparkling against a draft of fresh snow clinging to the windowsill. I lifted my head enough to listen.

Had I heard a snowplow?

There was no distant rumble of diesel engines, so I plopped my head back down with a huff.

Now that I was awake though, the new snow made me nervous. It was still falling in big, fluffy flakes at the same pace as hours ago when I stomped my boots on the front mat and shook the condensation out of my scarf and toque, waving good night to the boutique employee closing up across the street. We were used to snowstorms, but the big blizzards didn't usually roll in until January, after the holiday crush. I squinted into the blue light of my phone screen as I looked up the road closures heading north, worried that we might have to postpone leaving in the morning until the snow stopped. Otherwise, what was usually an eight hour drive could turn into twelve.

“Help!” a man’s muffled voice reached up through the building.

I jolted up in bed and inhaled a gasp, the chilly air prickling my forearms, and jumped out of bed in my long candy cane t-shirt and socks, running to the window. Cheek smashed against the frosty panes, I searched through the fog of my breath for any sign of someone outside.

“Please... help me,” the voice called again. My eyes darted to and fro, brow creased with confusion. That didn’t sound like it was outside...

“Oh my god,” I hitched, stumbling back. It sounded like it was from *inside* the bakery, just down the double flight of stairs.

Please don’t let it be Sam.

I slid across the wood floor and ripped my door open. Sam’s and mine shared a kitchen, having once been a single apartment. I banged on his door, just in case the voice downstairs wasn’t him.

“Someone’s hurt!” I yelled breathlessly, then swung around the corner and flew downstairs, my heart racing. “Hello?! Sam!”

The stairwell spilled out into an alcove hidden by a curtain in the kitchen. I pushed it aside and grabbed Sam’s mop propped up in the corner, as I called out again, checking the floors for a fallen shadow. I jogged out into the front, the corner bakery’s tall windows filled with reflections of my display cases and upturned chairs against the silent torrent of snowflakes outside.

My grip loosened with relief. None of the windows were broken. The door was still locked. I did a walkthrough to be sure, but there was no one in the bakery, hurt or otherwise.

A pair of feet fumbled down the stairs behind me. “Tinsley!” Sam growled, out of breath. He burst from the kitchen in a long-sleeve shirt and pajama pants, wide-eyed, with a rolling pin held above his head.

I set his mop on the floor handle first and leaned my weight against it with a sheepish grimace. “Sorry, Sam. I thought I heard someone call for help. You okay?” A flicker of worry passed through my mind. Maybe he’d been having nightmares.

He nodded, pushing his hair out of his face. “You sure you heard someone?”

My brow creased, sweeping the street. I’d fogged up my window pretty bad trying to look out from my bedroom, and now all the reflections in the windows still made it hard to know for sure...

“I’ll just check outside real quick.”

I propped the mop against a table and hopped to stretch over the counter for the keys beneath the register. Before Sam could tell me no, I slipped my socks into the familiar cushion of my boots and pushed the door open against a snowbank.

The bakery’s brass bell tinkled as I forced the door open, a cold breeze instantly chapping my cheeks and nose. I looked down the road in one direction, then the other, hugging myself against the chill.

“Help!”

I jumped, whipping my attention towards the corner of the shop.

“Sam, I *did* hear something! Hurry, get your boots and call the police!”

“Tins—wait!”

He padded across the floor, but I didn’t wait for him, leaving the bakery entrance propped open against the snow as I ran around the corner. I hadn’t tied my boots, so they flopped about, filling with white, glittery powder as I trudged through the high embankments along the road.

“Hello!” I called again, cupping my mouth.

“Help!” the man called again, closer this time, muffled by the silence of snowfall.

“I’m here!” I yelled. Had he been hit by a plow? Was he a homeless man buried beneath an embankment? I felt a rush of danger, a sense of urgency, and climbed on top of a wrought-iron bench, looking for any sign of movement. “Where are you?!”

“Tinsley, no!”

I turned around to look at Sam with confusion and met a monster instead. Big, black eyes stared at me from a flat, pale blue face, a wavy crest sprouting from its head like a ginkgo leaf. Its vertical nostrils flared wide, and it craned its neck sideways, revealing... tattoos? It was wearing clothing too. My eyes jumped to its face.

It moved its mouth then, that same voice projecting from its throat. “Help!” it said, only it looked like a bad dub on a foreign film, not matching the movement of its mouth, the flat teeth, the wide slash of lips. I shuffled backwards on the bench in terror, a tear freezing in the corner of my eye. Distantly, I heard Sam roar, his reflection running towards us in the windows of the bakery. I smiled at his reflection, heartbroken.

How many black clouds would I leave behind?

The monster lunged forward.

I shrieked, slipped on the icy bench, and the back of my head hit something solid with a resounding crack.

01

) TINSLEY (

Two Years Later... Ish.

I rolled onto my stomach and held up my scope, looking out over my premium view of the jungle. Every tree was well below my perch atop Home Tower 02, where I could see miles and miles into the distance. Sometimes I could convince myself that I lived in a sort of twilight tropical paradise on Earth, where the jungle was magenta and purple, the grass a dark aubergine bordering on black, and the sky turquoise instead of blue. But then I'd come up here and see Big Blue, the monstrous water planet haunting the northern hemisphere where it stayed tidally locked with our little moon, see the curve of the horizon—so much tighter than Earth's—and I'd come crashing back to reality.

My bakery was gone, my dad was gone, my friends were gone. I even missed that one customer that filched an entire bowl of candy canes a few days before I was abducted. And while I couldn't bring any of those things here, maybe I could bring a little cheer to Renata, the human colony we'd established on Yaspur.

"Come to mama," I murmured, looking through the toy scope I'd bought off the holomarket. I blew one of my short curls from my forehead and searched out the mountains perpetually caught in Big Blue's shadow, so far in the distance that they were just a ghostly shadow through the thick atmosphere.

I found the range, crossed my fingers, and slowly swiped across their peaks.

White.

I gasped with excitement as soon as I saw the snow caps.

“Yes!” I hooped and hollered, scrambling up onto my butt for a better view. I brought the scope back up to my face and took another look. Sure enough, far, *far* past the jungle, snow blanketed the mountaintops. I breathed in deep as if I could smell the ice.

We’d established Renata more than an orbit ago, and while the shilpakaari had shared a few of their traditions that passed the seasons, there *were* no seasons in a jungle. Maybe hot, hotter, wet, wetter... Nothing like Kingston, Ontario, where the winter weighed down the pines in glittering flakes and called you to a cup of hot chocolate. Where the spring burst with young green and thunderstorms that filled the air with the smell of fresh-cut flowers and grass.

I could *almost* smell it again.

That’s not to say that things in Renata were going poorly, that we were all loafing on our couches, pining for Earth. Many people had a good thing going on Yaspur. My former roommate, Omi, had her own hair shop and had started a portfolio of mane styles for the shilpakaari. Bree, the human transpo mechanic, ran the public media feed for the colony, giving the rest of the union a taste of human life while simultaneously smiting trolls with maniacal New Yorker glee.

And who could forget Amelia and Ezraji? They were close to welcoming their twins, the first shilpakaari-human hybrids. The galaxy didn’t know it yet, but the whole colony was buzzing with excitement over the union’s very first hukaari children. When the news broke publicly, it would be *crazy*.

And people really were healing. We’d all been leaning on each other, bonded by our shared abductee experiences and the sheer alien wilderness surrounding us. Before, when the security patrols emerged from the jungle like ghosts, silent and sure-footed, we’d all hide and watch them warily from our windows. We’d whisper about their weapons and their

unfamiliar features and how paranoid and insecure we'd felt in our so-called "protected status."

There was absolutely no question that even among our alien "hosts," our security team was intimidating. Vin, with his devilish red exoskeleton and crown of spires. Sizzle, a black hellhound with a Y-shaped Cheshire Cat grin. Ngozi and Kokebe, the uids with two pairs of eyes stacked like spiders and an uncanny preternatural awareness of each other's movements...

Now though, when they emerged from their patrols, most humans waved hello. Their big, scary faces would break into human-like smiles and nods of greeting. The uids even brought flowers or fruits they knew we liked, and I'd seen them help construct stalls and clear roads after the rains. Although they had terrified us all at first, they didn't anymore.

Now, many of us counted them as family.

Literally! Humans were shacking up with aliens left and right around here.

Which meant it was time to bring some celebration and pizzazz to our sterile little paradise.

That's right.

We needed a freaking *party*.

That snow in the distance meant it was my time of year, even if it wasn't in my backyard. It meant cozy blankets and fireplaces and twinkle lights. It meant a bakery ringing with holiday music, hung with beaded snowflakes, and Santa hats for my employees. It meant gingerbread house competitions, sugar cookie workshops for kids, *oh god, mulled cider spiked with so much rum I'd be dancing on a—*

I bit my lip and closed my eyes, centering myself as the sudden urge to cry hit me hard. While Sam's wife had said that sometimes healing could take you far away, my *nohkōmipan* had taught me that productivity helped soothe a troubled soul.

I needed to let the things I'd lost go and brighten my skies by making new memories. Focus on healing others as a way to heal myself.

The only problem was that my usual method of healing wasn't available to me. I thought of the mouth-watering aroma of brown sugar in *The Three Sisters* this time of year and a lump caught in my throat. Butter tarts, black forest cakes, pear fig galettes, hazelnut trifles, maple pies, pfeffernusse cookies, caramel bûche de Noël, sweet bannock... I swallowed hard, damning my circumstance.

Not that I couldn't eat most of those things. I just couldn't *make* them. There were no ovens, no pots or pans, no blenders or whisks. Just food bays. *Freaking bing*. Food's ready. Food's perfect.

Food's *boring*.

So if I couldn't bake anymore, what could I do? I could decorate, play music, get drunk, and watch the movie archive—something I'd been doing for an embarrassing amount of time at this point. And if it depressed me to leave my little unit and the Christmas cheer behind, maybe others felt in the holiday dumps too. We needed a break from the humdrum of colony life.

We needed *holidays* again.

I rolled up my comforter and scope, then headed back down the service ladder into the top floor of the tower. When I entered the lift and selected the ground floor, there was a little fizzle of excitement in my stomach. I kept my fingers crossed as I descended, tentatively hopeful that this could be my purpose here. I just had to get permission first, and I had to do it before the anxiety ate me up. Rip off the Band-Aid, jump in with both feet, be confident!

Marcella Bianci, affectionately known as *Nonna*, was Renata's most prominent figurehead. She'd given the place its name and organized the community area's construction and integration program with the alien refugees that lived with us.

She petitioned for a school pod to be dropped in just a few weeks ago for the kids too and was doggedly determined to get us a full-fledged piazza worthy of Rome. She was a powerhouse of a woman and a little intimidating despite her grandmotherly warmth.

I found her at the edge of the playfield, where the adult humans often sat and watched the children play. She was sitting on a newly installed garden ledge, local flowers popping out of the black soil behind her in little bright pink and blue sprouts. Beneath her prim hips was a bright blue kitchen towel to keep the pollen off her impeccable palazzo pants.

And she looked *pissed*.

Specifically at her holotab, the tech most of us had gotten implanted in our forearms as a comm device. It was one of several bionic upgrades we'd received for free to help us navigate union life. Most of us at this point also had linguitors installed behind our ears for translating speech, and transitors in our optic nerves to translate text.

By the way Marcella was snarling at the holoscreen hovering above her forearm, I suspected she wished she could rip it out and throw it in the jungle.

"Impossible man!" she snapped, throwing her hands up in the air. Imani, the Tanzanian woman in charge of colony security whose convergence with the arms master had given her a short crown of horns around her forehead, golden eyes, and a red tint to her vitiligo-speckled espresso skin, raised a brow, taking a long drag from her water bottle.

"Ferulis?" she asked as I inched closer.

"Yes," Marcella hissed, standing up to pace. "He's denied my request for the construction of a piazza... *again!*" she emphasized, slapping the back of her hand against her palm. "And what do you think his excuse was this time? A permit for construction on protected lands! Protected because *humans* live on it!"

Marcella threw her hands up and sat with force on her kitchen towel. Imani grinned, closing her notifications. “Sounds to me like you just might need to go rogue, Grandmother.”

“Going rogue, I like it!” I interjected brightly. Being overly cheerful was a nervous tick of mine.

“As much as I’d like to disobey that overgrown cricket, I can’t,” Marcella sighed, crossing her arms. “I want the process to be safe. I may not be an engineer, but I’m not a fool either. Gravity here isn’t quite the same as Earth, and the curvature of the moon is very different. No catastrophic collapses on my watch, thank you. I want seasoned builders from Samridve to fly in.”

Imani shrugged. “And you don’t like Wade.”

Marcella shot the head of security a dagger-like glare, rolling her shoulders back.

“He’s disrespectful.”

“You’re totally right!” I said with a single nod of conviction. “Safety is the best choice.”

Both women looked up at me and I immediately grimaced. Not because they were unwelcoming, but because I was brown-nosing too hard and off-tempo. I *needed* approval to plan a holiday, for my own sake as much as the colony’s. And I’d just walked in on the one person who could give it to me in the middle of an outburst over being denied her own project.

“I’m so sorry, *dolce*, but I don’t think we’ve met,” Marcella said sweetly. She smiled, clasping her knee, and leaned towards me, waiting.

“Oh!” I cleared my throat and thrust my hand forward. “My name’s Tinsley Adams. I was hoping I could talk to you, Ms Bianci?”

She took my hand and gave it a little squeeze instead of a shake. “Please, call me *Nonna*. How can I help you, Tinsley?”

The elegant white-haired woman was as warm as potpourri made from scratch and simmered in an oven. I breathed in her spicy personality and low, mercurial Italian accent like she was a shot of rum and clutched my comforter and scope with hope. “I noticed that the mountains have snow caps, and I was hoping—”

“Mountains?” Marcella interjected with confusion. “There are mountains?”

“Yes! If you look *waaay* in the distance from on top of the towers, you can see them!”

I held up my scope with a sheepish grin and they blinked at its colorful plas design for “child development 3 and up.” Imani held out her hand and I gave it to her. She looked way more suave than I ever could, coolly searching the treeline on the other side of the playfield through its rudimentary lens.

“The Pahatdhi Mountains,” Imani supplied. “I’ve seen them on maps but didn’t know they were visible from here.”

“Yeah! Very... very visible.” My voice trailed off, and Marcella smiled.

“What were you hoping for, Tinsley?” she prodded.

“Oh! I’d like to organize a holiday. Christmas!” I babbled nervously. Perhaps because it was so personal to me, the fear of rejection prickled the back of my neck like a cold sweat. “We’ve been here for more than an orbit, and holidays are good for tracking the time, keeping traditions alive, and healing the sou—”

Before I could finish defending my idea, Marcella clapped her hands together and laughed wickedly, her chocolate brown eyes sparkling to life.

“A magnificent idea, *dolce!* Show our friends how humans throw a party.”

“And it has absolutely nothing to do with stepping on Ferulis’s talons. Let’s see how long it takes for him to yell at

me over comms,” Imani said with amusement, still playing with my toy scope.

Marcella summarily ignored her jab, stubbornly beaming at me. Was I stepping in the middle of a diplomatic war? I was definitely stepping into *something*... “Does three weeks give you enough time? What do you have in mind?”

“Yes!” I laughed, breaking into my usual goofy smile as zealous ideas flooded my engines. I pushed my choppy brown waves off my forehead with a sigh of overwhelming excitement. “*Watstakats*, I have so much to think about. Can I give you a plan tomorrow? Three weeks... *Three weeks!* I can do this.”

Marcella’s excitement softened as I gave myself a pep talk. She patted my hand, recognizing the immense pressure I’d placed on my own shoulders. I didn’t want this to be just a half-assed White Elephant party. I was going to pull out *all* the stops.

“You just let me know what I can do, Tinsley, dear. Anything you put together will be a good start.”

“Thank you, ma’am!”

“*Nonna*,” she corrected me gently.

Imani returned my scope, and I clutched it as I waved goodbye and marched off on wobbly knees to Omi’s hair shop on the hill. I needed to tell her the good news.

I needed to *make a list and check it twice*.

I whisper-squealed to myself, hugging my scope in an effort to appear calm as I walked—not skipped—away.

As soon as I was around the corner though, I broke into a sprint.

I had elves to recruit.

02

) HUNAR (

“Hi, *syalī!*” Piro called happily from the lockers, waving his two right hands like a human. “Are you ready to go?”

I kept my focus, squinting one golden eye down at the breadboard I was working on. With minute muscle control, I focused the magnifying lens in my bionic eye and smoothed the soldered joint with a hot macro-needle. The soft silver melted like warm clay into its mold, and I waited until it cooled to a dull grey, not a single crack in sight.

“Almost,” I gruffed over my shoulder. I set the needle on its delicate rack and flipped it off to cool as I stood and slung my overnight bag over my shoulder. “Let me close up shop.”

“You got it!” The young pilot saluted with a jovial smile and sauntered out of the workshop towards his transpo. I watched him go, my sorry attempt at a smile fading to grey in the dim, colorless dusk. My expression hardened, I snorted the smell of burnt metal out of my slitted nostrils, and I locked down my stuff.

Piro was young, on the cusp of manhood. He’d shown immense promise and was a star swimmer from an affluent family, but when it came to the harsh realities of adult life, he was still as soft as a spat’s feet. Not a callous in sight.

But I wasn’t so lucky. I’d spent a majority of my adult life embroiled in the usual obligations of shilpakaari men. Competing for affection, having to prove my worth, making enough of an income to support a woman while I scraped by. I’d worked hard, like my father had taught me, but the fruits of my labor seemed a never-ending cycle of soft gains and quick rot. Nothing stuck for long, so I’d stopped trying.

Except...

This weekend had to be different.

I checked my cache, made sure my credits were up to date, then headed out to Piro's transpo, hovering on the tarmac. The lieutenant pilot was already in the cockpit, warming up her engines. He welcomed me aboard, confirmed I'd engaged my harness, even told me the fucking weather. I rolled my eyes but appreciated the gesture deep down. Unlike Aavar, Piro knew how to keep some professional distance.

We ascended straight up, the red ferns and palms whipping up around the treeline beyond the hangar, and the bone-deep exhaustion I'd felt for satbits seeped back in. My mane of tendrils slumped from where they explored the rivets around the windows and settled against my shoulders, too weak to enjoy the rush of fresh air. I closed my eyes and thumped my head back against the vibrating hull.

I'd grown up on the shilpakaari homeworld, Dharatee. It was a cold, harsh world with miles-deep oceans and tempestuous weather. To visit, other species had to sign liability waivers and provide proof of high-quality breathers that would filter the immense humidity from the air. As a result, I'd always felt I lingered on the brink of limbo, where time stood still and people were irrelevant. The underwater cities were ancient and underdeveloped. The outskirts were isolated, since most comm tech would rust within half an orbit.

Yaspur though, with its red jungles and turquoise skies, was paradise. The moment I'd stepped foot on this little moon, my shoulders had loosened, and my tendrils had plumped under the warm rays of that glorious golden pink sun. How had I never known our system's sun was so beautiful? On Dharatee, it was a diffused marble of grey most of the year.

I'd sucked up the tropical air and vowed that I'd retire from fleet life to Yaspur's only city, Samridve. I'd enjoy the music, the diversity, the sense of fun. I'd have spats and own a unit that looked out at the sunrise. I'd build myself a little life that was perfect and perfectly mine.

“*Syalī*, we're here!”

I jolted awake at some point later with a crick in my neck, the tips of my tendrils tingling from the constant vibration of the hull. Piro's transpo let off exhaust as it touched down with a gentle shudder on the secure tarmac at Nilah Port, where the mists of the massive falls hid the platform from civilian view.

And also doused the entire exterior in a downpour that rivaled Dharatee's storms.

Piro unlatched his harness just as I did, already wearing his protective hood and coveralls. He tossed me a set and stuffed my overnight bag into a waterproof duffel while I dressed.

"Your left shock's out of alignment," I said, filling the space before he could ask me about my weekend plans. "I'll get Bree to take care of that once we're back."

"Oh, sure. No rush," he said, rubbing his upper left hand against his mane.

"Thanks for the ride." I took the duffel with a grim smile, slung it over my shoulder, and punched the ramp release. The roar of the falls drowned out any other conversation as we descended onto the open tarmac.



Corsa's home tower was a marvel of engineering, much to my chagrin. I stared up at its pyramid architecture, the intricately designed balconies that cascaded in blocks overflowing with red and pink vines, the hand-carved pillars around the lobby entrance depicting scenes of shilpakaari fishing in the ocean depths of Dharatee, and enjoyed a rare glimmer of *pride*.

It wasn't an emotion my *priya* inspired in me often anymore. Bitterness, resentment, resignation... That was more like it.

But when I looked at the grand facade of that ridiculous building, a little bit of the tension ebbed. True, I no longer

enjoyed the sunrise view from that balcony, but my spats did. Every morning, when they woke up for school, scrambled to find their shoes, fought over the cleansing mister, and ate their breakfast, that sunrise was looking in on them.

Letting the reminder wash over me, I took a deep breath, stepped up to the building's access panel, and swiped my palm over its sensors. The directory read my biometrics, then told me to make a selection. I wasn't in the database.

My heart skipped. I blinked down at the directory's holoscreen, then stupidly tried again. Twice more. When I still wasn't granted access, I set my forehead to the wall with a grimace and closed my eyes. Mane flared with anger, I pressed my fist against the wall. Not in a punch, but with mounting pressure; enough to grind my calloused knuckles into the stone and really feel it.

Corsa had found someone else.

It wasn't the first time, and we hadn't been together since well before I took the Renata contract. But it still bit deep into my soul, filling my gut with fresh vitriolic tar. I wasn't enough. I'd *never* been enough. Coiling with a woman was just a show of desperate men in iron shoes, dancing until their feet burned off, and mine had finally whittled down to stubs.

Grinding my dental ridges, I took a deep breath and combed Corsa's unit. The holoscreen's vid feed flashed, letting me know she'd turned it on. I blinked at it staring me straight in the face. She would have known I'd be coming.

"Recording in progress," it stated.

"It's Hunar," I said awkwardly, forcing a neutral scowl across my features. "I'm here for the... for the spats."

The unit's responding vid popped up and a younger shilpakaari man answered. He was handsome and smooth. I couldn't tell much about him except that his eyes were dark and his mane thinner but longer than my own.

"Corsa says you can come up. They're already packed."

The grand entrance hissed open, and the feed cut out.

When Corsa's new coil opened the door to *my* unit, I wasn't surprised that he was lean, with a narrow waist. His coloring was rare—bright blue with violet markings—and his tendrils looked as if they'd been dipped in expensive dyes. He looked me up and down, at the grey stripes along my forearms and the dull blue-green of my skin, then smirked.

"*Priya,*" he called over his shoulder, digging his heel into my limping pride. "Their father is here."

"Coming!" she called from the bedroom in her sweet, singsong voice.

I bit the inside of my cheek with all three of my left canines until I bled. Despite getting away from Corsa, moving halfway across the moon to the most remote and secure location in the fucking *galaxy*, my shriveled, unused *senti* swelled at the back of my neck with biologically-mandated interest. I suddenly understood why monks cut theirs off, liberating themselves from their sensory phalli, from the slavery of mate-dependent heat.

I'd been trying to wean myself off Corsa's coil for nearly two orbits, but the distance hadn't helped at all. No wonder everyone thought I was nearing retirement. My colors had been drained of their virile glow by the slow deprivation of her taste, even though I'd taken vitamins and supplements to keep the worst of the coil deficiency in check. Now, standing next to her new coil, the stark reality of what lay before me hit me like a freight drone.

Someday I'd be a roaming husk, shuffling up and down the streets, my mind and body so starved that I wouldn't be able to distinguish food from shit.

When Corsa rounded the corner, she had Reha under her arm, running her hands busily through our daughter's lustrous light green mane, making sure it shone bright. She smiled up at me in a flippant way, as if she'd caught an admirer on the street. "One sec," she said, then slipped back down the hall.

“Boys, come on! Virhek, could you get their bags from their rooms, please?”

“Of course, *priya*.”

Virhek preened, his mane curling and puffing up with importance. I nearly rolled my eyes. He’d thought he’d have to fight for her, no doubt. That was the common course of these sorts of things, a fight for favor. The younger man must have thought I was weak and old.

I *was* weak and old...

Virhek brushed me aside gently while Reha looked up at me with a critical eye. Her little tendrils curled at the tips, quietly judgmental.

I cleared my throat. “Hi, sweetheart. How’ve you been?”

Weak. Such a weak attempt. Reha shrugged and opened the notifications on her holotab.

Though this was the first time Corsa had allowed me to take them away for a few days, my little girl didn’t want to go, and I couldn’t blame her. Here, she was treated like a princess. I gave nearly all of my income to Corsa, and Reha was still too young to see that. Instead, she saw the old work boots and oil stains in the ridges of my palms, the gruff manners and dry mane.

Corsa returned, our sons under each of her palms. Tahavir beamed up at me, as red as the day he was born, taking after his mother all the way down to his black and silver striped eyes. But Ladh’s dark blue gaze was round with uncertainty. My brow creased. He was usually a happy spat, though his jungle-green coloring exacerbated the troubled look he gave me. When I caught his eye, he blinked away, staring at pieces of luggage as Virhek set them at the mouth of the hall.

“You look worse for wear, Hunar,” their mother said in that honey-rich, sickly sweet tone I’d come to distrust. Her red tendrils flipped over themselves with manufactured worry. “Long days at work?”

“Yes,” I said with difficulty, distracted by *more* luggage bumping the walls on Virhek’s second trip back. “Is there—”

“Oh! Of course,” Corsa exclaimed, patting the boys’ manes. “I bottled some for you this afternoon. Go greet your baan, dears. I’ll be right back.”

Ladh’s lip quivered as his mother let go. He held his brother’s lower left hand in a tight grip, trying to hide it behind their backs.

Something was wrong.

I knelt on one knee and held out all four arms, my tendrils slipping forward in welcome, and for the first time since I’d last seen them, I gave them a real smile. Warm and loving, lighting up every subtle crease around my eyes. “Come here, sons.”

Ladh broke first, running straight into a big hug. My heart cracked with worry, then a glow of relief flooded my chest, finally able to hold my brood after being away for a satbit. Tahavir followed soon after, and I squeezed them tight between my arms, tendrils sliding over their little heads with affection I rarely showed.

I looked up at Reha, still standing amidst—

What the *fuck* was up with this mountain of luggage?

I redirected my stare to Corsa and Virhek, a crease between my brows as he slipped his hand around my... my ex. “What is all this?”

“They’ll need their things, obviously,” Corsa said. She pressed a hand to her abdomen with a timid smile. Virhek emitted a low hiss of satisfaction and flashed his colors at me in warning.

My mane and my arms jolted with shock. I blinked at each of our children and reality crashed down on me. None of them, not even Reha, could look me in the face.

Corsa was having another brood?

Anger exploded in my chest like shrapnel, tearing apart my insides. But because the spats were with us, I got to my feet slowly, carefully extricating my four limbs from eight little uncertain ones as darkness settled over my brow.

“You’re kicking out our three children so that you can replace them with new ones?” I asked. Corsa’s brow creased, and she frowned prettily, holding out a dark orange vial of pheromones. I recoiled from it, forcing my interested mane to writhe behind my shoulders instead of reaching in its direction.

“Don’t be that way, Hunar. It’s how these things go, and we’ve both known that for a long time,” she said in a low, *reasonable* tone. “I’ve kept them for seventeen years. You *know* that’s well above and beyond most other women. I could have rightfully placed them in a guardianship while you were off serving on that vessel.”

“Yeah, instead you put them in temporary boarding schools where you didn’t have to think about them except on the weekends, spoiled our daughter, and deprived our boys. What’s the difference exactly?”

Corsa’s gentle features twisted with indignation.

Ah, yes.

The age old argument. I’d known it would make this ugly, but it was already as traumatic for the spats as it could be. What had our children endured during the satbit I’d been working, knowing they were being cast off to a baan that hadn’t really been there for them?

“She needs every advantage, Hunar!” Corsa yelled, her perfectly coiffed delicacy cracking apart as her voice rose in volume and octave. “So she can catch good men to—”

“What about Ladhraan and Tahavir?”

When she froze, having obviously not considered them, just as she *never* had, I threw down the bottle of pheromones and it shattered across the ground, filling the room with her scent. Reha screamed, Tahavir started keening, and Ladh

pulled his brother back behind a piece of luggage almost as tall as them. I looked at the names on the luggage. As expected, more than half of it was for our daughter. Every piece of her luggage was part of a matching designer set, while the boys' were scuffed hand-me-downs.

“How will they learn to be good men when you leave them scraps?”

Virhek growled, putting Corsa behind him just like any obedient coil fucking should, nearing a frenzy from her smell permeating the air. I bared my teeth.

Corsa bore her furious eyes into my face and pushed Virhek aside. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, the perfect image of feminine rage, as quiet and still as the eye of a storm. “That is *exactly* how they will learn to be good men, Hunar,” she said with finality.

Her words hit me like ice water and my jaw fell slack. Neither of us had ever been ideal parents, but *this*... It tore me in half. I twisted my tendrils hard to keep from keening in pain, staring down at the mess of broken glass and oil on the floor.

“That was your last dose. Don't come here again. You understand?” Corsa said, resuming her gentle, low tone.

Ladh shushed Tahavir, grabbing my attention. I couldn't take my eyes off Virhek, worried the newly coiled man might actually lunge at me in front of my brood, so I pushed it all down and slid back one step, glass crunching underfoot.

“Fine. Call a levicart. We'll be waiting in the lobby.”

I reached down to gently guide the back of Ladh and Tahavir's heads towards the door. They went without protest. It hissed open, and I reached my lower hand back towards Reha with a tight smile. “Come on, sweetheart.”

Our daughter hesitated, eyes bouncing between us.

“Maan?” she asked in a tiny voice, realizing just then that it was real. She was being set aside for a shiny new family.

Corsa smiled comfortingly at her, but the relief was evident in how wide it was, how it reached her eyes. “Go on, blossom. I’ll be alright. And you’ll grow up strong. Let’s get lunch sometime after you’re settled.”

What a crock of *sssshhit*. Corsa didn’t know my address or where I was working. She’d never asked, and it was obvious she wasn’t planning to. Not that I could tell her anyway.

With that, my horror-stricken daughter clutched her middle and hurried through the door without looking back. She’d been abandoned by her mother, and she knew it.

The door hissed shut behind the children, leaving me alone in the beautiful unit with the sunrise view.

“You need to move on,” Virhek warned, emboldened by the heavy dose of aphrodisiac pumping through his lungs. “You’ve been living off her coil for years. It’s pathetic.”

I considered violence, appraising the younger, more athletic man. Virhek was well-built, the sort of sculpted shape one got from exercise, not the real world. I could best him even as starved as I was, relying solely on the strength I’d earned in the hot core of a mission control center, the knots of muscle hard-won through labor and toil. In a fight, grizzle and pain tolerance trumped training every time.

But I blinked away the fantasy of ripping off the man’s *sentì* and shrugged. He was just another sorry boy being taken advantage of.

“Who’s living off who? I haven’t been interested in Corsa for years,” I gruffed with a dead smile. “But my will doesn’t mean shit compared to a coil. She can pull my strings and I have to obey. The expensive oils, the boarding schools, the unit you *fucking* live in... I had to work hard all these years so she’d keep our— *my* —spats,” I corrected myself with a human shake of my head. I dug my bronze eyes into Virhek’s sapphire ones with conviction. “So you remember, Virhek. How grey my colors are, how for *years* I’ve prolonged her coil so I

could have even just a speck of meaning in my spats' lives. And remember that she didn't turn me away until *you* pumped her full of pearls that stuck."

Corsa's beauty had completely fallen, her enormous silvery eyes transfixed and glistening with fury. Virhek wasn't posturing anymore either, or holding her quite as tightly. Good.

"Get out," she seethed.

"Don't forget the levicart," I reminded Virhek, ignoring my ex. "And congratulations on your impending fatherhood."

With that, I stepped out into the hallway and collected my three frightened children with a heavy heart.

03

) HUNAR (

By the time Virhek had sent down all their belongings on a levicart, I'd pried open a crate right in the middle of the grand entrance. The timid doorman had bumbled anxiously as I threw down the heavy lid and climbed right in, hefting luggage inside, optimizing every nook and cranny with care.

Sir, you can't do that here. This is a public walkway for residents. Sir, I need you to take your things outside. Do you have to make so much noise?

I'd make as much noise as I fucking wanted. Let all of Corsa's neighbors whisper and gossip.

Their belongings shipped to the secure tarmac for screening, I took them all outside for a "nice stroll downtown." We ate insta-cuis off the street—some universal fish pockets that smelled like warm rubber—while I searched the ancient, serpentine alleyways for the entrance to Ambassador Zufi's office. Tahavir was bouncing back, smiling now and then, looking at tourist trinkets along the main marketway. Ladh was still wary, though his brother pulled a little bit of light and sunshine out of him. When they laughed about some quick vid on their holotabs together, my tendrils twisted up with gratitude.

But Reha... She tossed her lunch in the trash and drowned me out with music.

I ignored it. I'd already made enough of a scene for one day. I didn't need to do it again. Let her rebel against life and loathe me for being her baan and just... get it all out.

I found the ambassador's office after that. An ancient clay building that had been patched countless times, the variable colors of river earth and plaster peeking through where a

wayward cart had bumped it during peak pedestrian hours. Rubber marks from a food delivery drone's bumpers marred the wall in blurry streaks, as if they'd tried to scrub it away with water, then just covered it with a shoddy layer of paint. I rolled my eyes inwardly. All it needed was degreaser, but some young, dumb office assistant hadn't thought to look that up on their holotab.

Columns had once framed the megalithic doors, but now just their capitals were left looming over the stairs, creating a shaded spot for journalists to gather like *shivies*. Of course, everyone knew Zufi was the point of contact for the human colony. I should have expected that.

"Excuse us," I gruffed. Several bystanders shuffled aside with mild curiosity. I glanced down at the bits of plaster beneath those old pillars and instinctively hovered three of my hands above my children's heads, half-expecting them to fall, even if no one else was concerned as they ate their lunches and checked their feeds.

"May I ask why you're stopping by the ambassador to Renata's office?" someone asked. A snap drone turned its camera towards us, and I clenched my jaw.

"What?" Reha asked, surfacing from her sulking playlist at the name of the infamous, secretive human colony.

"Janitor," I grunted, bodily moving a small man aside with a calloused grip on his shoulder. His tendrils writhed, tasting the oil and grease embedded in my palms from years of work, then scooted away. No one else asked questions as I ushered my spats through the thick, stone doors.

"But you're not a janitor," Tahavir astutely observed.

"What was he talking about?" Reha asked, looking up at me for the first time in hours. Maybe it was petty of me as her father, but I left her hanging. She'd find out soon enough, and now that we were inside, my nerves were showing in the tips of my mane.

Unlike the historic exterior, the lobby was sleek and officious. Flags hung from the ceilings, displaying all of Samridve's sister colonies around the galaxy, and the man behind the desk was dressed in a smart blue tabard and matching modesty hood to cover his tendrils. He smelled faintly of citrus oils and displayed his perfectly filed dental ridges in an almost human manner. I raised my brow. He needed more practice.

"Ah, Delegate Fareshi!" he greeted me. "It's such a pleasure to see you."

"Hi." I cleared my throat, glancing down at Reha and the boys. My brood's manes had fallen slack in shock. "I was hoping to talk with Ambassador Zufi today. Is he in?"

The clerk's smile froze in place, and he blinked once, trying desperately not to look down at the children. He smoothed the front of his tabard and drew up a holoscreen with a privacy filter, scrolling through his schedule. "Hmm, it seems like he has fifteen beats between comms this afternoon. I can see if he'd be willing to slot you in."

"Thanks. We'll wait."

"Wait for what? Baan!" Reha pulled on my hand, suddenly interested in what was happening.

"Later." I gestured to the sofa across from the front desk and the boys bounced onto the cushions, hyped. "For now, we wait."

And we did. For fucking *ever*. The spats were bored, especially when I refused to answer questions, but at least it gave me enough time to sever the link between Corsa and my cache accounts and take my name off of her unit's lease. When the home tower's AI requested my biometrics for confirmation, I excused myself to the bathroom, then remotely scanned my palm print and retinas. As bitter as I was, Reha and her brothers didn't need to see that.

When I returned to them, all three lounging across each other with a limb here, wayward tendrils there, comparing

media feeds and pondering what a “delegate” was, my heart felt lighter. *Springy* even. By taking myself off that lease, I could afford *real* stuff. No more insta-cuis or showing up in my work boots. I could get something nice to wear when I took them out. A tabard and dhoti, maybe. When was the last time I wore sandals?

“Delegate Fareshi? Ambassador Zufi will see you now.” The clerk leaned over his desk with a welcoming gesture towards the lift and my mood fell, tendrils cramping up again.

All of those little dreams were precarious though. If Zufi didn’t agree...

“Got it. Reha, Ladh, Taha, c’mon.”

They jumped up and ran to the lift, dancing on the balls of their feet. To their dismay though, the next clerk parked them on another sofa in another lobby, identical except with a view overlooking the old spice markets and their red awnings.

“Behave,” I told them, and they waved me off.

“We’ll be fine,” Ladh sighed.

“C’mon, Baan, you’re killing us,” Tahavir whined.

I grinned. “Later.”

Their collective groan gave me a chuckle I sorely needed before facing my... boss.

Zufi’s office was set up with traditional furnishings, the clay walls carefully carved with arches and geometric patterns; a low, faceted desk with three work surfaces set at a slant like a drafting table, thick floor cushions with more padding behind their circular seats to support the back, and intricately woven carpets that were so plush, my boots sank into them with each step.

“Hunar!” Zufi said, standing up from the floor with all four arms opened wide. The door closed with a soft hiss, and he ushered me in with a clap on the shoulder. I squinted at his baby-soft hands adorned with jewelry. “Sorry for the long wait, *syālī*. I’m glad you came by. Care for a drink?”

I blinked at him, taken aback by the honorific. “I’m younger than you,” I blurted gracelessly as he poured me a brimey over ice.

“Oh really?” He blinked in surprise, taking in my dull coloring with a sympathetic wince. “Apologies.” He added an extra dash of the grey liquor to a tiny copper cup and held it out to me. Though I wanted to toss it back in one gulp more with every passing moment, I took a dainty, civilized sip and cradled it in my meaty palms like it was a bird’s egg. He motioned for me to sit as he tapped the desk and its slant flattened out.

“You couldn’t have come at a better time. I was going to comm you tomorrow anyway.”

“What for?”

When the desk between us stopped moving, he pointed at a spread of holoscreens scattered across its backlit surface. I flipped one towards me with a familiar gesture.

DELEGATION TO RENATA
APPLICATION FOR ADMISSION

The blood drained from my mane as my eyes sped over the basics.

These were applications for *my job*.

“I don’t understand,” I breathed, crushing the copper cup in my lower hands as I slid another resume across the holoscreen, hoping my eyes were deceiving me.

Zufi lounged back on his cushion, upper arms splayed against the top while he laced his lower fingers together over his lap. “Well, I’m not an engineer, so I thought you might have insight into your replacement.”

“My what?” I snapped, mane roiling with unease. Zufi’s brow creased.

“Your replacement?” He leaned forward, setting one pair of elbows on the edge of his desk. “Hunar, your contract is up in three weeks.”

“But it can be renewed,” I insisted, letting the holoscreens float back towards the center of the desk.

“I was under the impression you don’t plan to fulfill the renewal requirements.”

Realization hit me like a cold wave. The delegation’s original contracts required us to pursue romantic partnerships to see if humans could induce a coil. Ezraji Zarabi, the medical delegate, had proven they could, and now he and Dr Ahlberg, his *priya*, were expecting spats. But when the humans in charge had found out about the fine print, they’d been livid. To keep the peace and salvage his diplomatic efforts, Zufi had agreed to take the clause out of our contracts.

Or so I thought.

“But... I thought the pursuit clause was removed. I approved an update to the terms of agreement months ago, and the other uncoiled delegates haven’t said anything about it.”

Zufi’s mane swayed back and forth with sympathy. “Special cases. Bajora is a test subject, and Piro’s family guarantees the media will behave as long as he’s in. Besides, he’s very diligent in his reports. The boy’s smitten with one of the human girls, so I’m expecting results.”

“But the update—”

“Stipulates that if you don’t meet the original terms, we’ll terminate your contract with the severance package we’d normally give you if we were at fault for the lapse. Going forward, there will be no pursuit clause.”

My jaw fell in utter disbelief. “Can I just sign the new contract then?” It seemed so obvious a solution, but before I’d even finished asking, Zufi pressed his lips together.

“I’m afraid not. It’s essential that I maintain a fair playing field.”

What he *meant* was that he still wanted delegates to pursue coils, but without saying the quiet part out loud. He didn't want a paper trail or publicity to hang his laurels on. He just wanted fucking results.

Zufi leaned in with that oily politician charm they all had, and his tendrils reached out to me in sympathy across the desk. "The word is out now that humans aren't gritty orange barbarians like their *fotoz* suggested in previous research. I can find delegates that have the proper training to protect them without strong-arming desperate people."

Well *that* fucking stung.

Screw civility. I guzzled the rest of my drink and slammed the cup down on the carpet.

"No. What you mean is you can find young men falling tendrils over foot to coil with them without having to state it."

Zufi opened his palms in agreement.

What was I going to do? *Chudthi*.

The spats were born seventeen years ago, and I'd immediately taken the highest paying position I could find, sold everything I owned, and visited during shore leaves. Corsa and my relationship degraded pretty quickly after that, and soon sleeping on the sofa turned into sleeping in bachelor dormitories instead. I didn't know anything about having a permanent life in Samridve anymore. School, housing, a new job... All in three weeks? It was impossible unless I agreed to send them to a guardianship. Which I absolutely fucking refused.

"I came by to see if I could get visas for my brood," I said, curling my lower hands into fists where he couldn't see, hoping the tension would travel there instead of my tendrils. I licked the corner of my mouth, trying to twist my words into something meaningful. Something that could save us. "They're a good age to integrate with the human children on a long-term basis." I glanced at Zufi to see if that ambiguous claim would catch his attention. He watched me intently, mane

stilled and focused. “And their mother and I split ways officially. I was hoping to make the situation more... permanent.”

Zufi was quiet for a heartbeat longer than was comfortable. He grunted thoughtfully, sitting back on his cushion, tapping one finger against his desk. “How many?”

Fuck me. “Two boys and a girl. Seventeen. Most of the human spats are about twelve. It equals out developmentally.”

He nodded slowly. “Right on the cusp of curiosity then.”

I winced. “Don’t remind me.”

He smiled, the first genuine expression I’d seen on him. Ever. “I have two broods myself. My oldest, all boys, are in their fifties now. The second set is in their thirties, finally. I don’t envy you.”

I thought of my spats and softened a little. “They’re alright.”

Zufi chuckled and poured me another drink. His smile faded as he took another sip of his own. “I’ll issue their visas for the next satbit, but I’m not budging on your contract, Hunar. You still have time to gain some ground on your... predicament. I expect to see results by the time I visit.”

He got to his feet, fingers flying over his holotab. Someone answered him as he spoke into the linguitor embedded behind his ear. “Pajri, issue three adolescent visas—yes, that’s them. You’ll coordinate with Delegate Fareshi on their vaccines and biometrics. Thank you.”

I stood with him, still cradling my liquor. In a smooth motion, I drank it down and set the cup on the corner of his desk. “When are you visiting?”

Zufi guided me to the doors. “Next week. I should pay my respects to Ezraji and his *priya* before their brood is born, don’t you think?” Zufi opened the door, smiled at my spats, and ushered me out. “Good luck.”

My tendrils went slack, stunned, as the door shut behind me.

Next week?

Ssshit.

04

› HUNAR ‹

I'd planned on spending the weekend in a small unit for short-term rent so the spats could enjoy looking out at Kāca Falls. It wasn't in the fanciest part of town, but the rusted balcony was overgrown with flowers and the cabinets were full of colorful handmade pottery instead of plas plates and bidents. It reminded me of the few things I remembered fondly from my own baan's home, so even if it wasn't perfect, it felt right.

But I'd had to swallow the loss to my credit cache and put us up in a hotel near Nilah Port instead so I could take care of visas, vaccines, security customs for all the luggage, and remove Corsa from my emergency contacts. We still had a view of the falls, *technically*, but we were so close that the window was sealed shut and mist doused the glass. A low rumble vibrated the walls from the force of the massive torrent, which meant that the walls and shelves were barren. The suite was as boring as spit.

I was beyond bitter. It had taken me *weeks* to settle on that ancient little unit. I'd wanted to make my visit special since Corsa hadn't let the spats stay with me during my visits. She'd always said it was easier for them to sleep at home and spend the days out.

Now I recognized it for what it was though. A control tactic. She'd wanted to monitor what they thought of me, and what they told me.

At least Tahavir and Reha had stopped asking me where we were going on the second day when I told them they should let their friends and extended family know they'd be out of comm range for a while. Ladh, much more obedient than his brother and sister, hadn't asked since we'd gone to Zufi's office. But at that news, even his big blue eyes had

flown open in shock. For the next several hours, I'd enjoyed a nap while they commed everyone they knew, gossiping about going off-world on an ISU vessel or maybe even to Dharatee...

If I weren't so overwhelmed, I might have found dodging their questions and eavesdropping to be fun.

The next morning, Piro met us at the transpo, the crate of luggage already loaded. He was dressed from head-to-toe in the port's lime green rubber coveralls to keep the worst of the falls' mist from drenching his pilot's uniform but pushed up his visor as soon as he saw us.

"Come on, everyone, before you get drenched!"

Piro waved my brood into the transpo with a holobaton that cut through the heavy water, all according to regulation.

The boy really was a by-the-book golden child.

"Can you tell us *now*, Baan?" Tahavir asked, tossing off his poncho as the other two stomped their shoes on the grated floor. I collected all the rain gear, shoved it in a "Wets" bag and tossed it in an overhead net.

"Not until we're out of civilian space, son," I told him with the ghost of a smile. Could they see the dark rings beneath my eyes? I could feel them, heavy and weighing me down.

"He doesn't want us snitching on our holotabs," Reha pronounced, huffing into a seat. Ladh helped the others figure out how to put on their harnesses as Piro jogged up the ramp.

"Is there enough space? I collapsed the port-side seats last night so the crate would fit," he asked quietly, locking the doors. I grunted in approval.

"Thanks," I told him with a hiss of my mane. He pulled off his visor and hood and gave me a relieved smile as he unlatched the coveralls and let them drop to the floor.

"No problem, *syalī*."

“You go ahead and get the bird airborne. I’ll bag those up and check the lashing.”

Piro greeted the spats as he squeezed by, making sure he knew their names. When he asked Reha, she did a double-take, her mane scrunching up with embarrassment.

“Hi...” she managed, enthralled with his rare lavender coloring and bright, handsome smile. Reha’s speckled markings glowed just a touch of pink against her turquoise cheeks and tendril tips.

Oblivious, Piro checked her harness. “Make sure you’re strapped in, okay? This tarmac gets a lot of turbulence on takeoff.” The lieutenant pilot then bounded into the cockpit, grabbed the bar above the seat, and vaulted into place. Reha followed his every move, staring at the back of his head with a look of adolescent wonder.

“Ew, stop staring so hard, you’ll pop a blood vessel,” Tahavir teased.

Reha snapped her head away and scoffed. “I’m *not* staring!”

“Are too.”

“Public comm access requested.”

The transpo’s AI cut through the argument before it could begin, speaking directly into our linguitors. I accepted the request on my holotab and the others followed suit, surprised by the sudden inner ear sound.

“Secure transports do direct linguitor interfacing,” I told them just before Piro’s voice hit our ears.

“Heads up, we’re going to lurch here in about ten bits. Weight distribution will pitch us hard to the left for a few seconds while the transpo calibrates. So keep your eyes straight ahead and hold onto your straps!”

“He’s not kiddin’. Hold on tight,” I reinforced. Immediately, they all sat ramrod straight and clutched their harnesses.

And when the jolt came, my whole brood screamed like they were on an amusement ride. I grinned, loving that sound.

))

“Baan.” Ladh shook my shoulder. “Baaaaaan. Wake up.”

“Wake up! Wake up!” Tahavir sang.

I winced, pressing my tendrils against my ear. “What?” The gravel that tumbled out of my throat was barely discernible, but the spats hauled me to wakefulness regardless. I opened my eyes wide and stretched my neck. “What is it?”

“Piro said we’re out of civilian space,” Reha explained.

“Which means you can *finally* tell us where we’re going!”

I groaned as each of my vertebra popped, all the way between both sets of my shoulder blades. I was getting too old to fall asleep in a transpo harness, but was also too old to stay awake.

“Renata,” I grunted, pressing my linguitor. “*Comm Piro.*”
Beep.

“What’s up, *syālī?*”

“Did you just say Renata?!” Reha gasped. “As in *the* Renata?!”

“How far are we?” I asked Piro, holding up my hand to keep the spats from screaming.

“Spats woke you up, huh?” Piro laughed. “I kept it quiet as long as I could. We’re about ten minutes out.”

When Bree guided us in with her four-armed coveralls tied around her waist like usual, the spats *did* scream, staring at her through the windows like she was a celebrity. I warned them to behave as Piro lowered the ramp inside the hangar, but the excitement was too much. They bounced down the ramp as

if they had one mind like the brood they were, and Aavar waved.

I rolled my eyes as Reha stopped short, jaw slack. She looked back at Piro, then at Aavar, her immature markings glowing pink again.

“Wait, you’re *Aavar!* I can’t believe you’re standing right in front of me!”

The chief pilot put his upper hands on his neckline, lower hands on his hips and wagged his brow. “Better believe it.”

Then Reha glanced up at me with confusion. “This *can’t* be real. Right?”

“You’re old baan isn’t as boring as you thought, huh?”

“Huh?”

She wasn’t listening to me at all, having been completely bulldozed by the pain in my ass who was currently showing my sons how to perform a human handshake.

Aavar butted in, noting the awkward exchange. He was always in tune with spats. “Anyway, welcome to Renata! I *swear* the humans aren’t grimy weirdos.”

“Yeah...” she mumbled, staring at the half of his head that was painted with little human patterns. They changed almost every day, and I’d bet half my salary that my daughter knew every single doodle Bree had ever drawn on the knucklehead’s old prosthetic jacks.

Not that I could blame her. Female shilpakaari matured more quickly, and she was right at that age where she started to notice the contrast between both younger men’s coloring and markings. They were pastel with jewel-toned stripes, Aavar’s being spring green and garnet red. And considering his *priya*, my mechanic-in-training, was a perfect match for his infuriating flavor of humor, his red stripes glowed with virility from her constant attention.

Speaking of...

“Hey, welcome home, Hunar!” Bree said, slapping the transpo’s hull as she rounded the corner and deactivated her holobaton.

Aavar pointed at her with two finger guns. “Except this one. She’s *definitely* a grimy weirdo.”

Bree smacked his stomach with her wrench and beamed down at the spats as he groaned. “Don’t listen to him. I swear I shower.”

Aavar’s half mane hissed with amusement, roping itself around her forearm as she leaned her weight up on his much higher shoulder. His eyes left the spats, entirely enthralled by her sweaty taste in his pores.

“Watch it,” I warned, acting the boss. Aavar glanced back down at the spats and winked at Reha, taking a step away from his *priya*. Her tendrils curled at the tips, pleased, as Bree leaned her palms on her knees to look them all in the eye.

“I’m Bree, what’re your names?”

“*You’re* Bree?” Reha asked, looking the woman up and down. “The human that runs the Renata media feed?”

“Yup!” she said, wiping at a smudge of oil on her cheek. The tip of her nose was burnt from the sun, and her hair was matted and falling crooked in its *poneetayil*. “I usually take one of those showers I mentioned before posting snaps though. Can’t post anything in the hangar for security reasons.”

“But—” Reha squinted, looking between the lovebirds, and I pulled the brood away, feeling an insulting adolescent observation right on the tip of her tongue. We said our goodbyes as they unloaded our crate, then I checked in with Bajora and ushered them out through the yawning hangar doors.

“Are they encoiled?” Reha asked bluntly as we walked down the footpaths towards the home towers.

“That’s right,” I confirmed, my chest tight. “You didn’t see that on the Renata feed?”

“I saw that they were *flirting*,” she huffed, brow creased. “Why would Aavar coil with a human covered in engine oil all the time? Doesn’t it taste gross?”

I choked on my own spit. Reha brought up a coil’s taste without so much as a blink of an eye? The boys were suddenly quiet too, listening.

Damn it to the abyss. This was “the” talk, wasn’t it?

I cleared my throat... again. “Well, they love each other. Coiling is about more than what your partner, uh, tastes like.”

“But that’s the biggest thing, right?” Reha pushed.

I shook my head, and if my *senti* weren’t already shriveling against the back of my head, it would have retreated like we were swimming in cold waters.

“Trust is the biggest thing. Your coil should be your partner... Not a servant.” I said the last part quietly, hoping that the bitterness of the last few days was well hidden. “For example, Bree is Aavar’s mechanic, and he’s teaching her how to drive a needle so they can go on trail rides.”

“So you should work together?”

Fuck.

“Uh, no. Not usually. But you should have shared goals other than—” I sighed. This was the worst conversation of my life, and considering the weekend we’d had, that was a high bar to clear. “Other than sex.”

“Ew,” Tahavir shuddered.

I absolutely agreed. Never again in my life did I ever, *ever* want to talk about Bree and Aavar’s sex life with my spats.

Reha walked in contemplative silence, staring at the muddy grooves in the footpaths left behind by the recent rainy season. She looked like she might ask me more questions at any moment.

To my utter relief, the few human adults we passed stole her attention instead. I made a point of saying hello to one.

Her name was... *Shivies-on*. Or *Sawn*...?

Obviously, I couldn't remember, but she smiled and said hello, waving at my brood. They waved back, Ladh walking backwards to watch her go, his tendrils bunching up with bashfulness.

Pride washed over me. Maybe the weekend was real shit, but today would be a core memory. I hoped it would overshadow the pain and loneliness they felt over time. It fell on my shoulders to make their new home a positive place so it could outshine what they'd left behind.

A thought that instantly made me feel inadequate the moment I opened the door to my unit.

Stale air billowed into the hallway, the thermostat having just turned back on after three days in stasis. This was technically my unit, but I didn't really *live* here. I groomed. I cleaned my clothes in the wardrobe. I slept. But every moment of my waking day was spent working, coordinating, reviewing, approving, repairing... If I wasn't working as the sole domestic engineer for the three home towers and over a thousand residents, I was maintaining surveillance microdrones for Imani James, the human woman in charge of security. I left the hangar at the "end" of the workday, but then spent most of the evening filing reports, checking in with Imani, and generally just *numb*.

Which was real fuckin' obvious by the state of my unit.

As in, the plas film was still stuck to the chrome front of the cabinets despite the pile of dirty coveralls draped over the counter where I usually stripped down to my briefs. I motioned to the spats' shoes, and they toed them off by the door, the glimmer in their eyes dulling with disappointment.

"This is a temporary unit," I lied, desperate to salvage their excitement. "We just need to stay here a few weeks, then we'll be moving into a family unit." *As long as Zufi renews my contract*. "All the luggage will arrive soon, so let the drone in,

and eat whatever you want from the food bay. There's also human media streams on the main holoscreen."

"We can't go out and play? There are human spats playing with a ball," Tahavir asked, opening the balcony to the late afternoon.

"Maan would let us play in the neighborhood by ourselves," Ladh added.

"Yeah, well, me too," I said a little too forcefully. Taking a deep breath, I continued more calmly. "Just not until your vaccine course is complete. Ezra will stop by tonight to check, then tomorrow, you can go out and play. If he clears you."

"What about you?" Reha questioned.

"I have to work for a bit. Your room is the first on the right, by the way."

"As in we're all sharing?"

It's not like I'd known they'd be living with me, so *yeah*, they were sharing. "For now."

"Great."

Reha collapsed onto the sofa beside Ladh, and Tahavir dragged a rug out onto the balcony to soak up the jungle air and sunshine. He was also preemptively escaping any bickering the other two might get tangled up in.

Smart spat.

I left with a half-hearted wave, called the lift, and slumped into the corner as its doors closed.

There was so much to do. I needed to stop by the clinic to get coil withdrawal meds, add the spats' biometrics to the access panels, get them fobs for the home tower entrances, and check for emergency work orders. All before dinner in three turns.

I groaned into my hands as the lift slowed. The exhaustion was so much more than the work I had this afternoon. Bigger, scarier, just now sinking in... I suddenly had to be a father,

every day, every night, all the time. The visitation was permanent.

And I had no idea what I was doing.

“So you do twinkle lights too!” I gasped.

Naitee giggled, sitting on my sofa with reindeer antlers perched on her head. She was struggling to cut a snowflake out of a folded piece of glittery white plastic as her shoulders shook. “Of course! Have you ever met an Indian that *doesn't* use every excuse to put up colorful lights?”

Omi tossed a glittery blue snowflake on our growing pile and downed the dregs of her coconut pineapple rum drink. I'd gotten pretty good at making her fake cocktails, but I stayed away from them myself. All the juice tasted too smooth, as if it all came from concentrate. Which it did, since food bays manufactured cooked foods a lot like a 3D printer.

The Santa hat dutifully balanced on Omi's large topknot of box braids flopped in her eyes as she set the empty glass down on the floor by her chair. “Yeah, Tinsley!” she hiccuped in her syrupy Jamaican accent. “*Ah course*, everyone likes colorful lights. You can't go wrong.”

“Samridve has a festival of lights too,” Piro added. He wore a headband with a little present on top like a fascinator, carefully nestled between his tendrils, and stuck his tongue out one side of his mouth in concentration as he cut his own snowflakes, one for each pair of hands. Thanks to him, we'd been able to make a big dent in our quota for the home tower lobbies and the school pod. “Actually, I think *most* species have some sort of festival of lights.”

Omi and Naitee both gestured at him, their eyebrows raised as if to say, *see?*

I bit my lip to keep from laughing and shrugged. “Hey, how would I know? I'd never left Ontario. Total homebody,

guilty as charged!”

“They don’t look like that though,” Piro said, motioning to the strings of colorful lights adorning the outside of Danny DeVito’s home in *Deck the Halls*, a festive classic about neighborhood dads duking it out. When I was a teen, my dad and I would watch it every year to get jazzed up before hanging our own lights outside the house. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen lights on a rope.”

“Guess it’s a human thing.” My stomach grumbled as I got to my feet and stretched my arms up high, a draft of cold air hitting my stomach as my ugly green sweater lifted above the waistband of my pants. I sighed happily, pranced off to the printer bay nestled in the hallway, scooped up the glittery plas sheets that had floated to the floor, and placed them in a bin.

Then I put my hands on my hips with confusion. The custom Santa hats and festive headbands that I’d painstakingly designed the day before littered the ground, ready to be dished out to the teachers at the school pod, but my spray cans of biodegradable glitter and colorful baubles that *kind of* looked like Christmas tree ornaments were missing. I glanced at the queue on the printer’s holoscreen...

And winced.

I had absolutely no credits left to my name for another two weeks when our living stipends were deposited into our accounts, and the queue was still as long as my arm.

“*Watstakats*,” I whisper-swore, gnawing on my lip. That meant I also didn’t have any cache for my food bay. I may have hated the infernal machines, but I still needed to eat. Maybe I had some leftovers...

“Need help?” Omi asked. I squeaked, turning on my knee as I picked up a handful of red hats with white pom poms. My butt hit the door to her old room and it slid open. She looked inside at the clutter of decorations and balked.

There was *so much stuff*. Garlands, cut-glass-looking cups and platters, lengths of fabric to use as table cloths, giant

red bows, tinsel, these weird fake ferns that kinda looked like poinsettias if they were long and spindly like spider plants... My former roomie squinted with suspicion, crossing her arms as she calculated the cost of my treasure trove.

“Oops!”

I scooted my butt out of the way of the door with a sheepish chuckle. It immediately hissed shut, but Omi was *way* too perceptive. She was a business owner back on Earth, just like I had been.

Except that she didn't have a serious holiday addiction.

“That's a *lot* of stuff, Tin,” she said warily.

“I've been printing ever since you moved in with Siatesh,” I said, rising to my feet and dusting my hands off on my thighs. I gave her a bright, easy smile. “So don't worry!”

“But ya been fronting the cost, right? Tinsley—”

I hefted the container into my hands and jugged my chin towards the living room, interrupting her before she could state the worry written all over her face. “What! It's nothing. Besides, you know this is my favorite holiday.”

Omi let me push her out into the living room again with a roll of her eyes. “It's a *lot* of people's favorite holiday, Tinsley. If people knew it was coming, they'd want to pitch in.”

Yesss. A topical escape route!

“Which,” I set the container on the floor by the sofa and swirled back around with my pointer finger in the air, “is *exactly* why I put up a note yesterday morning for whoever's behind the Renata Rag!”

“Oh, is there a new one already? I thought it wouldn't come out for a few more days,” Naitee asked from her seat next to Piro. He was still concentrating, bent over his work.

“Nope!” I said, popping my lips together. “But I left a note on the lobby door for them to ask for volunteers. With

any luck, I'll be flush with Santa's little helpers before next week."

I grinned at Omi. *Suck it.* The corner of her mouth turned up and she shook her head with amusement, taking out the last stack of plas to cut. "Want to mix it up?" she asked, plopping back into her chair. "Snowmen and stars maybe?"

"And candy canes," I agreed.

I sat down on the ground by the box and dished out fresh sheets, thinking about how we could manage red scarves and black hats on the snowmen. Then I paused, remembering the ugly scarf I'd made for Adam the night I'd been abducted, and I brushed my fingertips across the leg of my pants, pretending I could still feel the soft fleecy fabric. My smile drew inward as I took a deep breath, wishing more than anything that the aroma of warm cinnamon and apples filled the air instead of warm plastic.

"What do you think, Naitee?" Piro asked, unfolding his two newest snowflakes. He held them both aloft, the one in his lower hands smaller but incredibly intricate with two miniature pinwheels interrupting the pattern. Naitee leaned in to get a better look at them, her knee bumping against his, and her face brightened, a sheet of long, straight black hair falling over her shoulder towards him.

"Piro, it's incredible! I've never seen snowflakes that pretty. How did you do that?"

"Just..." He cleared his throat, eyes stuck on where her long hair drifted against his upper elbow. A few of his tendrils drifted towards her in a hypnotizing swirl. "Just refolded them a couple times."

She smiled at me, bobbing her head from side to side merrily. "Can I keep it? After the festival, of course."

"Pfft, duh," I agreed immediately.

The marigold stripes on the undersides of Piro's periwinkle tendrils and forearms flashed in a wave of bright

salmony orange. He jolted to his feet, breathing hard, and clapped all four hands over his mane to keep it from writhing.

“Are you okay?” Naitee asked, her smile fading with concern.

Piro blinked his big sapphire eyes at her, slitted nostrils flaring like gills, and licked his lip. “Just, ah, suddenly so... so thirsty. Y-you want some water? I’ll get us all water.”

Before she could answer, he marched into the kitchen like a robot. Omi and I exchanged a knowing look as Naitee’s eyes followed him. Ah, young love. Poor Naitee had to be as romantically dense as a brick if she didn’t know how far Piro had fallen for her. She picked up his snowflakes and slipped them into our finished pile with care.

“So, Tinsley, what else do you have planned other than hoarding decorations?” Omi asked, pulling Naitee’s focus away from our struggling friend as he guzzled water.

I stuck my tongue out at her but preened on my seat bones. Plans? Oh, I had *plans*.

“Well, first of all, decorate the elevators, the lobbies, and the school pod. Then tomorrow, I’m going to the hangar to pick up some deliveries and get BEO to play holiday music. And I got biodegradable glitter spray!” This got me bouncing with excitement. “It’s for plants, and comes in white, so I’m going to spray all the ferns around the buildings and the playfield to make them sparkle with frost. Oh, and a five-meter tall Christmas tree, a gift exchange, a potluck party... and twinkle lights!”

My eyes gleamed as I pictured how the whole festival would look. I had so much to do, but it was completely possible with a little community effort. Three weeks wasn’t much, but I was rocket fuel in a tiny package. *Nohkōmipan* did always say productivity was good for the soul, and Renatans were still on the mend.

“Hunar can take care of BEO for you,” Piro chimed in, his mane tied back now in a thick band, and set a tray of water

glasses on the coffee table. His tendrils crawled over his shoulders in Naitee's direction but couldn't get close enough to touch her.

"No need! Sizzle told me he's on vacation anyway," I practically sang. It was *perfect*. I wouldn't have to deal with Scrooge McAsshat if he wasn't in the colony. Even if he *was* the colony's chief engineer. All I had to do was get Imani, the head of security, to approve whatever I asked Bajora to do for me. It might be a few extra steps, but it'd be worth it.

Hunar and I did *not* mix well. I was collaborative and energetic. A glass half-full kinda person. He was... not. He was impatient and rough and had *no* tact—

"No, he isn't! He came back with me this afternoon."

I grimaced, my half-finished snowflake plopping down on my lap with the scissors still stuck in place.

"And the bigger stuff like the, ah, *Krismis* tree?" Piro continued. "I don't think we have that species, but the industrial printing bay is definitely better than trying to do it at home. Way bigger and faster."

"That so?" I screwed up my nose, focusing too hard on the corner of a snowman's hand. Omi stared lasers into the side of my head and my scissors slipped, cutting off all the fingers on one twig hand except the middle one. *Oops*.

"Oh yeah," Piro said, a little of his flustered blush receding as he straightened his shoulders and cut out some stars from scrap plas. He smiled, blindingly handsome and soft as always. "And Hunar's budget for that thing is pretty much endless. He printed the clinic and school pods on it, did you know that? It's state-of-the-art. There are only a handful of people that are even trained on something like that."

Omi burst into laughter at my scowl. I threw scraps at her and slumped back against the chair with a huff. Piro tilted his head like a puppy, good-natured confusion scrawled across his face. He blinked down at my ruined snowman and his smile returned.

“Want me to make that into some stars?”

“Knock yourself out.” I handed the mangled plas to him and he wriggled on his butt with satisfaction, lifting his scissors and getting back to work. I exhaled, my excitement deflating as I thought of all the things I’d planned, now blocked by the smug shadow of that stupid shilpakaar...

Could I give up the tree? I thought so... We could make one out of red ferns and hang baubles off it. It might not feel quite like Christmas this year, but over time it would become our own tradition. That was the point of all this anyway, wasn’t it? To foster a strong community?

I also had all the ornaments to print still. And dishes, glasses, tablecloths, wrapping paper... All of that could be done by volunteers in small batches though. It’d take more effort to coordinate but still, totally doable.

Then my eyes drifted to a bowl of failed experiments on the counter and my stomach plummeted. The one thing I couldn’t do on my own was twinkle lights. I’d tried to do it myself—how hard could making a simple little light bulb be? But no matter how many DIY tutorials in our internet archive I tried, the materials out here just weren’t the same.

I thought of my dad stringing up lights in his toque and work boots and bit back tears. I *had* to try harder for twinkle lights. I needed...

“Damn it,” I whined to myself. Omi gave me a little pat on the back and a low hum of encouragement.

“He’s not that bad,” she murmured. “Remember how he got ya waders that actually fit? Otherwise you’d be swept away in the rains like a bucket.”

Yeah, he bought me waders... *after* yelling at me about having a tantrum around dangerous plasma discharge pipes. My cheeks blistered with embarrassment remembering the whole thing.

But this was bigger than me. This was a chance for *everyone* to come together and celebrate.

I took a fortifying breath and nodded once. “You’re right. I can win him over for sure.”

“Das di spirit,” Omi crooned, falling into her native Patois and rolling my shoulders with a little dance. I giggled as my reindeer antlers wobbled. “No one alive can resist my Tinsley’s cute smile.”

“That’s right!” I agreed. “Not even Scrooge McAsshat!”

“Who?” Piro asked.

Omi and I looked at him for a heartbeat, then laughed. Even Naitee giggled.

Omi had that magic that made everyone see the best in themselves, and she was right this time too. My nerves were just acting up.

I could *totally* win Hunar over.

06

) TINSLEY (

There was a bounce in my step as I climbed the footpath up to the hangar in the jungle steam the next day, despite how tired I felt. I'd stayed up half the night after Piro and Naitee left, working on getting that warm mulled cider smell into my unit. Omi and Siatesh lived just a couple floors away, so she'd let me print a whole tub of potential ingredients.

Already cooked, universal ingredients that were a total crapshoot, but still. I got pretty close!

Siatesh suggested a citrus drink that tasted a lot like spicy pineapples, and a grilled Yaspurian fruit called a *plurhurrbidoo*... That's not what it was actually called, but my tongue tied up every time I tried to fit the word in my mouth. It wasn't so much a fruit as a hollow mushroom with juicy pulp on the inside. When I gently crushed the pulp against the roof of my mouth, I tasted honeysuckle and simple syrup. Together with the spicy pineapple juice, it tasted a whole lot like your basic store bought apple cider.

I expected the spices to be a lot tougher. Nutmeg with its earthy sweetness, the licorice bite of star anise, cloves and their pungent, bitter kick... How could I ever find spices that compared to some of Earth's rarest and most sought-after edible sensations? Wars had been waged over them, entire civilizations built upon their backs and then destroyed.

But I'd sorely underestimated our shilpakaari hosts. They loved their spices just as much as us humans, and when Siatesh opened the holomarket to show me my options, my jaw hit the floor. I scoured the listings for hours, reading the taste profile of each spice.

After midnight, I'd finally settled on what I wanted to use. Omi ushered me out the door with a yawn and a threat that if I

didn't share whatever strange creation I came up with, she'd come collect, then I'd hustled back to my own unit and played Mad Scientist until dawn.

Now, nearly lunch, I clasped a jar of universal mulled cider in my hands like a vigil candle and hoped, hoped, *hoped*, that Hunar would be inspired when he tasted it. I stopped outside of the open hangar doors to catch my breath. I checked that my reindeer antlers were on straight and that I hadn't smooshed the pretty green ribbon and snowflake with which I'd decorated the jar with my clammy hands.

"Stop stalling," I huffed at myself. I closed my eyes, sighed to wash away the nerves, and walked in like I owned the place.

Which was unnecessary, because the place was abandoned. No Bree swearing and throwing her tools around. No classic rock or shilpakaari pop echoing down from the PA system. Everyone must have gone to lunch, which meant I'd have to loiter like a weirdo.

At least it wasn't stuffy inside despite the lack of a natural breeze. Big, lazy fan blades set in the ceiling ensured the air didn't hang thick with humidity, but condensation still clung to the metal walls from the morning.

Too busy running my fingers over the chilly metal walls, I slipped on a dollop of oil and squeaked, grabbing hold of a shelving unit. A canister of jittery screws wobbled off the shelf with a sharp clatter so loud that I winced, the screws skittering across the grated floors in all directions.

"Really?" I whined, admonishing myself. Suddenly, I didn't mind so much that I'd have to wait. I could clean it up before Hunar got back from break. No harm, no foul, right? I crouched down, set aside my peace offering, and scooped up the biggest pile of screws in both hands.

"What are you doing?"

A pair of old, scruffy work boots with beige coveralls tucked into the toppers stopped a foot away from my mess.

My guilty stare traveled all the way up two sets of crossed arms, a mane twitching with annoyance, and the sharp, greying features of the chief engineer.

I grimaced with a smile. “Hi, Hunar.”

“Miss Tinsley.”

It wasn't a greeting, but a warning. I got to my feet, still cradling the tiny pile of screws. “I, uh, didn't mean to? I slipped on some oil.”

Hunar scanned the floor, then his mane rumbled with a sigh as he reached into one of the hangar's red lockers and pulled out a long metal pole. He pressed a button and swept it across the floor, gathering all the loose screws. He held the pole over the canister, pressed the button again, and all the screws fell back inside. I picked it up as I stood, and he slapped the lid back on. He tossed it on the shelf with a resounding gong, his huge bronze eyes never leaving my face.

“Why are you here?”

Ouch.

“Well... Piro told me you'd be able to help me with something.” I rocked onto my toes, trying to seem taller as Hunar squinted with suspicion. Shilpakaari had ovoid eyes three times the size of humans. Their pupils were striped, and they could have as many as five in each orb. Staring contests were a bit unnerving, and I squirmed. Hunar's striped glare narrowed, but he shoved the magnetic pole back in its locker and waved me into the engineering lounge anyway. I breathed a sigh of relief as I slid my jar of cider back into my hands and followed, a trickle of nervous sweat inching down my neck.

Hunar wasn't the tallest shilpakaar, nor the brightest in coloring... Actually, he was the shortest and greyest of them all. I'd never seen the color of his stripes, even though the others looked like precious stones when the sun glanced off their skin. Instead, his markings were a cloudy, muddy pink and his turquoise skin was ashy and dry... Like an old car with

murky headlights and peeling paint that had just rolled over its odometer for the second time.

But he was *thick*. His palms, his mane, his neck, his shoulders. Even if he never quite stood up straight, he moved with the grace of a retired athlete. And that mane of his was strong despite that it only reached his collarbones, wrinkling where it twisted over itself. I'd put money on Hunar against even Siatesh, who'd been an enslaved killer for decades before falling into Omi's coil.

"You can submit a work order on that holoscreen," he said, gesturing to a standing terminal tucked into the corner on top of a tool cabinet. Hunar returned to his workbench and reached for what looked like a multi-jointed pen with a red-hot tip.

"Actually!" Hunar looked up at the ceiling, sighed, and turned around on his stool. I gave him a sheepish smile. "I was hoping, maybe, we could talk?" I held out the jar, its green ribbon now askew. He creased his brow.

"What is that?" he asked with supreme suspicion.

I blinked at it. "It's a gift."

"A gift."

"Yeah! You know, like a peace offering. I, um, made it last night. It's a human drink with universal ingredients."

Good job, Tin, real smooth.

When I didn't lower my hand, Hunar reached forward and took the jar with so much care, you'd think it was a live grenade. With exactly zero enthusiasm, he set it on the windowsill and my spirits dropped a little further. So I smiled wider. I had a mission, and it wasn't to impress my arch nemesis with my DIY food bay usage. No, it was to make Hunar feel *obligated*.

"It tastes best when it's warm," I instructed.

"Fine. Thank you. Now, what do you want?"

It was now or never. I needed to ease him into it. Small stuff first, then the biggies.

“Yes! Okay. I’m organizing a human holiday called Christmas, and I’d like to have BEO play some music in the home tower lobbies. I have a playlist ready to go!”

Hunar opened the holotab in his forearm and it scanned his eye. The colony’s AI beeped.

“Good morning, Chief Engineer Fareshi,” BEO’s smooth Old World voice greeted him. “How can I help you?”

“I’ve got music for you to play in the home tower lobbies.” He gestured to me, and I sprang forward, opening my own holotab. “Miss Tinsley Adams will relay it to you now.”

“Excellent.”

“Hey, BEO!” I said, waving unnecessarily.

“Hello.”

“Can you play my playlist called *Santa Shenanigans* in the home tower lobbies and lifts for the next three weeks?”

“Accessing... Yes, your music is now playing in all lobbies and lifts.”

I beamed at Hunar’s holotab as if BEO could actually see me. “Thank you!”

Hunar closed his holotab, pressed his lips together in a mirthless smile and gestured back towards the hangar doors. “You’re welcome. Now, if that’s all, I have a lot of—”

My smile turned sheepish. I laced my fingers together in front of my chest in a pleading gesture and sucked in a breath. “Actually...”

“Seas save me,” Hunar groaned.

I could feel his attention and patience slipping away, so I leaned into the puppy dog eyes and the frail little human act, hunching my shoulders with a bereft flutter of my lashes. “It’s

just, I have so many things to print and Piro said you'd be able to help!"

"So many things? *What* things?" he asked with a sharp snap of his dental ridges. "The industrial printing bay is for colony infrastructure only."

I bounced up, grabbing onto that. "It is! Infrastructure I mean."

He crossed his arms and raised one brow, waiting for me to elaborate.

"...cultural infrastructure?"

Hunar's tendrils hissed as he rolled back around to face his workbench. "Unbelievable—"

"It is though! Holidays are important! They build community and tradition and give people hope—"

"So build it yourself, Miss Tinsley." Scrooge McAsshat picked up his spindly, smoldering pen arm thing and hunched over a circuit.

"I have been! I've been working really h—"

"I don't have time!" Hunar growled, cutting me off with a sharp glare over his shoulder. "I need that bay to stay open and loaded. What if we have an emergency and need to print triage pods? Or rebuild someone's unit after a fire? Replace a burst pipe? *That's* what my printing bay is for, not arts and crafts projects."

I bit my lip as angry fire boiled in my gut, staring daggers straight through the stupid jerk's mane. But unlike every other time we'd ever talked, I needed to stay cool. Focused. I had a mission, and Christmas wasn't gonna *craft* itself, at least not now that I didn't even have cache to replenish my food bay with.

I put on my big girl boots and used a calm, serene voice. "Maybe we can compromise, Hunar. It's not that big of a project—"

Bizz 't. A glittery spark erupted beneath his little pen tool.

“Fuck!”

Hunar threw down his work and whipped towards me with two right fingers pointed in my face like a human. He stood, chartreuse blood dripping from the back of his hand, and I instantly gasped, both hands up. “Oh my god, are you okay?!”

“I told you I don’t have time. If I did, maybe I’d help, but Zufi is breathing down my *fucking* mane, and I can’t juggle it all while you’re nipping at my ankles and telling me to ‘just compromise!’” His tendrils growled low like a crocodile, visibly pulsating with fury, and the hair on my forearms rose in alarm.

I clenched my jaw, eyes stinging. My chest was so tight that my inhale of breath was more of a shuddering hiccup. I wasn’t going to cry, absolutely not. I’d known asking Hunar was a long shot, and now I just knew it was a lost cause.

“Thanks for your time. I know how busy you always are,” I croaked, looking up at the fan swirling meters above us to keep the tears from falling. “Anyway, enjoy the cider. I hope you like it.”

Before he could respond, I turned so he wouldn’t see the fat tear race down my cheek, and I rushed past the lockers.

Defeated.

As soon as Tinsley disappeared into the shelving, I slumped into one of the break chairs with a groan. My mane fell lifeless around me, ashamed for blowing up in her face. It wasn't her fault that her reasonable tone of voice had short-circuited my temper. It was Corsa, the way she'd goaded me for years with that syrupy fakeness that made me feel like asking her to give an inch was selfish.

Not to mention the coil withdrawal marching at a steady beat beneath my skin. My fingers and tendrils tingled, even if I was on meds to mitigate the symptoms. Sure, I'd been strung out on Corsa's pheromones for years, barely scraping by, but I hadn't suffered from withdrawal for decades either. A healthier man would've been able to bounce back in no time. Me? I was a wreck.

Familiar boots strutted into the engineering lounge as Bajora cocked one hip, gesturing off towards the hangar doors with a piqued expression. "I leave you alone for one lunch break and you yell at one of the humans?"

"It was Tinsley," I grumbled, leaning my upper elbows against the worn yellow table.

The culinary engineer shrugged. "So?"

Frustration compressed a huff right out of my chest as the vice of guilt tightened on my ribcage. I laced my upper hands together above the table and leaned my forehead against my knuckles. "I can't handle another fight right now, Bajora, so just leave it."

"Why should I? Someone has to hold you accountable for being a *Skhrooj M'gess Het*, and Bree's not here to do it."

“What the fuck is that?”

“It’s what Tinsley calls you. Means you’re a killjoy. And she’s right.” He tossed down his bag and powered up the food bay on his workbench with an irritated flick of his finger.

“Corsa’s having some poor boy’s brood and kicked our spats out to make room,” I bit out, baring my teeth.

Bajora turned his shocked stare on me. I sat back in my chair, arms falling limp in my lap as I met his indignant fury with my own numb exhaustion. “I’m in withdrawal and my contract is expiring. I’ll have three spats, no job, and no place to live in the next few weeks.”

“But the pursuit clause was terminated,” he insisted. “None of our contracts expire.”

I nodded to him slowly. “*Yours* don’t expire. But *mine* does.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re a test subject, Piro’s family is loaded, and the others fulfilled the clause. It makes perfect sense.” Silence descended between us as Bajora began to pace. “Zufi had me look over replacement applications when I got the spats’ visas.”

“*Chudthi* bastard,” Bajora spat. He rubbed a hand over his forehead, thinking. “Are you on hectaconorphine at least?”

I nodded. “Got meds from Ezra yesterday.”

He stopped, looking me over with confusion. “A coil that thin should kick the bucket fast.”

Swallowing hard, I prepared for the humiliation of just how far I’d fallen. Bajora and I were constantly at odds, but it was out of a shared investment in helping the humans recover from their abduction experiences. He had a casual rosy outlook on how things should go, while I was all about securing infrastructure and vigilance. The others mostly followed Bajora’s point of view, which wasn’t surprising. We all knew just how much they’d lost, and it was our duty to

protect and support them. Even if we were prickly with each other.

Even if I was prickly with *them*...

“Wasting disease,” I admitted thickly. “For half an orbit or so.”

Bajora swore, kicking his bag into the shelves with a loud hiss.

I’d been careful, taking supplements and eating well, but the truth was that pheromones alone could only hold a coil for so long. The long phallic tendril at the back of my neck, known as a *senticotylus*, had been neglected for years. Dabbing a drop or two of Corsa’s pheromones on it was like eating empty food to make my stomach feel full even if I wasn’t getting the nutrition I needed to survive. I’d felt it in my bones for at least a couple years, watching my tendrils shrivel in the mirror. It was brought on by an unrequited coil, in which partners didn’t embrace or feed their tastes and sensations to each other.

Lethargy set in, and a few months ago, my pearl production began to wane. The reservoir at the base of my cock produced one or two per day that were a quarter of the size of a healthy coil. Most days, I couldn’t even relieve them. When I’d confessed this to Ezra at the clinic the day before, he’d subjected me to blood tests that came back positive. The dissolving pearls in my sac were poisoning my endocrine system.

I wasn’t just on hectaconorphine for the coil withdrawal. I was taking antibiotics while an implant in my thigh regulated my chances of sepsis.

“That parasitic *priya* of yours has a lot to answer for, you know,” Bajora hissed.

“Zufi is visiting Ezra and Mel this week,” I said, getting to my feet. Every joint in my body ached, every muscle depleted. I leaned on the table and took a deep breath. “I have

a lot to do if I want to prove I should stay. Imani and Vin will vouch for me.”

Wide-eyed, Bajora shook his head. “No,” he said, shocked. “It’s not gonna work. Zufi doesn’t give a shit. He wants hukaari spats running around by the dozens. Full integration. It doesn’t matter how much pressure the security team puts on him, he’s going to kick you out anyway.”

I bit my cheek until I tasted coppery blood.

“I know it’s a stretch, but maybe—”

Bajora grabbed me by the elbow and hauled me up to look at him. His expression was hard-lined and intense, tendrils writhing with desperation. “You need a new coil, *syalī*.”

My colleague never called me older brother like the others. Heat raced over my skin, not embarrassment so much as unworthiness. I pulled my arm out of his grip and picked up his bag. He followed me, all four palms open to the ceiling.

“You know it’s the easiest solution. And it’s not hard!” he pleaded. “At least go on a *date* with someone. Something to make Zufi hold off.”

“What about my spats?” I challenged, setting his things on the shelf with his name on it. That’s when I saw the blood on the back of my hand. I picked out the little piece of metal wiring stuck between my knuckles and rubbed the blood away on the side of my coveralls. “I can’t throw them into more coil drama when they’ve been with me for less than two days. They can barely look at me as it is.”

“At least take them to the playfield,” Bajora begged. “Make sure some humans know your name and *smile* when they see you. If you care about Renata at all, you’ll suck it up and do it. And don’t you dare say you have work to do. If you don’t figure out how to convince Zufi to renew your contract, you won’t have any work at all.”

“*Ssshit.*” Resignation pulled on my features. I sat with a heavy exhale at my workbench. Bajora’s aim was true, and the words cut straight through me.

None of this mattered if I didn't keep my contract.

Maybe... maybe while Zufi was in town, I could ask Marcella and Imani to set me up on a couple of blind dates. My wavering vision descended to my murky stripes, and I knew, deep down, that it wouldn't be enough.

But Bajora was right. My only options were to give up or *try*. Otherwise, some horny golden boy would be sitting at *my* workbench come next satbit, drooling over human women instead of paying attention to security and work orders.

I stood up, faking more energy than I felt, and gave him a tight smile. "You're right. Ezra cleared their vaccines this morning, and I need a break anyway."

Relieved, Bajora's mane settled, slipping over his shoulders. "Atta boy."

“So why are we at the playfield?” Omi asked as I kicked a few rocks out of my way, snapped open a blanket, and draped it across the ground.

“Oh, you know. To watch the kids play,” I said, panting and distracted. I glanced up at the footpath from the home towers a dozen times, hoping to look like I’d been here for a while before Hunar showed up with his kids.

After marching away from Hunar, I’d brushed past Bajora on the verge of tears and he’d given me a confused look. It had been embarrassing. I was being immature, reactionary, taking things too personally. So I’d gathered my courage, and decided I’d ask Bajora about some help instead. But by the time I’d dried my eyes and reached the lockers again, I’d heard their voices through the shelves.

What Hunar was going through sounded horrible. Sure, he’d yelled at me, but maybe I wasn’t so graceful about it all either. I’d assumed he thought I was yippy and annoying, when the truth was so much more complex. I couldn’t imagine how tired he was. Three weeks to put a roof over your kids heads and move while suffering from heartbreak and withdrawal? I’d be catatonic.

So here I was, giving him the benefit of the doubt. I’d smile and greet him by name. Maybe I’d tell him how strong he looked, or how cute his kids were. He needed a confidence boost.

And I needed that industrial printing bay.

“You don’t want to go to the space chicken coop and check on your potatoes?”

“Nah.”

We’d caught a space chicken with brilliant blue and pink plumage before the rainy season really drenched the colony, but it turns out it was a boy chicken that didn’t lay eggs but sacs of semen that were soft like alligator shells. As culinarily inclined as I was, I had no interest in making Rocky Mountain oysters, space chicken edition. So we’d been hoping a girl chicken would get curious and come investigate. I’d been staking it out ever since the jungle dried out a little, but no luck so far.

Also, my potatoes wilted and rotted no matter what I tried. I was a baker, not a farmer. Even if we were on Earth, who plants potatoes in jungle mulch?

I plopped down on the blanket, then jumped.

“Ouch!” Reaching underneath, I pulled out a long, dark purple cylinder that looked a bit like a rifle casing. “What the hell?”

“*Biria* nuts. I stepped on one yesterday too. Sati says they’re seeds that fall after di rain. Poisonous though, so be careful.” Omi sat and opened her backpack just as my stomach growled. I hadn’t eaten breakfast, and she knew it, having brought the goods. Reaching in like Mary Poppins, she withdrew a container of pancakes and *madhu* honey to dip them in.

“Yes,” I moaned, tossing the toxic nut and wriggling my fingers as she handed over my sorely needed lunch. I jammed the first wedge of pancake into my mouth without honey, my stomach too impatient to wait, then dunked the next piece and fit it into my other cheek like a zealous chipmunk right before winter.

“B’fur I furget,” I mumbled around pancake, producing a jar of cider from the cargo pocket on my pants. Omi gasped with delight and twisted the cap off, taking a big whiff.

“It smells so good!” she awed, taking a sip and licking her lips. “Is this what it really tastes like?”

I wobbled my hand in a noncommittal way and swallowed. Omi had never had mulled cider, being from Jamaica. "It's pretty close."

"Toss some rum in that and you've got a party," Omi joked. "You should be proud, Tin."

I stuffed my face full of more pancake and made a silly face, unable to talk without spewing flapjacks across my lap.

A mass of kids ran by, chasing a frisbee. Now that they were starting to develop into preteens, playing tag wasn't nearly as exciting to them. Soccer and team frisbee had taken over, especially since Wade and his small crew had built the place up after the rains. Soccer nets were positioned on both long sides of the field, and they'd even built picnic tables and a short deck over the ditch across from the treeline. Most of the adults sat up there and enjoyed the potted flowers and sunshades during the day. The older kids and their teachers held classes up there too.

Which meant it was usually packed. That suited me just fine though, especially once I saw Hunar's pallid figure round the ferns along the footpath, one girl and two boys in tow. Just as I'd planned, he'd have to walk right by us. I made a noise and chewed faster, swallowing down my pancakes as I brushed the crumbs off my clothes. Omi raised a brow.

"What ya doin'?" she asked.

"Shh! Act natural," I stage whispered.

"*You* act natural."

I glared at my best friend, and she grinned back.

"Hi, Hunar!" I said, waving nice and big. One of the boys' manes shrank up like a gasp, then shook itself out, looking up at his dad with excitement. But Hunar's nostrils flared with frustration and a muscle in his jaw ticked as his family came to a stop.

"Miss Tinsley," he said with a pained nod. "You come to the playfield?"

“Yup!” I stood up and brushed off my palms, waving to the kids. They were nearly the same height as me, and looked as if I was the first human who’d ever talked to them. Maybe I was. I gave them a wave. “I didn’t know you had kids. Man, you guys are *gorgeous*. Look at those cute tendrils.”

One of the boys, the teal one with red speckles, glowed a little brighter as his mane curly-cued. “Thanks,” he breathed.

“Go on,” Hunar urged, giving his bicep a little nudge. The boy blinked, looking at his siblings.

“Uh, I’m Ladh. This is Tahavir and Reha. It’s nice to meet you.”

Then he held out one of his upper hands hesitantly, glancing at his father. I took it and gave him a clear handshake with a little squeeze for encouragement. When it was over, he looked at his palm in awe.

His brother Tahavir eagerly pushed his hand out.

“Me next!”

I laughed and took his hand while Reha, Hunar’s daughter, watched the human kids play. I’d seen plenty of female shilpakaari in vids and such, but most of us viewed Pom Pom as more or less human these days. Female shils only had two arms, so their proportions were far more familiar. It was strange though to see Reha cross her only set of arms.

“I’m Tinsley. Welcome to Renata!”

“What’s that shilpakaari girl doing here?” Reha asked, looking up at her dad. Hunar and I both glanced out at the field, where Pom Pom’s unmistakable pink coloring stood out amongst the terracotta rainbow of human children. She caught the frisbee and threw it straight to Rambir, Naitee’s little brother. They were joined at the hip and their teamwork showed.

Hunar cleared his throat. “Pom Pom is Imani and Vindilus’s daughter,” he explained. “You should make friends with her.”

“Why are her tendrils so short?”

“She was sick for a long time,” Hunar struggled, taking in the girl’s colorful bandana, above which short tendrils brushed the air like a sea anemone.

Pom Pom’s illness was like leprosy, eating away at the flesh and nerves. Most shilpakaari with labyrinthula were ostracized out of fear, but in Renata, she was accepted and loved.

“Pom Pom grew up on an ISU vessel,” I said with a wink at the boys. “She’s pretty cool and has tons of stories. She’s even done some missions.”

“Woah!” Tahavir’s tendrils twisted with excitement. His exclamation was loud enough to draw all the kids’ attention. Rambir and Pom Pom, currently dominating the field, looked over and stopped the game. Rambir smiled, but Pom Pom followed him hesitantly as he jogged our way.

“Hey!” Rambir came to a stop, his thick black hair bouncing across his warm brown forehead as he smiled. Reha looked between him and Pom Pom as he tucked the frisbee under his arm. “You must be new. I’m Rambir. This is Pom Pom.”

“Hi,” Pom Pom said, staying a shoulder behind him, her eyes darting to Reha every so often. Hunar’s daughter was stiff, the gears in her mind turning rapidly.

“Introduce yourselves,” Hunar coaxed, putting a warning hand on Reha.

“I’m Taha,” his extroverted son said immediately, spiraling his red tendrils over his shoulders in what I guessed was a normal shilpakaari greeting. “Did you really grow up on a vessel?”

Pom Pom’s nerves broke, one corner of her mouth tugging up with a shrug. “Yeah... Are you guys from Samridve?”

“Yeah,” Ladh answered, waving like a human with a proud smile. “I’m Ladh, and that’s my sister, Reha. Where are

you from?”

“Huajile.”

At the mention of the volcanic moon, Hunar’s sons gasped.

“No way, that’s so cool!”

“Do you guys want to play frisbee? It’s really easy. We’re just on teams trying to get the frisbee in those nets on either side. You have to throw it though, no running with it in your hands.” Rambir held out the lime green disc to Ladh who took it with both lower hands and grinned.

“Looks fun.”

I glanced at Hunar as the five kids mingled, talking about the rules and getting to know each other. He looked concerned, but his attention drifted my way.

“Is your hand okay?” I asked.

He grunted with confusion, then looked at the dried blood between his knuckles and flexed his fist. “Yeah, happens all the time.” He cleared his throat. “About earlier,” he started, boots shuffling at the corner of my blanket.

I held up my hand and shook my head. “Water under the bridge. But I still want your printing bay. Pretty please?”

“Tinsley—”

“Just look at what I want to do. I bet it’s not even that big!” I begged.

“I said *s top!*” Rambir yelled, snapping in my ears like firecrackers. Hunar and I both stopped mid-sentence, a cold rush of adrenaline rolling over me.

Pom Pom gripped Reha’s shoulder, and they were hissing in a way that grated on my ears. Though Reha looked like she was a little younger than Pom Pom, she had a couple inches on her. Her much longer tendrils were rising around her head, exposing her small ears as they shivered in warning.

I jumped between them, facing Reha with my hands up. “Woah, there’s no need to—”

A blur streaked across my vision, stunning me as white hot pain lanced my temple and cheek. I stumbled back and fell on my butt, blinking defensively as my palms bit into the gravel.

“Enough!” Omi commanded, getting to her feet. Her long box braids swung over her shoulders and a scowl worthy of a queen froze every child in place. Several of the adults craned their necks from the deck, and I got to my feet with a tenuous smile.

“I’m okay,” I panted, resisting the urge to look at my hands or touch my face.

Hunar grabbed Reha by the arm and jerked her back, staring at me with wide, furious eyes. “What did you do?!” he snarled.

Was he mad at *me*?

“I-I was just trying to help.” My voice shook, bewildered.

“Are you okay?” Omi stepped between us and turned me away from Hunar’s wrath, pulling pebbles and dirt off my palms with care.

“What?” I was dazed, whiplashed by all the voices and fussing.

“Sorry, Tinsley,” Pom Pom said. Ladh and Taha echoed her, handing Rambir’s frisbee back.

“We should go,” Ladh sighed, despondent. “Maybe we’ll play next time.”

Rambir couldn’t muster a smile, glancing over my shoulder with an anxious look. “Sure, next time... Come on, Pom Pom. Naitee brought some snacks.”

As the kids parted ways, I looked over my shoulder to catch Hunar’s eye, but he was already marching away, his daughter under his two left palms. I bit my lip, confused by his

reaction, and my cheek itched. I swiped at it with the back of my hand, which came away smeared with red. Omi glanced at my hand, then dabbed at my cheek with her t-shirt.

“It’s not that bad,” she murmured, cleaning me up. “Does it sting?”

I shook my head, speechless for the first time in a long time.

No matter what I did, I just couldn’t chase the black clouds away.

What a disaster.

I'd been standing outside Tinsley's door for several minutes, staring at her name glowing by the access panel, before one of her neighbors walked by and gave me an awkward greeting. I'd been frozen, replaying the moment my daughter had lashed out and she'd fallen to the ground, a trickle of red racing down her cheek.

It haunted me every time I blinked. So once the spats were winding down for the night, Reha buried under blankets in their room and the boys lounging on the sofa playing games, I'd grumbled something about being back in a little bit, then found myself in the lift, riding it up to Tinsley's floor.

Alone in the lift, I let out a slow breath.

What had Corsa been teaching our daughter?

After getting Reha's side of the story, I'd commed Vin, Pom Pom's para. He was a venandi with bright red plates and more scars than the hull of a fighter ship. He assured me there was no bad blood, but the shame fizzled like seafoam in my veins regardless. I was failing as a father, and I'd barely just begun.

Reha claimed Pom Pom blocked her from introducing herself to Rambir, but I'd heard the boy telling her to stop whatever she was doing. Vin left me a message later after hashing it out with Pom Pom too, neither of us quite comfortable in our fatherly roles yet, and both leaning on each other to parse out the truth. Reha had run her tendrils over Rambir's bare neck and hadn't stopped when he'd apologized and said he'd rather shake hands. She tried to smile prettily and brush her hands over his arms, then Pom Pom claimed to push her away to protect her friend.

Tinsley had gotten in the way of my *very young* daughter's first coil fight.

At least, Reha said it was her first... and I believed her. She'd been shaken up by the whole experience after all, her tendrils cramping with confusion and anxiety. I'd given her a hug and told her she was forgiven, but she keened anyway, mumbling into my chest that she'd never make friends now because the humans would gossip and judge her.

I'd been assuming all weekend that she missed her mother and looked up to her, but what if that wasn't entirely true? She wasn't a clone of Corsa's sweet, sugary shell. She was resentful, hormonal, scared...

Fuck me, but I could have been more empathetic.

Before I could dive further into the depths of self-loathing, I punched the comm request on the access panel. BEO beeped a couple of times, reading my holotab serial number, then a light on the access panel flashed, letting me know he was informing the resident of my presence.

Tired, bogged down, I forced my weary shoulders to roll back, expecting the vid feed to flash on so I could explain why I was standing outside Tinsley's door.

But the entrance just rolled open with a hiss, no video needed. I blinked down at Tinsley, taken aback. She hugged herself from within a thick red sweater covered in extremely ugly decorations: little puff balls and bells and some crinkly metal fringe. A blast of cold air hit my mane and my skin prickled.

"Are you having trouble with your thermostat?" I blurted, shocked out of the apology I'd rehearsed by the chilly wave of air. I'd taken an afternoon off and missed a legitimate work order from her? Fuck me...

Tinsley rubbed one sock against her bare leg and grimaced, stretching the bruised skin around the lash marks my daughter had left on her face. One across her temple, and another deeper laceration on her cheek. She'd cleaned it, but

her delicate skin was angry, blossoming red and a tiny bit of purple on a swollen cheekbone.

“Oh, um, I’m from a cold place, and I miss the weather,” she admitted. “Is it a drain on resources?”

It was, but not enough to be a problem. “No, it’s fine.”

“You wanna come in?”

She stepped aside, and I entered cautiously.

Then my jaw dropped, tendrils going slack. Her unit was *beautiful*. She’d painted the walls in thick bands of beige and cream so the interior glowed with a pleasantly warm light, and a deep green *berli* faux fur blanket draped across the sofa facing the wall where a large holoscreen was playing some rudimentary human animation. Decorative white and red towels hung from the cabinets, taped in place on their smooth surfaces as if there were knobs to pull. A collection of colorful plates in pink, turquoise, gold, dark blue, and dark yellow sat glimmering on the counter beside a shilpakaari pot full of utensils. It was cozy, comfortable, welcoming...

And it smelled nice. Spices and fire and citrus.

But it was also a mess. Tubs full of crinkly metal, glass orbs, and fake red *aphida* plants littered the floor, stacked three high beneath the counter overhang, her stools stowed off in an unused corner of the common room. An entire bag of spray cans slouched in the hallway next to a formidable pile of plas scraps, and the coffee table was a wreck, littered with adhesives, scissors, drafting utensils, and empty cups.

“So, what are you doing here?”

Having lost myself in looking around the odd and inviting interior, I spun back around. Tinsley crossed her arms over her middle and I pulled a little aero-syringe from my pocket.

“I wanted to apologize for what Reha did. She shouldn’t have lashed out at you. Or Pom Pom. She’s that age...”

“What age?” Tinsley tilted her head with curiosity.

I cleared my throat, massaging the awkwardness out of the back of my neck. “You know, when spats start to fight over each other... getting curious about coiling.”

Her dark eyebrows rose and the tension in her shoulders eased. “Oh... you mean puberty? It’s okay. We’ve all gone through that. I was more worried about her. I don’t want her to feel too guilty for something every kid struggles with, you know?”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I held up the syringe instead. “I brought this as a peace offering. That’s what you called it before, right?”

Tinsley took the syringe, and I stuffed my lower hands in my dhoti pockets. I felt underdressed in my sleepwear, way too exposed, standing in private with a woman in her home for the first time in decades. I took a step back into the kitchen while she looked the penance over, rolling the glass vial between her delicate fingers.

“Oh! This is a medical plasma thing, right? I saw these when we were first rescued, I think.” She leaned on the counter opposite me and smiled. The wires around my ribcage eased a bit. Tinsley was a nuisance, a pest, but the world was a lot dimmer when she didn’t smile.

“A mediplasma, yeah.” I rotated the shilpakaari pot of utensils so the front of the design was facing out.

“How do you use it?”

I gestured one of my tendrils at her cheek. “Press it against your injury and hold the release.”

She turned it over in her hands again, gnawing on her lower lip. “I’ve never given myself a shot before.”

I shrugged one shoulder, leaning against her cold bay. “It doesn’t hurt. It feels like someone blowing air through a straw.”

“Are you sure? Have you done it before?”

She was obviously stalling, thinking too hard about it. I fought back a haughty twist of my tendrils. I was on hectaconorphine and had to do it four times a day at the base of my neck. Even children administered their own shots with supervision.

I held out my hand. “Come here.” She set the medioplasma in my palm—easily twice the size of hers—and stood up straight in front of me with an anxious tap of her toes against the tile. I leaned down so she could look at the vial more closely.

“See this metal plate? It’s perforated at a molecular scale. The meds,” I gestured to the blue mist stuck in the center of the vial, “are separated into their smallest components and suspended with air tension.”

“Woah,” she said, just like Tahavir often did. A smirk lifted one side of my mouth.

“The release on the top pushes all the air to the back of the syringe, forcing the meds through the metal plate. It happens so quickly that the particles perforate the skin before they can reform into a liquid or gel. Might tingle or itch but won’t even leave a mark.”

The tiny human licked her lips and nodded, staring at the vial with wide eyes. “Okay. Will you do it for me? I’ll mess up for sure.”

I looked at the ceiling, nostrils flaring with equal parts annoyance and amusement. “Sure, why not.”

She squared her posture unnecessarily. “On the count of three then.”

I pressed the syringe to her cheek bone, just above the red, angry cut.

“One...” she said, serious and low. “Tw—”

I pressed the release and the medioplasma disappeared into her skin faster than the blink of an eye. Tinsley gasped and clapped her hand over her cut, spine snapping straight with

surprise and indignation. I waved the empty vial and grinned, depositing it into her other palm.

“See? Doesn’t hurt.”

“Did it really go?” she asked. “I didn’t feel anything at all!” I hummed in the affirmative and she dodged around me to go look in the bathroom mirror.

My mane rumbled with amusement. Maybe Tinsley wasn’t *so* bad. Her enthusiasm for life was genuine, at least. And she cared. I looked down at the cut on my hand and flexed it to feel the slight sting.

My brow creased though, standing next to the food bay. The spices and citrus my mane sensed didn’t come from her food bay at all. When I concentrated, the only recent printing I could taste in the air was from the hall. Warm plas and lubricant, likely for all the junk she’d stacked around the unit.

“Woah, it’s stitching up all by itself!” she called back.

“Yeah, it does that,” I grunted, pulling up my holotab. “Keep watching.”

“Okay!”

I logged into my work portal then scrolled to her unit number. Bajora was technically in charge of the domestic printing bays, but as chief engineer, I had access to all of his work orders and every unit’s diagnostics. Tinsley’s food bay hadn’t been used in two days. The printer in the hallway though...

A list of orders had been paused, dozens of items flashing in the printing bay’s queue.

INSUFFICIENT CACHE...

She’d already spent her entire stipend, and we were only just halfway through the satbit. What was she living on, nutrient bars? With a spark of surprise, I opened her cold bay.

Condiments, half a plate of wilted human food stuck between two pieces of bread, and a gallon of an amber liquid that looked slightly suspect.

“*Watstakats*, I’m such a bad host. Would you like some water? Or *sīdur*?”

Tinsley hopped around the corner as she joined me, opened the cold bay without hesitation, and hefted the amber drink out onto the counter. She twisted open the cap and a fresh wave of that spicy scent perfumed the air.

“This is what you brought me earlier today,” I realized, tapping a tendril tip against the rim of the jug. The taste bloomed and saliva pooled in my mouth. It was crisp and complex, though completely alien. All I’d tasted off the cap was aluminum.

“Yeah! *Sīdur*. Did you like it?”

Guilt caught me off guard. I’d shoved it as far behind my collection of drone parts as possible, in the dirty corner of the windowsill above my workbench. “It was, uh, good. Thank you.”

Tinsley glowed with pride. “Right? I made it myself! It’s one of the things we drink around the holidays back on Earth. Well, not *this*... This is all universal ingredients. But it’s close enough to remind me of *Krismis* at home. Makes me think of my dad.”

I put my hands on my hips and grimaced a little harder with each careful spoonful of the spices and pulp she added to the jar. Her expression was syrupy and faraway, thinking of home. Of Earth. Of family. *Damn it*.

Staring at the ceiling, I dragged the words from my throat with a belabored sigh. “What projects did you need printed?”

Tinsley dropped her spoon in the jug and it disappeared into the delicious-smelling swill. “Wait, really?!”

“Yeah,” I groaned, feeling a headache coming on. “Really.”

“Twinkle lights! And a *Krismis* tree. And probably some garland and ornaments. I have some, but it’s definitely not enough.”

This sounded like a big project to me. I didn’t know what any of those things were, which meant I’d need to map them by hand unless there were blueprints on the open holomarket. Which there weren’t.

Tinsley sensed my skepticism and held out both hands to keep me from challenging her list of needs. “Wait, wait. Seriously, it’s not so bad! Look.”

She slid a bowl across the counter and held up some failed circuitry and colorful teardrop glass bulbs. “I tried to make twinkle lights myself, which did *not* go well, but I bet for you it’d be a piece of cake.”

I picked through the bowl and brushed my fingers over a little filament to taste its contents. “Copper. If you want this to glow like a rudimentary bulb, you’d need tungsten instead. But it’ll get too hot to touch, let alone put in a tree. You’d be better off using gallium diodes.”

Tinsley’s smile didn’t so much as twitch as she beamed up at me. “I have no idea what those are, but as long as they’re on a string and colorful, I’ll take it.”

My mane swirled, thinking it through. “Do you have examples?”

“*Yes!*” I couldn’t tell if she was agreeing that she had examples or exclaiming in triumph. “BEO, search for snaps of outdoor *Krismis* lights!”

The big holoscreen switched to a visual database of trees and human homes illuminated with cords of colorful bulbs. Tinsley pointed to her favorite, the bulbs about as long as her thumb with a little curl of glass or plas at the end. My mane rolled over itself with gathering interest. Shilpakaari loved color, and I was no exception, despite the grey tinge in my skin.

“So, will you do it?”

Tinsley held her breath with hope, expecting me to decline. I scrolled through the snaps of Earth slowly, stalling for time while I weighed the cost and reward.

Then that damned conversation with Bajora echoed in my head. I needed the humans to see me, know my name, say hi... I needed to ask one out to dinner and play the part of flirtatious bachelor, at least while Zufi was in town. Was it stupid of me to tie up the industrial printer with frivolous, useless shit? Yes. But would it make hundreds of humans happy? Fuck yeah, it would.

Plus, this human holiday ticked all of a shilpakaar's instinctual visual boxes, which meant the spats would love it. I could win some points with them, with the humans, and maybe even with Zufi...

Like Bajora said, *this* was my job right now. If I didn't give it my all, I'd be up shit's creek with no paddle by the end of the week and it wouldn't matter how many hours I spent hunched over my workbench building perimeter drones and bumping up security infrastructure. Zufi would send me to the chopping block and my brood would be homeless.

"Come by the hangar tomorrow," I decided, glancing at her cold bay. "We'll talk over lunch."

"Yes!" she squealed, pumping the air with her fists. "Thank you, Hunar, I *promise* you won't regret it!"

I pressed my lips together in a half-smile, the best I could muster. Regardless if I liked the color of the lights, the idea of wasting time on holiday decorations grated on my work ethic. "No problem. I better go. Sorry again, for Reha."

Tinsley waved me off, capping the jar of *sīdur* as the front door hissed open. "You don't need to apologize for your kids, Hunar. I'm fine, and you gave me the best thing I could have asked for anyway."

"Twinkle lights?" I asked, taking the jar from her. She nodded once.

"Twinkle lights."

That quirked the corner of my mouth.

“Right. Good night, then.” I stepped out into the hallway, and she leaned out from the doorframe.

“See you tomorrow!”

Once I was alone in the lift, I unscrewed the cap on her *sīdur* and breathed it in.

Earlier in the day, she’d said something about drinking it hot, but I tried it chilled anyway. My chest warmed with comforting spices as a tingle shivered up the length of my tendril tips.

It was delicious.

10

) HUNAR (

Bing.

“Access granted,” I said before BEO could chime in my ear. Aavar was due back from Samridve and he was right on time. I didn’t need him to yell into my linguitor, fighting the atrocious pop music he always listened to on full blast.

I refocused my attention on the little bulb suspended above my workbench. It was a couple inches from base to tip, with a swirl of glass spiraling around the end. It was plas rather than glass, which made it light enough to mount on a tiny levipuck.

Tinsley had been right on the money when she said her twinkle lights would be a cinch to figure out. The gallium diode and levipucks were the only real engineering requirements, and I had the blueprints for those already. The majority of my morning had been spent instead on refining the shape of the plas bulb. I had four prototypes I was happy with, but she would have to judge when she arrived for lunch.

The base though... I’d made a judgment call on that. Rather than green, the bases would be red to blend in with the jungle. And the electrical cord she insisted they be mounted on? An ugly waste of filament. Instead, I’d program the little levipucks with a fleet code and installed the software on her holotab. All she’d need to do is draw where she wants them to hover on her holoscreen, and the little guys would fly right out of their container into position. No messy wires to roll up or hang from palm fronds.

Besides, the woman practically spoke in exclamation points. She wouldn’t want a handful of twinkle lights. She’d want a fucking army.

So that's what I'd give her. Be a good team player, take my kids to the playfield, meet some humans, go on some dates, maybe volunteer at the school pod... A good baan would do that, right?

Whatever it took.

Aavar touched down inside the hangar in his usual spot. He was flying light this time, the engines jettisoning heat for only a few seconds before they purred quietly and the ramp opened. Bajora waved at Aavar through the shelves, but I was focused on my last curly cue before lunch, completely ignoring the usual chaos that accompanied an Aavar-Bree reunion after one of his weekend flights.

She *was* being louder than usual though. And getting closer.

"Yeah! So this is the engineering lounge!" she practically bellowed. "After you, Ambassador Zufi!"

My eyes widened, catching on Bajora's shocked face.

No...

"Thank you, dear. You don't need to yell though," Zufi said, his syrupy tone slightly strained.

"What?!" Bree yelled, cupping her ear. She made a face behind the ambassador's shoulder at us, hands flailing. She mouthed, *What the fuck*, and even though my linguitor couldn't lipread, I recognized it anyway. It was one of my junior mechanic's favorite phrases.

"Ambassador Zufi!" Bajora said, wiping off his hands and setting aside his tools with a diplomatic smile. "I thought you weren't due for a few more days."

The politician scanned the lounge with a satisfied smirk, tendrils completely at ease. "Yes, well, I was able to clear my schedule. I figured I should make the time, get to know Renata now that the humans have settled in, and check in on my delegates..." His attention landed on me. "And their progress. Don't you agree, CE Fareshi?"

“Of course.” I turned away, diligently and carefully turning off my soldering arm and the heated wand I was using to blow the bulbs into shape. I needed my heart to stop racing, the tension to ease out of my mane, and for Zufi’s attention to drift somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

I was so fucked.

Bree cleared her throat and bellowed right in Zufi’s ear. “If you’ll follow me, ambassador, I’ll show you our plasma discharge barrels.”

Zufi winced and she blinked innocently, lowering her voice just a tad. “Sorry. Hard of hearing after losing my eyes.”

“Wha—”

“Come on, sir!” Bree jumped on the moment of confusion and pushed the ambassador towards the row of lockers. She came up short though, reaching out to grab Tinsley as she rounded the corner, her strange felt holiday crown of antlers jingling in surprise. “Damn, sorry!”

Tinsley touched her holiday crown to make sure it was still intact. “Oop, my bad!”

“I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of meeting. I’m Ambassador Jurek Zufi. You’re welcome to call me Jurek.”

My tendrils shrank up and I held my breath. Tinsley was an unpredictable glitter bomb of cheer and spite. She waved to him with a little dip of her head, hugging a pile of scribbly plas to her chest. Her holiday plans, no doubt.

“Ohh, *you’re* the ambassador! It’s *so* nice to meet you. I’m Tinsley Adams. Human resident, obviously.”

I squinted at the tiny woman’s tone of voice. It was far too syrupy, and the smile that reached her eyes was pinched and unwelcoming in the most welcoming way possible. What was she doing?

“A pleasure to meet you, Ms Adams—”

“I prefer Tinsley.”

“Ms Tinsley,” Zufi corrected himself, flashing his triple canines with amusement. “I won’t delay you any further from speaking with the engineers. Bree, shall we—”

“Oh, I’m not here for a work order,” Tinsley interrupted him again. She bit her lip and rocked up on the balls of her feet with excitement, hugging all those scribbly plans a little tighter to her chest.

That’s when I saw it.

Not her usual brand of festive excitement...

But *mischief*.

“Oh no,” I murmured under my breath.

Tinsley skipped past the ambassador, slipped her arm around my lower elbow and *jumped* to give me a human kiss on the shoulder of my coveralls. “Sorry I’m late for lunch, honey.”

I *just barely* fought off the urge to grind my dental ridges together, a sigh of defeat collapsing my chest. “It’s *Hyoo* -nar,” I said like a dunce. She squeezed my arm and laughed, the infuriating little bells on her holiday crown tinkling.

“Pretty sure I know that by now.”

“You *just* got it wrong.”

She elbowed me, then fussed with the cuff of my sleeve, so close to my skin that I felt the heat of her fingertips. “Honey is a human term of endearment, *honey*.”

I glanced at Zufi, where a frown of concentration deepened the facets of his face. His tendrils churned thoughtfully as he steeped his upper fingers. “I had no idea CE Fareshi was courting a human.” He smiled without amusement at Tinsley, seeing through her lies instantly. “What a surprising revelation.”

Bree, Bajora, and I held our breath as Tinsley squared her shoulders. “Why, because of the whole thing with his ex?” She shrugged and my tendrils slipped behind my shoulders in

shame. How did she know? “Family’s important, and we don’t always have choices. I’m not going to hold that against Hunar. Besides, he and Corsa haven’t actually been together for a long time. And see?”

To my absolute horror, Tinsley produced another jar of *sīdur*, this one with an unrecognizable blob cut from red plas adhered to the top. She held it out to Zufi and pointed at the blob.

“A misshapen... bean?” Zufi guessed. Bree snorted, then bit down on her lips to keep from laughing. He glanced at her, and she reigned it in.

“No, ah,” she cleared her throat, huffing through her words. “It’s a heart. Human symbol for love.” She remembered she’s meant to be hard of hearing and coughed loudly. “Uhh, super cute, Tin!”

“Thanks!” Tinsley set the jar on the old break table with a peppy pat and hugged my arm with both hands. I tried to jerk away, but she held firm, smiling rainbow daggers into Zufi’s disbelieving face.

His expression broke with a hiss of amusement and a volcano gurgled inside of me. Mortification, indignation, and the stupid knee-jerk instinct to fling the little woman I’d just started getting along with off my arm.

But I couldn’t do that, not with Zufi watching. I *had* to play along, because if I didn’t?

My spats and I were as good as chum.

“CE Fareshi, I’m impressed! Such a glowing young woman hanging on your arm, even as you recover? I would have expected you to boast, or at least *mention* how radiant she is. You’re a far more humble man than I.”

The fucker could barely finish his sentence without laughing at my expense. I fisted my lower hands inside my pockets, forcing a few of my tendrils to lean towards Tinsley as the heat of embarrassment ripped through them. Bajora turned away, rubbing a hand over his face. Bree tried

desperately to get Aavar's attention, yelling across the hangar with her hands behind Zufi's back. I swallowed hard, hoping the clown got here before my life unraveled.

In the meantime, I managed a short, strained sentence, giving in to the worst decision I could possibly make, but the only one that would give me any kind of hope. "It's... new."

"Forgive me for saying so, but it's a relief," Zufi said with approval, turning his attention back to Tinsley. "Truly. I was concerned about Hunar's recovery from his last coil. But with you at his side, he'll bounce back in no time."

Dread chilled my veins. I opened my mouth to cut Tinsley off, but she beat me to it.

"Damn straight he will."

Zufi rumbled with satisfaction, bowing his head to her. "Damn straight," he echoed, pleased with himself. "Shall we, Bree?"

"Fuck!" Bree's voice cracked as she jumped to attention, nearly caught waving frantically to her coil across the hangar. "I mean, fuck yeah, totally! Clinic's this way, Ambassador!"

Ambassador Zufi tucked his lower hands behind his back as if the humans weren't used to seeing all four of our arms by now and followed Bree out of the engineering lounge. As their voices faded out onto the footpaths, Bajora exhaled with force.

"*Chudthi*," he swore.

"Ya think?!" I growled, ripping my arm away from Tinsley. I paced, hands in my mane, eyes wide and trained on that cursed woman's face. "Do you have *any* idea what you've just done?!"

She shrugged, setting her handwritten plans out on the table. "Sure I do. And you're welcome. Now that *that's* taken care of..." She sat with a nonchalant pat on the chair next to her. "Let's discuss *Krismis*."

11

) TINSLEY (

Suck it, Zufi! I silently *ka'ching* -ed the air, doing smug happy dances in my head as I wriggled on my dilapidated chair and shuffled my plans.

Ever since I'd overheard the challenges Hunar was facing, I knew I wanted to help him. Sure, it was mostly so I could get in his good graces, but that wasn't the only reason. We were a community, right? Community should be supportive and helpful, and even if we butted heads, he had proven how much he loved Renata. I couldn't let him get the boot just because he refused to shack up with someone while there were more important things to do.

Besides, after what he'd been through? No freaking way.

A big hand wrapped around the ball of my shoulder and pulled the chair back. Hunar pressed his weight into one upper palm against the table and leaned me back with the other, staring furious daggers into my calm stare. If I wasn't going to freak out about it, he wasn't going to either.

"You're unbelievable," he rumbled, slitted nostrils flaring. The striped pupils in his big eyes turned to angry slits. "You realize you told Zufi that you're planning to encoil me, right? Do you even know what a coil *iss*?"

I crossed my arms, unimpressed by his looming shadow and threatening tone of voice. "Yes, actually I do. Omi is my best friend, remember? Siatesh's *priya*? She tells me..." I leaned forward. "*Everything.*"

Hunar snarled and whipped away, taking up Bajora's pacing rhythm. The culinary engineer stopped, all four pleading palms raised.

“Tinsley, I don’t think you get it. *Syalī* is, ah, not as *healthy* as most men at the end of the coil, and it’s really...” He sighed, cursing under his breath. “*Really* noticeable.”

I rolled my eyes. “You mean the wasting?” Both of them paused, manes curling up with surprise. I threw my hands into the air and got to my feet, patience running thin. “I heard it all, okay?! I came back here to ask Bajora for help when *you* refused.” I slashed a hand towards Hunar. “You need a new coil to stay in Renata with your kids, and even if I didn’t think you deserve to stay—which I *do* –I happen to owe you a favor for all of the Christmas printing.”

Both men stared at me like deer caught in headlights as I took a deep breath and righted my antlers.

“You really don’t get it.” Hunar’s mane keened as he leaned back against his workbench, despondent. “What am I gonna do?”

Every once in a while, men would assume that just because I was snack sized, I didn’t have the brain of an adult, competent woman. It boiled the blood in my veins every time I was carded or some *dude* ruffled my hair. Now it wasn’t just human men, but aliens too? I squared up to Hunar and grabbed the front of his coveralls.

“That *creep* wants evidence that you’re sleeping with a human,” I spelled out as plain as snickerdoodles. “So I’m gonna bring you cute little jars of cider at lunch, walk you home at night, hug your sleeve, and call you *honey* until he leaves. Done and done. Zufi and whatever stupid clauses are in your contract can suck an egg. Got it?”

A muscle in my jaw ticked as I put on my absolute best bad cop persona. I *needed* Hunar to make my holiday dreams come true, and he needed someone in his corner. So what if he was pricklier than a dried out evergreen and didn’t socialize? Didn’t Zufi understand how hard he worked? How much of an asset he was? When I really thought about it, which I didn’t ever want to, Hunar had probably saved us from a lot more

threats than the rest of the security team combined. His perimeter drones were amazing.

But the way he looked at me when he leaned in, calm despite the riptide roiling beneath the surface, made me nervous. I held my breath, heart in my throat as he growled.

“Except you’re forgetting... We don’t taste the air with our tendrils the way you humans do when you smell something.”

“Okay...”

Uh oh.

“We’re pheromonal creatures, remember? We scent *chemicals*. Like when a man has recently frenzied over a new coil? And maybe *you* don’t change much when you date someone, but a shil does. I’m not grey around the gills because I was fucking born this way, Tinsley.”

My hard expression cracked. “Oh... right.”

“Oh shit is more like it,” Hunar said with a hoarse hiss.

“Watstakats.”

The three of us went still, the ramifications of my improv acting finally catching up to me. I stared at the little jar of cider, cursing myself for how hard I’d messed up. I should have offered to play pretend after Zufi left, but the jerk just pushed all my buttons so *hard*...

Hunar sat heavily in the chair next to me and pulled a vial from his pocket with shaking fingers. His mane tumbled over itself to expose his neck as he leaned his head to the side and slipped an aero-syringe from its case. As he injected it into the back of his neck, he took a deep breath and addressed me.

“I appreciate that you want to help me,” it pained him to say. The shudder in his fingers eased as he tossed the empty vial into a hazards bin. “But Zufi will expect my health to improve fast with a new coil. Within days, not weeks. We can fake date like humans, but there’s no way for me to fake *that*.”

“Right.” I swallowed hard, clutching the corners of my seat, lost in thought. The answer came more easily than I should have been comfortable with, and the implications were serious... I glanced at Bajora, resting against his workbench and straightened my shoulders as my cheeks reddened. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Figure what—”

My eyes snapped to Hunar’s and I gave him a timid smile, much less confident than my usual bravado. “Just trust me, okay? I’ll figure it out. Now, can we talk about printing, please? It’s important.”

“...Fine.”

Utterly drained, Hunar sat, and I spread out my first little stack of plans.



As soon as the door opened to my festive little troll cave, I breathed in the smell of universal cider and the knot of nerves in my chest unraveled just enough for me to loosen my shoulders and stretch my neck. I rubbed my cheeks, so flush and hot that they tingled and had been for hours.

Was I overheating because I was tipsy?

Or was it that I planned to give Hunar a pair of my panties?

I held up the neck of a bottle of Bajora’s murky rum and took another swig. He’d printed it for me that afternoon during Christmas planning, and I’d scurried off to sit by the space chicken’s coop and my stone-ringed firepit to think after we were done. It was crude but effective, and I needed all the liquid courage I could muster. I had a feeling he knew what I was going to do.

I groaned, smacking my forehead against the counter like a woodpecker searching for grubs. “Everyone does it,” I told

myself in the cringiest pep talk ever. “And shilpakaari are super open about stuff like this. It’s totally fine.”

My cheeks bristled as I imagined handing my used underwear over to Hunar on a platter while the entire hangar watched.

I jumped up straight, ruffling my hair until it stood on end. “Nope! Won’t happen like that. Look how discreet Bajora was! It’ll be *fine*. Even if they do know, everyone there gets it. They *get it*. Us humans are in the minority when it comes to having no mating imperatives, after all...”

I snorted as I marched myself straight past the boxes of ornaments and bags of glitter spray cans.

“I mean, look at *venandi*. They straight up vibrate when their frenzy or whatever happens. Super loud. It’s all...” The bedroom’s recessed lights glowed to life as I walked in and swallowed, staring at my bed. “Completely normal.”

Swiping my fingers through my curly bob of hair one more time, I unlatched my pants and pushed them down my ankles. I kneaded them off along with my socks, tossed my shirt to the ground, then hooked my thumbs in my panties.

They were off-white and slightly worn. I nibbled my lip, looking at where the seamless waistband was starting to curl as the material lost elasticity. I was cool with offering Hunar a pair of panties, even if thinking about it made me blush, but I had *some* pride.

So I pushed those down my legs too and pulled out one of my new pairs. I’d printed a whole set of holiday panties for myself, just to test the design software Imani and Naitee were so good at using. The patterns were blobby and amateur, but you could tell which ones were snowmen or gingerbread cookies or twinkle lights. I picked the pair on top, decorated with candy canes and red velvet bows.

“BEO, display a slideshow of my secret folder.”

A holoscreen lit up the wall opposite my bed as I slipped the panties on and propped up my pillows. I wriggled under

the covers and bit my lip, looking at my collection of erotic photos. They were all human men posing nude or grabbing their shafts, thick and veiny just like their oiled-up arms. I rubbed my fingers between my legs even as I locked my knees together, letting the heat build and the interest settle in.

This was my normal routine and had been for a long time now. Back in Kingston, Sam had always respected my privacy, but the walls were thin, and I'd been paranoid that if I watched porn with the volume almost all the way down or used a vibrator, he would still hear it. Or worse, if I put in headphones, he'd knock on the door, and I wouldn't hear him approaching.

So I got used to photos instead. Dreamy guys that would bend me like a pretzel and slip their thumbs over my clit. I let out a shaky breath as the familiar daydreams took hold of my body, spreading heat between my legs like a bellows.

Even if I was warmed up and starting to tingle though, it wasn't enough. There were too many problems, worries, and plans nesting in the front of my mind and making a mess. I was too tangled up to relax. Maybe I didn't need to climax to get the job done though.

I slipped my finger beneath the seam of my panties and felt my slit, just to see.

Dry as a burnt cookie.

“Damn...”

I stared at the beautiful man in his shiny blue boxers on my slideshow. His face was chiseled, dark hair cut short with a five o'clock shadow that promised he'd eat breakfast in bed.

And he just wasn't doing anything for me.

“Next?”

Another tanned stud, this one smiling wickedly with ocean-bleached blonde hair and gleaming blue eyes.

“Next.”

An older guy with salt-and-pepper hair in his flannel pajama pants, reclining on a leather sofa, a spray of cum painting the divots between his abdominal muscles.

I glanced down at the crux of my legs with frustration. “Still?!”

Plopping my head back on my stack of pillows with a sigh, I rubbed my slit absently, just to keep the tingle from dwindling.

“BEO...” I said slowly.

“Yes, Tinsley?”

“Show me snaps of naked shilpakaari men.”

“Of course.”

The holoscreen changed to an image search. I lifted my holotab and swiped through the pictures until I found one of a guy masturbating, both lower hands wrapped around a shaft I couldn't really see while his uppers were buried in his mane, probably grabbing his *senti*.

My pussy pulsed with interest as I squeezed my thighs over my hand.

“BEO, make me a new secret folder two with images—snaps—like this one.”

“Task complete.”

“Play a slideshow.”

The slideshow popped up, and the breath whooshed from my lungs. A lavender shilpakaari man caressed what I guessed was his sac but looked more like a swollen channel with row of marble-sized bumps on the underside of his cock. His legs were open to show it off and it dawned on me that those were pearls ready to shoot. I swallowed hard, my knees unfolding as I pressed little swirls into my clit through the fabric.

The next was dark blue, obviously in the middle of flashing his colors as yellow stripes faded down his tendrils and arms. He stared hungrily at me, tendrils lifted around his

face, but he stood sideways, a massive shaft pressed against his belly and standing at attention. Its head was harpoon shape with a wider slit to accommodate the pearls bulging along the underside.

What would it feel like to have sex with *that*? Shilpakaari were about the same height as tall humans, and were proportional down there, but the textures and ridges were so different. Were the pearls hard or kinda squishy? Would they bump as I pressed the full length of that cock inside me and rolled my hips around? Their harpoon head was more pointed than a human penis. Would I be able to feel that?

What about their tendrils?

Omi told me that Siatesh liked to use his tendrils... but for *what*?

I closed my eyes and imagined the last man in my slideshow was touching me with them and my clit swelled. I pressed it like a button, then slipped little circles around the hood, dipped my finger along the length of my slit. Each time, my panties grew a little wetter, my breath a little more strained. The fantasy felt taboo, *real*, and so electric, that I lifted my knees behind my elbows to hold myself open all the way and used my other hand to tease my perineum. The soles of my feet and my calves met the cold air, exaggerating my pussy's explosive heat.

A flash of Hunar's face between my legs made me pant, two hands squeezing my brown nipples, two clamped down on my thighs. I only knew it was him by the grey pallor of his tendrils and the growl of frustration. In his workshop, his annoyance made me wince, but here in my bed, my breath shuddered. Short tendrils wrapped around my thighs and crawled across my belly.

I flicked my clit back and forth, setting my forearm on fire with exertion. Every tendon was wound too tight to breathe, so my breath stuck in my chest, waiting, close, so close. And then I was coming as my legs shook, and for the first time in a long

time, I moaned with abandon, the sound ripped from my throat without permission.

As the orgasm faded, my circles grew lazier. I stretched my legs towards the edge of the bed and pulled the panties from my hip bones with clumsy fingers. That was...

Wow.

“BEO, turn off the slideshow.”

The holoscreen blinked out, but the lights remained dim. I pressed a dry spot on my underwear into my channel for good measure, soaking up the rest of my own fluids, then got to my feet on shaky knees. Padding naked to the kitchen, the cold air like a balm to my feverish skin, I folded the panties carefully so that none of the, uh, *evidence* was visible, then put them in a sealed plas bag.

“Tomorrow,” I told myself with a nod of conviction.

The contraband securely wrapped in one of my festive kitchen towels, I decided to throw on my pajamas, spike the last of my cider with rum, and watch *A Christmas Story* for the billionth time.

Sure, the embarrassment was real, and the circumstance was ridiculous. But no one had the right to waltz into *my* colony and decide who got to stay and who had to go. That ambassador was going to try to meddle with my holiday plans and Hunar’s life?

Fat chance.

12

) HUNAR (

Spiced, earthy *sachem* seed oil perfumed the bathroom as I tossed the empty hectaconorphine vial into the trash. I leaned my weight on the sink and stared at the mister perched on my shelf, the lines digging into my features deeper today than I remembered.

“Give that back!” Tahavir yelled from the hallway outside. I glanced at the door behind my foggy reflection in the mirror as he ran down the hall, chasing the others, his steps fading into the living room. No doubt Ladh had taken the first set of school supplies, warm off the printing bay.

They weren’t technically starting school, but “visiting” for now. Their teacher had been supportive in her message, finding a way to include them in activities so they’d feel normal, but the first few hours of school were off-limits. That time was reserved for human subjects, and considering the security risks, the teachers decided my brood couldn’t sit in those classes without permanent residency. It was a fair call, even if it compressed my morning hours at work.

But that also meant that I’d walk into a hangar already buzzing with people. Witnesses.

The tips of my tendrils shied away as I picked up the mister and finally looked at myself in the mirror. I was beyond a spritz here and there, so I uncapped the bottle and stepped into the shower, filling my palms with the *sachem* oil.

One by one, I coated my tendrils, flipping them over my head to get at the roots and the back of my neck. I wrapped one palm around my *senti*, which was so diminished it felt like the skin of my knuckles rather than smooth and strong, and tried stretching it long with the oil. I worked it until it felt

warm and my cock swelled just a tiny bit, rolling the end through my fingers and coating the base at the nape of my neck. It had been so long that it felt awkward to touch myself there again, but the breaths ebbed and flowed and my pulse thickened. I indulged for a moment, eyes closed, but ultimately felt chased by the cacophony outside the door.

So I moved on. I pressed my hands into my face and neck, across my chest and both sets of arms, careful to coat my sides. Then I rubbed the remaining oil into my cuticles, between my tendrils where they formed above my forehead, and in the sensory recesses along my jaw and cheekbones. It had been so long since I'd given a proper shit about what I looked like that I felt like I was drowning in *sachem* oil, constantly swallowing the overpowering perfume.

I stepped out of the shower, spritzed some soap over the rich plops of golden green oil on the tiles, then turned on the water so it wouldn't be slick later. Dabbing a towel over my features to make sure I wasn't too shiny, I inhaled for strength, then looked in the mirror again.

It... helped.

I was still obviously wasting, but a little vibrancy had returned. The grey had a blue tint to it now that, thanks to the oil, had an iridescent green sheen. It would have looked good on a healthier body.

Which made me even more self-conscious. Sure, engineers coiled and took care of themselves, but almost everyone I'd ever worked with didn't bother with oil. What was the point? We weren't office workers or scholars. Maybe you'd get the chance to hydrate your mane on days off, but otherwise, our jobs were gritty and physical. If it wasn't already gone by the end of the day, we'd have to wash it off anyway. That was the definition of creds down the drain.

There was a neon fucking sign on my forehead that flashed *Try-Hard*.

But I didn't have time to hide in the bathroom anymore. The spats were getting rowdy, and I didn't want them to be late. So I shoved on my coveralls and a clean white tabard, tying the coverall sleeves around my waist so my arms were bare and the sides of my ribs were exposed. It was what I wore everyday, but... not. It took physical effort not to slip my arms into the sleeves and latch up.

I growled, tossing my mane back and punching the door access open. Fuck me, but giving myself a makeover was nightmare fuel.

"No, *I* want the purple one! You got the pink one!" Ladh huffed, running towards their room. Both he and Tahavir screeched to a halt, gaping up at me.

I grunted, rubbing at my forehead self-consciously. Was I still too shiny? "Your holotab update finish?"

Ladh blinked first. "Yeah," he said, pointing to the steady light on the outside of his wrist. "And we ate breakfast."

Tahavir tugged on my tabard. "Baan, Ladh wants to take the purple fob for the door, but I changed my mind. I don't want the pink one. My bag is already pink, so the purple will stand out more."

"Uh..."

"But *my* bag is turquoise and the purple looks really good with it," Ladh interjected.

My brain short-circuited, entirely expecting them to ask why I smelled good, why I was wearing my uniform differently than every other day of my life, why the shower was still running...

But they just wanted to know which key fob they could have?

"Use the pink today. I'll get you another purple one from work." I gave them each a numb pat on the shoulder as their faces brightened.

"Twin fobs!" Ladh said.

“What’s a twin?” Tahavir asked as they bounded into the bedroom.

“That’s when two humans are born at the same time like us. Twins, triplets, quad... quadlets? And sometimes they look alike! I was reading about it last night...”

Reha sat at the counter over a bowl of grilled fruits and fish. She gave me a thin-lipped, tired smile that looked suspiciously like the one I wore often, then assessed my skin with a raised brow. “Morning.”

I grunted in response, programming a *hefi* for myself. The hot, nutty smell overpowered the *sachem* oil immediately. I watched the dark liquid brew, so similar to Bree’s morning *kauphee* ritual.

Did Tinsley drink *kauphee*?

“You smell nice today,” Reha added, prying. I glanced at her as the food bay slowed. “Is that *sachem* or *savadiy*?”

“*Sachem*.” I scratched my chin, picking up my drink and leaning against the counter opposite her. “Does it look okay?”

Reha sat up a little straighter, squinting with the sort of seriousness only spats were capable of as her mane curled thoughtfully. “It looks nice. I didn’t know they make it glittery like that. Can I try it?”

My immediate reaction was to say no, but I took a long sip of my drink instead. “You can try some this weekend. But the human spats don’t wear oils, so it might be overpowering when you’re at school. Ask the teachers today and see what they say.”

At that, Reha’s tired face brightened just a bit. She nodded vigorously. “Okay, I will.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Another minefield of fatherhood safely navigated.

Getting the spats out the door after that took my full attention. Finding shoes, checking bags, stuffing food in my mouth in between tasks. Once we were in the elevator, they

settled down enough to hear the music playing softly overhead. Tinsley's playlist for the holidays. I hadn't bothered to notice it before, but now that I looked at the ceiling, a few of the little cut-out snowflakes she'd made decorated one corner of the chrome wall.

"What are those?" Tahavir asked.

"I guess you've never seen snowflakes," I realized. My spats had always lived in the jungle. "Humans cut them out like this for their *Krismis*."

"What's that?"

"A winter festival Tinsley's organizing."

The spats counted snowflakes as we left the lobby, and by the time we made it to the school pod, I was exhausted with keeping them on task. The human spats were outside playing during a break when we approached, and an adult woman with straight black hair and black eyes waved, hopping down the pod steps.

"You must be Mr Fareshi!" she said, meeting us on the footpath. Little bells on a headband just like Tinsley's jingled as she dipped her head in greeting. "I'm Jihae Jeong, the teacher you spoke to via message?"

"Nice to meet you." I smiled, putting three of my hands on my brood's shoulders. "These are the spats."

She nodded slowly. "Reha, Ladh, and Tahavir," she said, nodding to each of them. "You can call me Miss Jeong, okay?"

As their new teacher led them up the stairs, Ladh and Tahavir raced to join her, but Reha stayed beside me, her mane inert to keep from projecting how nervous she felt. I crouched down next to her and picked up a little stick, scribbling in the dirt.

"Nervous?" I asked, squinting into the sun.

"They must all hate me already," she croaked, gripping my tabard in her much smaller hand.

I grunted. “No one out here seems to,” I mumbled, looking around at all the human children. There were maybe a dozen, playing with throwing discs and hand-held balls. When we looked around, plenty of them were watching us, but when our eyes met, they waved and smiled. “I bet if you apologize and explain what happened to Rambir, he’ll forgive you. He seems like a good spat.”

Reha blinked, the pink speckles beneath her coral eyes heating up. “Do I have to?”

“No, but not doing it is worse. You’ll think about it constantly, and trust me, it sucks.”

“Maybe...”

That was the most I could ask of my daughter just then. Standing up straight, I brushed my lower hand over her mane and gave her a pat. “Go on then.”

Miss Jeong leaned out of the pod door and motioned to Reha to join her. Another familiar face—Pom Pom—leaned out to say hi.

“Hey!” She was wearing a boa of silvery tinsel around her neck and a blue headwrap with snowflakes as she waved a pink toy wand with glittery ribbons exploding from the tip. Rambir looked over her shoulder, also waving. “Can I skip work today, Hunar?! We’re doing *Krismis* crafts this afternoon instead of material science!”

I crossed my arms as Reha sped up the stairs and pretended to think about it. “Fine, but bright and early! You can help me with the festival after you make up on inventory.”

“Aw, hell yeah!” Pom Pom disappeared back into the school and Miss Jeong clapped her hands with a stern look on her face, shooing them inside.

When I turned towards the hangar, I let out a breath.

Time to trust. I’d never had to leave them somewhere with other people since technically *I* had been the other people

during my visits over the years. With any luck, my brood would avoid another diplomatic disaster like the playfield.

Seas help me if they didn't.

13

) TINSLEY (

I blew a sweaty curl from my forehead as the tangerine sun, Surya, peaked in the sky. It was time for lunch at the hangar, and there was no way I'd miss it. Panties burning a hole in my bag or no.

What if all the guys could smell them anyway?

I stopped, my heart in my throat, staring at the open doors, the little transport ships, the shelving units, the big ceiling fans. Holiday rock music wafted out of the metal dome as the pilots moved deliveries in and out of their transpos, drones setting them down in orderly rows along the walls. I checked that I'd latched my bag just one more time, then gathered my courage and walked inside.

Piro was the first face that turned my way. He waved, escorting a crate towards the door with his holotab open. "Hey, Tinsley!"

"Hey!"

Perfect.

I met him part way and leaned my bag towards him inconspicuously. If I trusted anyone to be classy about getting a wiff of *eau de la culotte de Tinsley*, it was him. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Oh, just marking some stuff delivered before taking lunch. How about you?"

I pressed my lips together, then slowly unlatched my bag and cocked my hip towards him. Piro waited with a golden retriever smile, but nothing else changed. "Looking for Hunar. Is he here?"

“Sure! Should be at his workbench, but he’s been going back and forth to the printing bay, so if he’s not, just stick around for a few minutes.”

“Cool, thanks!”

I latched my bag back up with a snap and bounced across the hangar. My heart was still pitter patter like a jackalope, but at least I could be certain that no one could sniff me out. My pep restored, I sang along to *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* by DMX, lowering my voice and bobbing my head with each reindeer name like a middle-schooler that just “learned how to rap” over the winter vacation. “*Prancer* and *Vixen*, *Comet* and *Cupid* and—Hunar, I’m here!”

I breezed into the engineering lounge and came up short. Hunar had turned my way, a small piece of something spiky in his upper hands. His coveralls were tied low on his hips rather than covering the muscular landscape of his arms and chest. Shilpakaari didn’t have body fat—something to do with being cephalopods instead of mammals—and Hunar was apparently no exception, with shoulders so much wider than the trim waist his uniform hid beneath its baggy shape. He pushed his tendrils back, which caught the light in a golden green shimmer that perfectly complimented his bronze eyes and tapped the spiky thing in his hands with his thumbs.

“I started printing your twinkle lights. Two thousand to start but tell me if you need more than that.”

“Sure,” I set my bag on one of the break chairs and gave him a smile. “You look really nice today.” I took a deep breath. “And it smells *amazing* in here! Like...” *Sniff, sniff.* “Cardamom. And maybe beer. Toasted barley? Something earthy like that.”

He cleared his throat and brought the spiky thing to the table, setting it down in front of me. “It’s *sachem* oil. I bought some to try. If you... If you like it, you should compliment it in front of Zufi,” he added with a grimace.

Ohh...

Before I could say anything, he sat down next to me and dragged the spiky thing back into his hands. “Not gonna lie, you’re spontaneous and it’s gotten us into deep shit, Tinsley. But I’m willing to play the part,” he admitted quietly. “Looking like we’re feeling things out is more serious than me asking Imani to set me up on a couple of blind dates, so—” He motioned down to himself. “This is the best I can do to make myself look like we’re...”

“Starting to coil?” I filled in.

Hunar groaned, pressing his forehead into his knuckles. “This is so fucking awkward.”

I swallowed, looking at my bag. Was this the moment? I fussed with the latch, holding it on my lap, and nodded to Bajora’s food bay instead. Hunar didn’t need me to make things more awkward. He needed some friendly normalcy.

“Hey.” I nudged his bare arm with mine. “Let’s just eat lunch like normal people. I’m feeling a panini with cheddar, tomatoes, and turkey. And a root beer!”

“A what?”

“Don’t worry, I got it.” I hopped to my feet and flicked the food bay on. It hummed, warming up its printer heads as I typed in one of my favorite quick lunches. It bothered me less than other options because it was the kind of food you could get at a lunch joint for cheap rather than slave away at home for. “What do you want?”

“*Gheele* with black roe and two *amil* pockets.”

I typed it all in and sat down on Bajora’s table, waiting for the printer to spit out whatever it finished first. Hunar disinfected his hands with a spritz of a glowing blue gel, then pulled my jar of cider and two bidents out of a canister on the windowsill.

“How are your kids doing?”

The first pocket of steamy bread and fish dropped onto a plate.

“They started school this morning.”

“Were they excited?”

Hunar snorted, a grin quirking one side of his mouth. “I was excited. I wasn’t prepared for all this father stuff. It’s great, and I love them,” he assured me. “But it’s exhausting. I feel like a fish outta water these days unless I’m working.”

Another pocket fell to the plate, and I shuffled it out of the way to make room for a bowl. “I’m like that too, a fish out of water.” Hunar took the plate and picked up the glorified turnover with his upper hand.

“You seem well-adjusted to me.”

“I was a pastry chef back home.” When he blinked, I pointed at the food bay. “That. I was *that*. I made food by hand every day. It took hours. My hands hurt and my shoulders hurt and my feet hurt... It was sweaty, hard work and I loved it. I loved seeing someone’s face when they walked into *The Three Sisters* and saw how special it was. When they bit into a pastry I’d made before dawn and their stresses just melted away. There wasn’t a single day I didn’t feel like I was enriching people’s lives with my baking, you know?”

Hunar chewed slowly, pulling his first pocket apart piece by piece, leaning one hip against the workbench. He pushed the *gheele* out of the way and held out a bowl and plate with his lower hands. “Bowl or plate for your *puhnini*?”

“Plate.”

He set the plate in the bay then frowned down at his food. “What is *The Three Sisters*?”

“My bakery.”

“I don’t know what that is. It translates, but it’s a very old word.”

Hunar took our food and my drink to the break table while I pulled up pictures of *The Three Sisters* in the archives. I

looked at them often, so it wasn't new or shocking, but I'd never shared them with anyone other than Omi.

Our first big food blogger review had a lot of professional photos, so I went there first. I'd saved it, of course, along with pretty much everything I could find in the archives about my life. Social media, photos, playlists of all the songs I could remember ever liking. I didn't want to lose a single note of what I'd left behind.

"These are photos of my bakery." I grabbed my root beer from the food bay, then sat down next to him, holding out my arm so he could see my holoscreen. His eyes went wide.

"You made all of that food?"

I beamed. "Yup! Well, me and Sam. So one other person helped."

I lifted my panini one handed and took a big bite while he scrolled, taking in every cookie, macaron, and Danish. Like most days recently, I hadn't had breakfast, so I got lost in the melted strings of cheese and the burst of tomatoey sweetness mixed with salty cured meat. One bite down, I picked up my root beer and took a long swig.

"It's beautiful," he admitted, letting me take my arm back. "You're very talented."

I smiled, vision far away and dreamy. I nodded to his cider, not really looking at him anymore but at my cash register and Sam's smile and Adam's buffalo mug. "I made that too."

"I remember."

"The night I was abducted." Unsettled quiet descended between us. I cleared my throat and forced myself back from the blizzard and the bell over the door and Sam's hoarse shouting. "I was abducted outside of my bakery a few days before Christmas."

Hunar sighed, setting his cider down on the table, staring at it like it bit him. But he didn't give me platitudes or greeting

card sympathies. I appreciated that, just letting the grief make itself known before going back to sleep inside my soul.

“I’m from Dharatee, not Samridve,” Hunar said a moment later, picking his cider back up. He took another sip, savoring it. “It’s cold, and the sun is just this grey marble behind all the storm clouds most of the year. When I came here, I was shocked at how beautiful the sun was. Same star,” he clarified. “But just... different.”

“The sky *is* beautiful,” I admitted, handing him a bident so he could eat his *gheele*. The purple kelp and black roe smelled slightly of balsamic vinegar and capers.

“I bought a unit that overlooks the sunrise so my spats would get to see what I didn’t every morning. Then Corsa kicked them out, and I’m worried that the sunrise depresses them now. And if we can’t stay here, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to give it to them again. I saved for decades to get that unit and—” He bit off the rest of his sentence, nostrils flared with frustration. Inhaling slowly, he changed directions. “What I’m trying to say is thank you. Even if it doesn’t work out. And I’m sorry for all the things you’ve lost. Mine aren’t as big, but they hit hard. So I can’t imagine what it’s like for you.”

I nodded slowly, cradling my root beer. “Sometimes healing takes us far away,” I recited. I’d carried that piece of wisdom with me for a long time, wondering what I could possibly be healing from so far from my home that I’d never see it again.

But maybe I wasn’t here for myself. Maybe I was here to make sure Hunar and his kids got the chance instead.

Hunar chuckled and it *sizzled*. I glanced at him, sandwich jammed in my mouth, to see a *real* grin on his face. He leaned back in his chair and caught my eye, those three canines on one side glinting as his tendrils rolled over his shoulders and framed his face. My cheeks turned pink when he bit his lip in disbelief.

“A bouncing chaos machine one beat, a serene enigma the next. You’re really something, Tinsley, you know that?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I laughed.

We spent the rest of lunch talking holiday plans. With the twinkle lights printing, Hunar had moved on to the tree. The weird spiky caterpillar he’d been holding when I came in were supposed to be spruce branches. We talked about some changes and looked at any videos I could find. Since he didn’t know the human words, he hadn’t been able to do his own research.

It would take him a while to get it feeling just right, so he asked for other easier projects. At first, I was surprised, but then I realized we needed reasons to spend time together until Zufi left. It would help Hunar as much as it helped me with all the festivities, so I gave him a list. Festive pop-up tents for food and trinkets, more glitter spray, wrapping paper, ornaments for the tree, bows... We decided to order the glitter spray and have the wrapping paper printed in Samridve once Imani had designed it, but the other things he could get started on.

After finishing my root beer, I looked at the time and winced. “I need to get going. Wade and Mikaela are down at the playfield today making booths for the pop-up tents. They wanted to do a check-in.”

“Go. I have a lot I can work with until tomorrow.” Hunar screwed the cap back on the last of his cider and set it on the windowsill. “And leave the plates. I’ll clean up.”

I stacked them up anyway and brushed off the table just as a familiar, grating voice interrupted. “Oh, damn. I’d hoped to catch lunch with our newest couple. Guess it makes sense that you eat a turn earlier, since your work begins before office hours.”

Hunar and I both looked up at Zufi as he entered the engineering lounge and I swallowed hard. His piercing

attention immediately shifted to Hunar, walking down his figure like he was a stud up for auction rather than a person.

“Hello, Ambassador Zufi,” I said, trying to draw his attention away. “You’ll just have to come earlier next time.”

He hummed in agreement. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear oils, Hunar. *Sachem?*”

Hunar’s tendrils slithered behind his back, a sign of embarrassment or submission. He stalled, not sure what to say or how to act. I slipped my hand into the open side of his tabard and gripped his waist. He glanced at me, then at the floor, and leaned in after a heartbeat, putting a hand around my shoulder.

“Yes! It’s my favorite. Smells like cardamom back home,” I agreed. I looked up at Hunar with a misty, lovey dovey look. “And the gold sheen compliments his eyes so much, don’t you think?”

Zufi’s mane hissed as if he were laughing. “So it does. Well, it’s nice to see you bring out the best in him, Miss Tinsley. I’m looking forward to his full brilliance when it returns. Soon, I hope?”

My voice rose an octave out of nervousness as I picked up my bag and slung it over my shoulder. “Mhm! Totally. Honey, do you have time to walk me out?”

I practically pulled the poor man, which was a feat, considering our height difference. We both nodded coldly to Zufi as we passed, and I motioned to Piro.

“Hey, Tin!” he said. “And... *syālī?*”

I dragged him down by the collar and whispered with desperation. “*Go entertain Zufi. Go go go.*”

He jumped up with wide eyes, saluted, then bounded away. “*Got it!* Oh, hey, Ambassador! I didn’t know you were visiting!”

That taken care of, I pushed Hunar out the hangar doors and around the corner. He collapsed against the wall, shoulders

slumped, tendrils hanging slack. “*Chudthi*,” he breathed. “I wasn’t expecting him. I should have fucking known—”

I opened my bag with shaking hands as we both fought to catch our breath. My brow creased as I withdrew the pair of panties wrapped in a towel from its deep pocket. I hadn’t forgotten about it, but I thought with how lunch went, that I didn’t need to give it to him after all. Seeing Zufi though made my blood boil with anger and Hunar’s freeze with fear. As terrified as I was, as much of a disaster as it could be, I needed to give him the option. That much was crystal clear.

“Hey, Hunar?”

“What?” He sounded agitated now, impatient. I winced inwardly, licked my dry lips, and squeezed my eyes shut.

“I made this for you. Wow, that sounds *way* worse when I say it out loud, but it’s true. I’m not sure if you want it, or if it’ll make you mad, um... I-I just want to help, and this is the best thing I could come up with. So just let me know if it helps and I can give you more. But it’s up to you. You can choose what to do with it.”

Trembling, I held out the sealed panties, afraid to look at Hunar’s face. I watched his hands as he took it with hesitation, slipping the towel aside. His breath hitched.

“Tinsley—”

My voice squeaked as I interrupted him. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Then I turned on my heel and power walked away.

14

) HUNAR (

After Tinsley gave me her gift, I wrapped it up tight, shoved it in my bag, and slammed the door on my locker. Then I paused, hand on the latch, staring a hole through the red metal.

Had Tinsley just given me her underwear?

I couldn't be sure since the package was vacu-sealed, but there was a trace of something on the outside where she'd handled it afterwards. As I'd pushed aside her towel to touch the plas, my sensitive palm had picked up something mouthwatering...

Fuck. It had to be underwear.

Right?

I was torn between annoyance and unhealthy curiosity. Tinsley had always been a thorn in my side, breezing in, making demands, distracting people while we were trying to get work done on a deadline. She'd royally fucked us over by improvising our relationship, and now I was stuck between *Krismis* and Zufi's pursuit clause.

But I wasn't totally impartial either. Tinsley had slipped her palms across my bare arm and back... I might have been taking coil withdrawal meds, but that didn't mean I'd burned off my fucking sensory buds. She tasted like hard work and bright, fizzy zeal. She used plain soap and made things with her hands. They were covered in traces of mud, plas, adhesives... And they weren't soft. She had callouses, long, thin scars, and even an old burn on her forearm that had healed into a smooth, smoky patch of dark skin. She was a pain in the ass, yeah, but maybe that dogged determination was actually her super power. And maybe I was starting t-

“Everything alright?” Bajora asked. I jumped, my tendrils flaring.

“Yeah, fine,” I said too quickly.

Bajora’s handsome mane drifted towards the lockers, a perplexed curl in their tips. I crossed my arms and blocked the vent. Bajora was keener than most shilpakaari men. Like a bloodhound. It’s what made him such a good culinary engineer.

“Piro pulled Zufi out to see the *milibol* hives. He’ll be gone for a couple hours.”

I blinked, surprised. The hives were huge and undisturbed, probably centuries old. Bajora had found them following those sensitive tendrils within weeks of us moving in. He had a small operation out there, knowing the sweet *madhu* was a comfort to the humans. It reminded them of something called *hunni*.

No, *honey*... Shit. Tinsley had used the same word as an endearment.

“*Chudthi*,” I hissed, heat climbing my tendrils like flames.

“What?”

“Nothing, just—you’re okay with that?”

Bajora shrugged, but there was a bitter set to his jaw. “Zufi won’t say anything if I send him a care package once in a while. Our little secret.”

“Thanks.”

He glanced at the locker behind me. “Tinsley’s right. You deserve to stay. I’m just doing what I can.”

“You agree with her a lot for a woman that hates your life’s work. How unexpectedly humble.”

When he turned, grabbed our plates, and tossed them in the cleaner, my shoulders eased. I glanced at the locker, half-tempted to burn the package that was making me defensive but

grabbed the prototype of the tree needles instead. A tree with needles? Fucking wild.

“I like Tinsley. A lot. She’s a handful, and you know me.” Bajora gave me a roguish grin and a wink as he walked to his workbench. “That’s my favorite kind of person. Besides, she’s right about that too. The food bays, I mean.”

“Right.” I shuffled all her plans together and tossed them on the shelf with my name on it.

“Come here, I’ll show you.”

Bajora programmed something into the food bay out of muscle memory. The machine, already warmed up, spit out a pastry similar to the *amil* pocket I’d yet to eat. Bajora held each one up in his upper hands, catching the light.

“This is something called a *samosa*. It’s from the part of Earth that Naitee and Rambir Patel came from. They’re really similar, but the Earth version is stuffed with vegetables instead of fish.”

“Okay,” I said, following impatiently. I had a tree to design and twinkle lights to pull off the printing bay.

“What differences do you see?”

I squinted. “I don’t. They’re both pastries and shaped like pyramids.”

Bajora shook his head and tapped on their corners with the index fingers of his lower hands. “The *samosa* is perfectly even. Every corner is the same amount of pointy, the same golden brown. The flaky bits are even the same shape. You see that?”

Now that he’d pointed it out, I did see it. “Huh.”

“Right now, there’s one variant to each human recipe except for the ones my data says are the most popular in the colony. Tea, *kauphee*, *tōst*, so on, so forth. So this *samosa*? If we print a hundred of them, they’ll all be exactly the same.”

He set it down, cut it open, and steam wafted out, exposing complex spices and rich chunks of vegetables in a minced paste. But the two halves of the *samosa* were identical. Three green chunks, two red specks...

Bajora repeated the *amil* pocket print twice more and set them all on a plate. “Our food has hundreds of variants that are selected at random for each recipe. It feels natural to eat because culinary engineers have had two centuries to figure out how to engineer our food that way.”

“Well, shit,” I said, impressed. Bajora smiled, handing me one of the *amil* pockets while he ate the other. “Guess I never paid attention, eating the same three meals on a ship for so many years.”

Bajora hummed in the affirmative. “Most people think that it’s a one-generation problem. The next generation grows up without the variety or more realistic printing ingredients, therefore doesn’t miss the taste. But a lack of culinary variants in yiwreni food was linked to higher rates of depression and dissociation when they lost their planet. Same with universal syn-cuis on ISU vessels. Our bodies are hardwired for certain vitamins and minerals, and it’s really hard to replicate that without ingredients from the source. That’s why getting a culinary engineer into the human colony was top priority instead of, I don’t know—”

“A trauma therapist?”

We both huffed with bitter laughter. Every time I’d requested one be stationed with us, Zufi said he was still looking.

Bajora shook his head. “And there are some foods we just *can’t* print. Like *yoaghurt*, for example.”

“Why not? It’s a food, that doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, except it’s a bacterial culture, which is something no other species eats. Food bays are regulated for safety because we’ve forgotten how to cook from scratch. No raw ingredients that might cause food poisoning. Molecular chem

bays—the industrial ones? That’s the only way to print a lot of the stuff humans like to eat.”

“I always did wonder why you were recruited.”

Bajora flipped me off like Bree, grinning as he picked up the plates. “The point is... when Tinsley complains about the food bays? She’s right.”

He popped a pocket into his mouth and slid the *samosas* into his organic waste compressor.

) (

At the end of a long day, I usually fell into bed naked from the shower. Joints creaking, so tired I felt weak, it was lights out almost immediately. I never dreamed anymore, and when I did, I couldn’t hold onto it long enough to remember what it was I’d seen or done. It was the steady march of a man that life had thoroughly tenderized, like tough meat under a steel hammer.

But tonight? I knelt in the middle of my bed in my briefs, still dirty from work, and shaking from withdrawal. I was a live wire, staring at the two options life had given me: a vial of hectaconorphine I was two hours late in taking and a slim little package wrapped in a red festive tea towel.

The spats had all been sleeping for an hour or more. I’d walked by their room twice to listen for muted conversation or vid feeds. In a blatant violation of privacy, I’d accessed my secure network and checked in with BEO in silence. Nothing probing, just whether or not the brood had lights on or if their linguitors were broadcasting airwaves. As soon as the colony AI confirmed they were asleep, I’d closed his portal.

I gritted my teeth and unwrapped Tinsley’s gift with quaking fingers.

This time, the hunger was *real*. There was no hectaconorphine in my system to dull my instincts or numb

my senses. Whispering my fingers over the bag's seal, I tasted that same, mind-bending flavor. Salty, a bit like the ocean, and sweet. Whatever it was, the traces were thicker than water, and full of nutrition that clenched my throat in desperation. My *senti* rumbled for the first time in years, vibrating along the top of my spine, sending excited sparks all along my nervous system.

I tossed the bag down with a groan of frustration.

If I did this, I wouldn't need to be on hectaconorphine or use colorized oils. I wouldn't feel weak and tired and like an asshole all the time. My focus would return, and food wouldn't taste like ash anymore. Zufi would let me stay. I'd be a person with control over my own life again and actually feel capable of taking care of my children...

But was it any different than what I'd had with Corsa?

This wasn't real. Tinsley was offering to help me, but she wasn't offering me a real coil. She'd promised she'd give me more, but *fuck*, did I want that? Another woman giving me doses of pheromones that I'd need to ration? An *arrangement* rather than feeling full?

Everyone would know.

I let out a shuddering, anxious breath.

My spats would know.

Would it tear them apart? Would they hate me even more? Reha had just started to come out of her shell. It had been less than a week since...

I stopped pacing, fixated on the shiny little bag.

Tinsley wasn't Corsa.

I knew that all the way through my mane. There wasn't a single self-serving, malicious bone in that tiny human's body. In fact, everything she did was out of blinding, aggravating love. She was a glitter-coated bouncy ball in a pottery shop, but her heart was in the right place, mounted on her forehead like a neon sign.

Everything she did was for family.

I snatched the bag before I could change my mind and locked myself in the hallway bathroom. Blinking against the bright white fixtures, I leaned against the door. “BEO, start the shower.” Water fell from the ceiling like a waterfall, echoing around the chrome and tile.

Lifting the bag to the light, I examined the pattern on the underwear inside. It was decorated in white and red striped hooks that I knew were a human food. I’d seen a photo of them wrapped in bows and displayed in Tinsley’s bakery. The absurdity pulled a nervous laugh from my chest. Of course she’d drawn blobby food onto her underwear. Meanwhile I was about to eat her like—

My throat bobbed as I swallowed hard, catching my own stare in the mirror.

I ripped the seal open and bowed my head. Seductive musk slightly tainted by a hint of plas from the bag wafted up to meet my tendrils as they probed the fabric with their tips. The familiar taste of Tinsley’s skin sank into my tongue as my mane took over conscious thought, acting on instinct.

As soon as one of my more sensitive minor tendrils slithered into the meticulous folds of the fabric, my vision shook. A bass growl so powerful my knees nearly gave out reverberated through my skull and spine. My shoulders slammed into the door as I lost my balance, grappling the towel bar above my head with my upper hands for support.

This wasn’t just a pair of underwear Tinsley had worn for a day. This wasn’t anything at all like a vial of diluted pheromones. This was real, heady musk, worked into the fabric, taken directly from the seas of her mantle.

Tinsley came wearing these.

For me.

My *sentì* swelled so quickly that it tumbled over my shoulder, hot and tingling from the stretch. I panted like a runner as that scorching itch raced through my skin.

Chartreuse blood coursed just beneath my flesh, stripes still murky but strobing like an emergency drone. I pushed my briefs down until they caught on my thighs, just enough for my cock to bob free, erect against my stomach as fresh pearls plumped to their full size within my reservoir.

I moaned with perverse fascination as I watched the ball ridges swell along the underside of my shaft in the mirror. I grabbed the base with one lower hand and squeezed, pearly cum dripping from the tip in a steady stream to the floor.

But the underwear was disappearing into my mane. It would fuel me, locked in my *senti* at the base of my neck, but I was greedy. Delirious and at war with myself. I was too hungry for the gift Tinsley had given me to give them up. With a snarl, I snatched the fabric with my free hands, ripped it open, and pressed Tinsley's seas directly into my mouth as my *senti* curled itself through one of the leg holes and pulled.

My pupils blew wide open as I sucked on the fabric, color burning into my retinas as my body devoted itself to the coil. My cock pulsed in my vice grip, already coming without a single stroke. Pearl after pearl squeezed its way past my fingers, rolled off my thighs and fell to the floor.

Stripped of self-control, my hands left Tinsley's underwear and two wrapped around my shaft, still hard and begging to pump, to fuck, to *bind*. My *senti* claimed its gift as I closed my eyes and thought of Tinsley's bare ass raised to the sky, ripe for the taking.

Stupidly indulgent. Taboo. Not at all what she agreed to give me, but her coil's tide was so strong, I was drowning.

So I let go and frenzied until the floor was slick with pearls.

“What do you think, Mr Sayeb?”

I held up a silvery star about the size of my head by a length of floss. It twirled in the gentle breeze, catching on magenta foliage. The *biria* tree that had nearly destroyed Omi’s shop during the rainy season still butted up against one side of the shack, though most of it had been carved away to make a bench. Select branches cast shade on the trunk for people to relax on.

I was standing on top of the trunk-made-bench, waiting for Mr Sayeb’s response. His mute smile was much wider than usual, and his gaze was focused. He patted his hand against his knee as Omi brushed his hair, and holiday music wafted gently through the air off her holotab.

I took that as approval and hung the star among the others, humming to the wobbly melancholy tones of Elvis Presley’s *Blue Christmas* while I wound blue tinsel around the dark pink branches.

“They lookin’ good, Tin.” Omi swayed her hips, murmuring the words she knew of the song while she ran her hands through Mr Sayeb’s hair. He closed his eyes and inhaled a deep, calm breath.

“Thanks! It’s nice to get away from all the—” My thumb buzzed several times, telling me new messages had arrived. I plopped down on the bench and opened my holotab. “Nice! Another volunteer for glitter spraying the ferns!”

The *Renata Rag* had pulled through with fireworks. The Christmas holiday was front-page news while Zufi was on page four. I’d cackled gleefully seeing that. No doubt he

thought he'd be the center of attention while he was visiting. Whoever published the *Rag* was in on the spite, and I loved it.

The sheer number of messages I'd received from volunteers was mind-blowing though. My spreadsheet of jobs was filling up fast too. But with all the offers to print holiday treats, decorations, wrapping paper, bows, and whatever else people could think of, there came equally as many questions. Will Chanukah be included? Kwanzaa? Solstice? Lunar New Year?

I'd been so focused on my quest to recreate Christmas that I'd forgotten that other people were aching for their own traditions too. It had been a blow to my good spirits at first, since *nokhomipan* had been so diligent in passing down Cree traditions to a wily teenage girl.

So I'd officially renamed the event the Winter Festival. Everyone seemed alright with a multi-holiday potluck on the playfield to start, but next year we'd have working groups, each of which would organize their own holiday's space in the festival. I wanted everyone to enjoy themselves and be happy. I just didn't have enough eggs in my basket to manage it all this time around.

I *could* make Mr Sayeb's afternoon happy though. He'd been badly injured during his abduction and didn't speak anymore, but we knew from the social media archive that he'd lived in London with his wife after their kids had left for college, practiced Islam, and ran a gorgeous candle and potpourri shop. Eid al-Fitr wasn't held in the winter, but he'd posted once about displaying silvery stars and blue candles around the front of his shop for the holiday. I didn't have a lot of brain space left, but silvery stars? I could *totally* make that happen.

"What ya think of Sati and I printing the ingredients you need for di cider?" Omi asked, trimming behind Mr Sayeb's ears. "You'll need a lot of it."

My mouth watered just thinking about it. I'd given the last of my cider to Hunar after he said he liked it. "That's a great

idea! Thanks for offering.”

I sent Omi a list as she focused on trimming the back of Mr Sayeb’s neck in an even line. Settling in, I crossed my legs and took a swig of water after all the stars were up. There were a lot of messages to catch up on. Wade wanted to check in on the booths that he, Mikaela, and the uids were building. I’d already assigned several of them and he wanted the list: the teachers were planning a booth for face painting and a holiday kid art raffle, and a few artisans were going to barter hand-embroidered stockings, painted plates, caricature portraits... I was giddy with excitement, but slightly bitter. I counted myself an artist too, but there was no way for me to express myself. Helping those artisans get in contact with Wade made me feel stuffy with warm-hearted jealousy.

My stomach grumbled and I jumped, water dribbling down my chin.

“*Watstakats,*” I swore, frantically checking the time. I was either late to my daily lunch date with Hunar or about to be. I swiped over to our comms and found an unread message.

11:62, Hunar Fareshi: Taking a personal day.

12:04, Tinsley Adams: Oh, okay! No problem. I’ll see you tomorrow :)

“Phew!”

“What’s up?”

I glanced up at Omi as I rolled over onto my stomach and kicked my feet up into the air. “I thought I was going to be late to lunch at the hangar, but Hunar’s taking a personal day.” I beamed at her and made grabby hands towards her lunch cooler. She rolled her eyes with a smile and tossed me a package of chocolate and chili.

I wriggled happily. “You know me so well!”

Siatesh jumped down from the shop's roof, where he often sat and wrote comms to his siblings. His lustrous black mane crashed around his face with a chorus of thuds like snake tails, golden stripes glowing in the sunlight. He turned his yellow eyes on me, closing his holotab, and crouched over the lunch cooler.

"You said he's taking the day off?" he asked, withdrawing a sealed bowl of shilpakaari ceviche.

I lowered a couple squares of chocolate into my piping hot chili. "Mphm," I confirmed, tongue curled around the corner of my mouth in anticipation as I stirred. Siatesh and Omi exchanged a glance, and my stomach jumped. "Why?"

I blinked up at them innocently. Omi let out a puff of air, her eyes growing wide.

"You *did* do it, didn't y—Why am I asking? Ah course, ya did!"

"Did what?"

Siatesh glanced between us as Omi brushed the shavings of hair from Mr Sayeb's shoulders. "Congratulations on your new coil, Tinsley."

I choked on that first scorching spoonful of lunch and bolted upright. "Wait, he used them?"

A glint of observant interest caught in Siatesh's gaze. "Used what?"

My pulse spiked, face turning cherry tomato red. After I'd bolted from the hangar the day before, I hadn't let myself dwell on the panties I'd shoved into Hunar's hands. I thought he'd be angry with me and throw them out. If I was being honest, it stung a little to think that was his most likely reaction.

So instead of worrying about something I'd already thrust into the world and had no control over anymore, I'd done my usual thing. Meaning, I'd kept myself so productive that there was no time to think about it. I'd gone down to the playfield

where Wade and his team were building booths, then checked in with Imani about designing wrapping paper. I'd even tracked down Marcella's unit number and gave her a report. She was perplexed but amused and already halfway into a bottle of universal wine.

Then, when I had no one else to message and I found myself staring at Hunar's comms like a psycho, I'd cleaned every nook and cranny of my bathroom with a spare toothbrush.

"I, uh, gave him a pair of—" I glanced at Mr Sayeb. He was watching the stars as they caught the sunlight, bobbing to and fro amongst the pink leaves. So instead of saying it out loud, I pointed to my crotch with a sheepish grin.

Omi gave me an approving grin. "Sly girl."

Siatesh blinked away and cleared his throat. "We saw Bajora walk Hunar's spats to school this morning. With all the confusion surrounding your relationship, I suspected your clever ruse had become genuine. It surprised me to see you this morning, truthfully."

"Oh, it's... it's not real," I admitted, hands falling into my lap. "But Zufi was on to us, and I couldn't think of anything more convincing, you know?"

Siatesh's mane swirled thoughtfully as he set Omi's lunch on her worktable. Mr Sayeb stood, and I helped him to his bench to be surrounded by stars, offering him some chocolate. He took a square and looked up at the display.

"I promise you, it's real for him," Siatesh warned, taking a broom from Omi to sweep the floor without a word. She sat, opened her lunch, then pointed her bident at me.

"Encoiled men go through a lot of changes, Tinsley. They get obsessive, territorial—"

"Protective," Siatesh suggested.

"Needy," Omi hedged.

"Attentive."

They gave each other a teasing look until Omi's face broke into a bright smile.

“The point is, Hunar can't help it. He'll see you as his *priya* because *ya are* his *priya*. Even if his mind knows better. So just take good care of him and communicate clearly, okay? Coiling requires a lot of trust.”

I nodded, the responsibility as heavy as an anvil in my stomach. I stood by why I'd offered, and even if Siatesh was wrong and Hunar wasn't in my coil, I already felt a sense of emotional ownership over his situation. I didn't want his family to get kicked out of the colony, and if this dumb fake dating act wasn't cutting it, it was my job to decide how far I'd go to help them stay.

“He'll need more,” Siatesh added as an afterthought.

I nodded slowly, eating a chunk of chocolate. I felt a lot less self-conscious now that my friends hadn't teased me for making an immature or brash decision. “How often?”

Siatesh weighed the options. “Every other day, perhaps? He's not well, which means he'll be far more desperate to appease the hunger. I suggest keeping an extra pair with you when you're together.”

“And his tendrils might reach for you without him knowing,” Omi added. “Scares the spirit right outta me sometimes.”

Siatesh smiled into his food, taking hold of one of her long box braids with his tendrils as if they were holding hands. Every time he reached for her, my heart melted. He was a standoffish kinda guy, but as sweet as molasses where Omi was concerned.

I put my hands on my hips and chewed my lip, dipping my spoon into the chili as I began to pace. My stomach was in knots. I couldn't imagine Hunar acting with me the way Siatesh did with Omi. What if this was too awkward? What if he kept postponing our next lunch meeting because he didn't want to see me? Had I royally screwed our first Christmas?

Whenever energetic anxiety like this hit me back home, I always made bagels from scratch. They were a low hydration dough that made my arms burn. Kneading the crap out of them was like meditation. It centered me in ways that other activities couldn't.

But I couldn't! Not here with the stupid food bays and the stupid lack of ingredients or, hell, even ovens to play pretend! I couldn't knead bagel dough or glaze donuts or mix apple pie filling with my bare hands. Damn it, it was so maddening!

My foot rolled over something hard, and I squeaked, flailing for balance. I stepped aside and picked up a cracked *biria* nut. Its insides were creamy white, cushioned by the aubergine shell falling off in shards in my palm.

“*Watstakats...*”

I stared at it in wonder.

It looked *exactly* like an acorn inside.

And acorns?

They were used by my Cree ancestors to make flour.

“You may want to wash your hands,” Siatish noted. “Those are poisonous, particularly raw.”

My heart started racing for an entirely different reason.

“Poisonous for who?”

Siatish tilted his head. But I was already on the move. I gave Mr Sayeb a kiss on the forehead and ran down the hill towards the clinic, a handful of nuts crushed in my palm.

16

› HUNAR ‹

After sending Tinsley a comm about skipping today's lunch, I blew out a breath and brushed back my tendrils with a shaky upper hand, my lower elbows pressing divots into the dining room table. I'd spent twenty minutes massaging that stupid fucking message.

Taking a personal day.

Before, it would have taken me seconds. Before, it wouldn't have mattered how my tone came across. Before, I wouldn't have even considered giving her a heads up.

My fingers gripped my mane with biting strength. I'd forgotten what a new coil was like.

Anxious, impatient, scattered.

Electric, scorching, constantly hard.

Even for a human hurricane that had been a royal pain in my ass for *months*.

There was no way I could face her today. I needed a buffer or else the moment I saw her, I'd push her up against my locker and do something we'd both regret. It had been years since I'd felt a fresh coil, and they'd never been *anything* like this. Tinsley had knocked open my instincts with a battering ram and the implications of being absolutely willing and ready to fuck a bouncy ball of absolute annoyance like Tinsley was more than my brittle personality could handle just then.

Because I would. Handle her, that is. With all of my hands and tendrils. If Tinsley gave me even an inch today—one of those little smiles that made her button nose scrunch up, or a bouncy wave hello—I'd tear her clothes off in front of the

entire hangar and find out just exactly how much pressure it would take to leave marks on her skin.

My tendrils would leave marks no matter how gently I bound her limbs. Human flesh looked so delicate. Would my marks be the same color as her blood? Rich, bright crimson like my stripes... The thought was satisfying on a base level. But no. No, she'd look like when we got into a fight. Her cheeks would flush with that deep, dusty pink and her skin would grow hot and slick. How far would that blush go? What did her chest look like? Humans were mammals. Did that mean all of the human women were walking around with buttons on their chests like yiwreni? What would hers taste like? If we had another brood, would her chest swell and drip with—

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, shoring up my strength of will. These were all questions I'd never answer. Building a wall in my mind, I chanted to myself the mantra I would need to live by for the next few weeks.

It's not real. It's not real. It's not real.

I just needed one day to catch my bearings. Then her taste would thoroughly coat my tendrils and I'd have enough control to be civil. Still a mess, just not a feral mess.

She was so small though... One of the smallest human adults in the colony. I was the shortest among the delegates, and even I towered over her. Fuck me, but if I *did* lose control, I could really do some damage. What was she thinking, putting herself in jeopardy like that? Didn't she know how dangerous I was to her? How much I wanted to wrap my *senti* around her throat and force her to admit that I was the best, the only, the—

My nostrils flared, tendrils spinning tightly over the underwear still clutched against the back of my neck.

No.

She *didn't* know how dangerous a coil this strong could be.

She *didn't* know that my instincts saw her as a bleeding fish on a line and I was the shark.

This was a perfectly on-brand Tinsley Act of Stupidly Spontaneous Selflessness. If I wasn't currently fighting a civil war in my mind, I'd berate her from Hell to high waters.

My shoulders softened, emotions swinging like a pendulum. All that frustration didn't mean I wasn't grateful, though. No matter how I sliced it, Tinsley might have just saved my life. Wasting disease was a slow illness, sure, but insidious and persistent. Most men never fully recovered. Tinsley's coil was a different beast though. Stronger than the strongest stimulants and synthetic pheromones. No doctor would have believed my transformation had happened in less than fourteen hours.

Zufi would be over the fucking moon about it.

A less jaded man might take the intensity of her coil as evidence of her extreme interest, a thought that made my tendrils perk up with excitement. But I knew better. She wasn't attracted to me after the shit I'd said to her over the past year. She'd cooked up this plan for access to my fucking printing bay. *Quid pro quo*.

It didn't explain the extra mile she'd gone for me, though. She'd defended me in front of Zufi, forgiven me for being an asshole, then offered up her most intimate taste. She'd been so nervous that her voice shook...

Because she didn't want to make *me* uncomfortable.

I felt like a creep, realizing now just how much I was getting out of this arrangement. I'd need to go all-in on this *Krismis* thing she obsessed over, or else the guilt would eat me alive.

The spats' door slid open and Reha turned the corner. She blinked at me, her coral-colored stripes blushing just a little brighter against her turquoise skin.

"Woah."

I took a deep breath and sat up straight. Though her only memories of me were as a grey and teal husk, there was no hiding that her coloring took after mine now. My daughter hated me most of the time, and for good reason. Would she hate me for this too? I fought the urge to curl my tendril tips in apprehension as her wide eyes grazed my bright red stripes.

“Morning, sweetheart,” I said with a rasp.

Tahavir and Ladh joined soon after, rubbing their eyes. “Morning? It’s lunch, Baan. You didn’t wake us up for scho—” Ladh froze, jaw slack, Tahavir bumping into his shoulders with a sleepy grunt.

I cleared my throat when none of them said anything, then motioned three hands to the other chairs at the table. “Sit.”

For once, they did what I asked without fussing over it. Three adolescent butts slid into their seats, knowing exactly what my vibrant colors meant. Tahavir stared at my throat, brushing his fingers over his own with awe. Little white speckles had begun to form along his red throat, signifying that his colors there would come in soon. His first.

“Baan, you look—”

“Really good,” Ladh finished for him.

“Why is your *senti* so long? Your mane is way shorter.”

“I always thought your markings would be blue...”

“Shush.” Reha’s tendrils shivered, shutting down her brothers as she met my eyes, waiting. She put her only two hands on the table and laced her fingers together.

“My contract is up in a few weeks,” I said, starting with the easy part. Funny... It would have been the hard part, had I told them earlier. “The ambassador wasn’t planning to renew because I didn’t meet one of the requirements.” Tahavir’s chair creaked. “Coiling with a human.”

“But now you have,” Reha guessed. I nodded like a human, then roiled my tendrils in uneasy confirmation. “So do we meet your new *priya*?”

That word made me grimace, especially coming from my daughter.

“You already have,” I croaked, motioning to my cheek with a tendril. “It’s Tinsley.”

A flash of nerves crossed my daughter’s face, but she swallowed it down. “Is that why you were so mad on the playfield?”

I sighed, glancing at the ceiling. This was absolute torture. “I was mad because you hurt someone. It was reckless and stupid.” Rubbing a hand over my face, I decided to just spit it out. “Tinsley and I aren’t really together. She’s helping me fulfill my contract, and I’m helping her with a human festival.”

“So you aren’t...?”

I squeezed my eyes shut at Tahavir’s lewd finger motions. “No.”

“Then how did you—”

I coughed. Loudly. “Look, I know your lives have sucked lately. I don’t have a lot of practice being your baan. It’s okay if you love and miss your maan, even if I don’t, and there’s no pressure here for you to pretend that you like me right now. Or ever.” I pointed at all three of them, catching their eyes with intensity. “But I do need you to pretend that this thing Tinsley and I are trying out is real, even though it’s not. She’s a nice person trying to help us stay here in Renata, and that’s it. There won’t be any adult sleepovers or new broods or distractions. We’re going into this as a family. A *team*. I want to be crystal fucki—ah, *fudging* clear about that. Got it?”

“Got it,” the boys echoed together, their eyes shining with excitement.

“I don’t.” Reha tapped her fingers on the table, a crease in her brow. “I mean, how can it be fake? Look at your colors, Baan. It’s not like you painted them on or something.”

I looked down at myself, my *senti* sliding over my shoulder, tasting the table absently. “The coil is physically real, but we aren’t in a relationship. Strictly professional.”

Yeah right. If the two hours I’d spent before dawn cleaning the bathroom floor were any indication, I’d flushed professionalism down the shower drain along with nearly a dozen pearls.

“Then all the normal stuff we learned in school applies, doesn’t it?” Reha asked. “You’ll have a bad temper and spend all your time with her.”

My instinct was to deny it, but I couldn’t lie to them. “Spending time? No. It’s not real, remember? We aren’t...” I opened my mouth, then closed it, choking on the words.

“Having sex?” Reha asked.

Did shil girls *really* learn about this stuff so early? I winced and nodded, my colors flaring instinctually. “Right. But the temper thing, I don’t know. It’s been a long time since I went through this, and I’ve been around the block. If I get territorial, it’ll be about Tinsley’s attention, not you guys fighting over the bathroom.” I winced, forcing my next words out. “Do you guys have any... questions?”

Please, *please* don’t have questions.

“Yeah, what should we call her when we’re pretending?”

I turned my lower palms up on the table as I sat back in my chair. “You can just call her Tinsley if you want. She won’t be insulted by that.”

Ladh hummed thoughtfully, crossing his arms as Tahavir perked up. “What about your *senti*? Why is it so long, Baan?”

I blinked at them with confusion, then shuffled in my seat awkwardly. “Your maan never told you?” All three of my spats shook their heads.

“Told us what?” Reha asked nervously. Her tendrils slipped behind her shoulders. “Is it hereditary? Contagious?”

I chuckled bitterly, pressing my tongue into my canines. I wasn't mad at Corsa for keeping me in the shadows. I was mad at *me*. How could I have been so closed off from my own brood that they didn't know what their baan was?

I had so many shortcomings to make up for.

"Taha, why don't you get breakfast, er, *lunch* started. Reha? Games. Ladh? I know you've been scrolling through human vids, so put something on you think we'll all like."

"We aren't going to school?" Ladh asked, a sparkle in his gaze.

"Not today. I'll comm your teacher, then I'm gonna tell you about your family on Dharatee. There's *a lot* your fancy boarding schools probably didn't teach you."

I ran into the hangar as fast as I could the next afternoon, sweat tickling the back of my neck.

The medical researcher and father-to-be, Ezra, confirmed that *biria* nuts were safe for humans to eat.

My answering squeal of excitement had threatened to shatter the windows.

I'd immediately gathered as many as I could find in the dark, carrying them home in the drape of my t-shirt and pockets, which bulged like chipmunk cheeks. Then I spent all night drying the shells—and all in the food bay heater, which was definitely *not* supposed to act like an oven—and grinding the testa down on a makeshift mortar and pestle. My arms were rubber, but I didn't care.

I could figure out how to bake again!

Fuck yeah!!!

“Sorry, I'm late, Hunar! I—”

I skidded to a halt, jaw falling open.

The only way I knew the stone-cut muscles and bright turquoise coloring of the man with his back turned to me was Hunar was because he stood at his workbench. His tendrils were longer, *thicker*, and though they only reached his upper shoulder blades, one red-striped tendril hung heavier and lower than the rest, brushing his hips. It was his *sentis*, no doubt. I'd never seen any of the others display their *sentis* like that, and suddenly my throat felt like a desert.

Hunar turned around, the same grouchy bronze eyes taking me in. He blinked, jaw ticking, fingers crawling across

his workbench as he gripped the edge. His entire mane, including his *senti*, slipped over his shoulders towards me.

“*Watstakats*,” I breathed.

“What?” he asked hoarsely.

I shook my head, trying to rein in my stampeding heartbeat. “It’s like saying geez in Cree. Family habit. What I meant to say is, you... you look *great*, Hunar.”

What had been murky stripes on his forearms, tendrils, and neck now flashed cranberry red in a wave.

“*Woah.*”

Hunar cleared his throat, trying to maintain a sense of professionalism. “I couldn’t sleep last night so I came in early. Ornaments, tinsel, tree needle garlands... Do they look alright?” He motioned around the lounge, and I dropped my bag of flour, covering my mouth in shock.

“Oh my god!” The lounge was like Santa’s workshop. Fake evergreen hung from the grid above, draped alongside tinsel in silver, red, and green. Giant red velvet bows were hooked all along the shelves, and the tools had been shoved back to make room for canisters of ornaments, twinkle lights... *Were those nutcrackers?*

He’d done so much more than we’d talked about. Hundreds of little details I hadn’t thought to ask for, like candy canes, even if they were holographic white and red decorations rather than real peppermint sweets, and a poor attempt at an Octopus bag.

I bit my quivering lip and blinked back tears. He must have referenced the photos I’d shown him of *The Three Sisters* and thought they were Christmas decorations.

He didn’t know they were actually marriage gifts one makes for their husband.

I wasn’t going to tell him though, even if my heart burst into thousands of sparkly pieces. Maybe... maybe after our deal was over, I’d cherish it quietly and hang it in my kitchen.

“This is *amazing*, Hunar. It’s unbelievable.”

“I’m concerned the needles aren’t realistic enough,” he gruffed, the edge of a workaholic obsession in his tone. He reached high with one upper hand and pulled on a garland. Cradling it in his arms, he held it out to me. I brushed my palm over the needles and swallowed a thick sob. It felt so real that I expected to smell terpenes and feel droplets of sticky sap in the knots of the branches.

“No, they’re perfect,” I sighed with a little smile. “I promise.”

Hunar’s *senti* reached across the distance, its wandering tip bumping against my arm. It rumbled, almost as if it were asking permission to touch me, and I creased my brow.

“Why is it so much longer than the others?” I asked.

Bajora spoke up from a corner surrounded by colorful spools of ribbon. I hadn’t even noticed he was there, his boots crossed on a high shelf as he reclined in a break chair. A Santa hat with elf ears was perched crookedly atop his tendrils.

“*Syalī* is from deep waters, so he’s a grower, not a shower. That fancy *senti* of his is used for mate-grappling and luring lunch. It’s bioluminescent, by the way, so when you see it in the dark for the first time, don’t be surprised.”

I turned back to Hunar. “Really?”

He nodded, jaw clenched, glaring at Bajora. His nostrils flared and he exhaled with a coarse hum. “Yeah.”

“They also have bigger spleens for longer dives and can control their nitrogen intake, so no decompression sickness. They’re the great builders of Dharateen’s ancient cities. Just can’t climb worth shi—”

“Bajora,” Hunar warned.

The culinary engineer got to his feet, all four hands up in surrender. “Don’t worry, *syali*. I’ve learned my lesson about coil challenges. Just dropping a few friendly facts since all the rest of us here are born from the shallows. Oh, and Tinsley?

They're territorial as fuck and don't hiss in warning so much as—"

On cue, a sinister bass clicking emitted from Hunar's chest and skull, the stripes decorating his neck pulsating in sync. Bajora motioned to him with a smirk.

"*That.* My cue to scam before he breaks me in half. Have fun, you two. Play nice."

Bajora turned off his food bay and left the lounge.

"It's called coding..." Hunar said, trailing off at the end. When I turned around, he was staring at the bag of flour I'd dropped. "What's that? Something you need worked on?"

"Oh! Uh, no. Just a personal project." I dipped down and shoved the flour into my bag. I couldn't let him near it. According to the clinic, *biria* nuts weren't lethal but did cause stomach pains and gnarly ulcers. No way I wanted Hunar to get it all over his hands and then go home to his spats.

"I can help with personal projects," he insisted.

"You already are, Hunar. It's okay." I stood and found him leaning towards me, shoulders strung so tight, he practically shook. When I bumped the garland he was still holding and squeaked in surprise, he leaned back with a breath that ended in those bass clicks.

"Sorry," he winced. "Maybe you should stand further back."

I shuffled towards Bajora's side of the room and Hunar bared his teeth.

"*Not—*" he snapped, then took another calming breath. "Not that way. By my locker would be more... comfortable."

I shuffled towards the row of red, my hands out where he could see them. He chuffed bitterly. Snatching a thick band from his workbench, he corralled his tendrils into two fists, except for his red-striped *senti*. They were shorter, so he lifted them up, securing the band at the back of his crown where a human might tie their man bun. "Sorry for scaring you."

“It’s okay. I’m not that scared,” I promised, pink tinging my cheeks. “How are you feeling?”

Hunar’s brow creased. He shook his head like a human. “What you did isn’t *bad*, Tinsley. I’m not struggling, and you didn’t hurt me. You *revived* me. Fuck, I feel like I could swim a league in ten beats.”

“So you’re not mad at me... And I didn’t trap you, right?” I bit my lip hard, wringing my hands together. “I was really worried when I left the other day, you know? Everything I’ve thought up has been a disaster for you.”

“No, I chose,” he said with confidence. A clamp on my sternum eased and I breathed a sigh of relief. “And yeah, you’re usually a disaster, but I don’t know...” Hunar chuckled with genuine, baffled amusement, nodding at the decorations that surrounded us. “*Krismis* is growing on me.”

If I’d had stripes, they would have pulsed at his gleaming smirk. I swallowed a lump in my throat, glancing at the poorly made Octopus bag.

“And I’m sorry.”

“What?” I fumbled.

“Your taste is driving me insane,” he hissed, licking the corner of his mouth. He couldn’t look at me, so instead he neatly wound the garland around his hand and elbow. “New coils are hard to manage, and it’s been a long time. I owe you my health right now, and my body knows it. So this whole scheme... It’s gonna be fucking hard, Tin. I’ll get agitated and territorial since we’re not—” He stopped, glancing at me to see if I understood without him saying the words.

“I know.”

“I just want to be upfront. I’ll be a shithead sometimes, even if I try not to.”

“It’s not like I have a line of boyfriends waiting,” I assured him, cocking one hip.

Hunar hung the garland from the back of a chair. “Also, my spats know about us. What we’re doing.”

My smile slipped. Somehow, the news that they were in on the ruse stung. “Oh, right. Of course.”

“Their maan...” He cleared his throat. “They needed to know that wasn’t happening again.”

Duh. Was I a horrible person or what? I reprimanded myself in silence. Of course they needed to know. But what did it say about me that I wanted someone other than Zufi to drink the Kool-Aid?

“Were they alright with it?”

Hunar’s mane twisted around their band, reaching forward above his crown. It was unfamiliar, seeing Hunar’s face without them down to frame it. The stripes on his neck were like tattoos, as if the red ink had spilled from his *senti* to coat his throat.

“Yeah, they’re fine.”

I bit my lip, running my hand over my bag. Not to feel the flour, but the other sealed package inside.

“I have another gift,” I stammered. “In case you need it for later.”

Hunar groaned and leaned his weight against his lower hands on the break table. He immediately subdued his tendrils, fisting the band holding them back, and closed his eyes, strained grooves carved into his brow as if he were in pain.

“Are you okay?” I gasped, rummaging around in my bag. “Here, I can give it—”

“No!” Hunar’s eyes shot open. He held out a hand to stop me, tendrils swarming. “Don’t hand it to me. Just put it with my stuff.”

I paused, hand clutching the sealed panties hidden in my bag. “Are you sure? I won’t judge.”

“If you hand them to me, I’ll rip the bag open and frenzy right here, so yeah, I’m fucking sure, Tinsley!”

Hunar’s desperate tone made me jump. I opened the lockers until I found his, made sure the door was blocking his sight, and pushed the package into the depths of his bag. Heart in my throat, I latched it shut and shoved his wet weather hood and waders in front of it so that even if he opened his locker, he’d have to dig to find it.

“Okay, done!” I panted, closing all the doors with a *clang*. Hunar was still bent over the table, his tendrils fighting desperately to escape confinement. “Can I do anything else?”

“Not unless you let me touch you,” he rumbled with hopeless sarcasm.

I licked my bottom lip, which was a bit raw from worrying it so often, and nodded breathlessly.

“Sure, okay. Let’s do this.”

Hunar’s head snapped to attention so fast, I hardly tracked it. The desperation in his expression was the most empowering thing I’d ever experienced as the frantic back and forth simmered down into a predatory silence.

“Don’t tease me,” he warned, resonant clicking snapping up the air between us. His colors flashed again, *senti* moving across his collarbones and over the shoulder nearest me.

“I’m not,” I assured him, taking a step towards the table. “Look, if I tell you to stop, you can stop, right?”

Hunar nodded wordlessly, throat bobbing.

“Then okay. I’ll stand still and you can touch me. Just, if I say stop...”

“I stop,” Hunar agreed, unfurling to his full height.

We faced each other and moved closer, like dance partners meeting for the first time. Hunar’s gaze roamed over the bare skin of my neck and arms, and slowly, gently, he raised all four hands.

His palms suctioned lightly to my sweat-dried skin like silicone trivets, tickling my peach fuzz as they coasted up my forearms. His thumbs pressed the insides of my elbows, sparking goosebumps over my flesh, then clamped my biceps with his lower hands, large and thick enough to almost completely encircle them. His uppers continued their journey north, skimming my collar bones over my tank top, cupping my throat, squeezing it gently as his fingers probed the nape of my neck and prickled my hairline where no one had touched me in years.

I focused on staying still and calm, but really, I was hypnotized by the divine sensation of slowing down and being in the moment. I'd forced my mind to run a mile ahead of the ghosts I'd left behind on Earth through gossip, rum, movies, personal projects, and forced exuberance for so long that standing still gave me vertigo. I gripped Hunar's wrist for stability, and he froze stiff.

"Keep going," I whispered.

One by one, the tendrils in his mane slithered out of that thick band and reached for me. When he bent over my head to get them close enough to touch, I lifted my face, so close that his strained breath tickled my ear. Distantly, the band thumped to the steel floor, drowned out by the murmur of his mane as it cradled my cheeks and ran through my hair.

His *senti*, though, tugged at the latches on my pants. Hunar hissed, trying to draw it back, but it refused, the tip curling into one of my pockets. It filled the little space, pressing into the heat of the crease of my thigh, and strained towards my pussy.

Towards the heat building there.

"*Chudthi*," Hunar croaked, grabbing his *senti* with one lower hand to make sure it didn't stray any further.

"It's—"

"*No*," he snarled. "If I frenzy, I won't be able to stop if you tell me to."

My throat went dry, but I kept my mouth shut. I wasn't going to screw this up for Hunar. He coiled with me because he didn't have any other choice, not because he wanted to. If I tried to chase the growing urge to run my hands over his stripes and rub my face into his mane, I'd be taking advantage of him.

“Okay, no *senti*, then.”

He breathed a sigh of relief at my command, then committed to dabbing the tips of his tendrils against my tear ducts, earlobes, and the corners of my mouth. He brushed my eyebrows the wrong way and whispered over my eyelashes. A few spiraled over my cheekbone and temple where I'd gotten lashed in the crossfire of Reha's first coil fight, and I realized distantly that they were worrying over it, looking for remnants of the bruises.

I pressed my palm against the worrying tendrils, and they curled around my fingers instead, exploring my palm and nail beds.

“I'm okay, Hunar. You gave me a mediplasma, remember?”

“Your prealbumin levels are too low,” he rumbled, the hand wrapped around my forearm gliding towards my spine while the other held his *senti* away from me in a taut grip. “I can taste it in the vessels here.” He tapped a tendril against my temple. His tone was calmer now, but intimate, sending my heart racing. I squeezed my thighs together and ignored it as best I could.

“What's that mean?”

“You're malnourished.” His lower hand traced my spine, a thumb testing the edge of my shirt moments before he took a step back and swallowed hard. With his tendrils and wide shoulders gone, the bright light of early afternoon stung my eyes. “I checked your cache when I came by with the mediplasma. Did you spend it all because you thought I wouldn't help? I need to know.”

Without realizing, my butt hit the lip of the table. Hunar had me spinning and my spontaneous, fluttering heart wanted more.

But Hunar didn't. So I took a deep breath, thinking back as I adjusted the hem of my tank top and pushed the bag of my pocket back into my pants.

"No," I lied.

He collapsed onto his work stool with relief. "Thank fuck."

When he opened his holotab, I finger-combed my short hair, working out the lingering tingle he'd left behind. On the outside, I was cool as a cucumber, but on the inside?

I was *freaking* out.

Hunar said Christmas was growing on him? Well, Hunar was growing on *me*.

I'd been getting mushy around the edges for a while. Dad had always said my heart was like a butterfly—attracted to beautiful flowers on a whim. But it was different this time. I looked at Hunar and saw things I wanted. He was rough on the outside, but soft enough on the inside that if I glitter-bombed him with my overwhelming enthusiasm, he didn't immediately snap. He knew how to make things with his bare hands and was dedicated to his work. He didn't change who he was to make humans more comfortable. In fact, he was probably the *least* adapted of all the delegates.

He was a family man...

I needed to get a grip.

My holotab buzzed for the millionth time that day. I ignored it, staring at the ceiling where a row of floating twinkle lights illuminated the shelving.

"Don't return it," Hunar warned.

I blinked at him, lost in my own stupid heart. I was doomed. *So* doomed. "Huh?"

“The cache.” He picked up his band and lifted his tendrils back into its grip. “Not taking care of you will make me paranoid and anxious, especially something like low prealbumin.”

“How can you even tell? I *feel* fine.”

He crossed his arms, hiding his fists from his *senti*, which was trying to slither its way up against his palms. “Parenting classes when the spats were born,” he said. “A responsible baan learns to tell if their brood is healthy or not. So does a good coil, so... just keep the cache and eat well. Got it? No arguing.”

If this is what he needed to even out the coil, then I’d take it and pay him back next month. We were a team, even if we weren’t in a real relationship, and this was how we could take care of each other. “No arguing,” I promised.

“Good girl.”

Blood parted like the Red Sea between my blush and my groin so fast I saw black dots in my vision. I swallowed a lump in my throat and got to my feet, in shock and entirely too affected to mumble anything but a wobbly, high-pitched, “*Mphm—*”

I turned away from him, pretending to get my bag in order, but really my eyes were bulging from their sockets, and I was mouthing, “*Oh my god!*” to myself instead of melting into a messy, babbling puddle on the floor.

I needed to get out of there. *Fast.*

I squeaked rather than cleared my throat, swung my bag over my shoulder, and beamed like a thousand-watt bulb. “Cool, anyway!” *Squeak.* “I, uh, *need to go*, so let’s catch up tomorrow, okay?”

Hunar nodded, absolutely and utterly clueless. “I’ll escort everything into the home tower lobby tonight. Should be safe enough for now.”

“Mhm, yup! Bye!”

But before I could disappear around the lockers, I stopped, damning myself. My thumbs fidgeted over my fingers as I closed my eyes and swore.

“Do I... taste okay?” I asked in the smallest, most insecure voice.

Hunar’s pause was heavy, and I counted the seconds. At three, I couldn’t stand the tension and shook my head. “Nevermind, it was a stupi—”

“Yeah,” he croaked, almost too quiet to hear.

The silent heartbeat between us lasted an eternity.

I left with a little nod, pulse pounding harder than my boots as I ran across the steel flooring and out into the afternoon.

18

) TINSLEY (

As promised, Hunar delivered everything to the lobby on a levicart and left it there overnight. He messaged me late, and I'd stared at it like a schoolgirl every fifteen minutes for the next few days.

25:16, Hunar Fareshi: Delivered. Sorry it's late.

25:16, Tinsley Adams: That's okay! Thanks for bringing it all.

25:19, Hunar Fareshi: We live on the second floor... If you need me, I'm here.

That last message made my stomach fizz up like a shaken can of pop. It was the stiffest invitation into a man's life I'd ever seen, but from Hunar? That was big talk.

Or maybe it wasn't.

Hunar and I were very similar but interpreted the things around us in exactly the opposite ways. We were both hyper-focused on the little details, for example, but where I saw his message as the door creaking open, he measured the degree at which it stopped. My instinct was to barge in with party poppers. His would be to knock first.

So rather than feed the fake-real coil crush currently vibrating my skin, I threw myself into the decorations Hunar had delivered and did my best to respect his space for the next week. It was an act of true self-moderation, getting up early,

asking volunteers to meet me in the lobby, assigning tasks, taking things in stride.

I *totally* wasn't getting up early and meeting volunteers in the lobby so I could say good morning to Hunar and his kids on their way to school. It *definitely* didn't fuel the fountain of bubbles in my chest for the rest of the day to give Ladh and Taha headbands with little Santa hats on them or to hear Reha hum along to *Jack Frost*. And when their dad said good morning, asked me if I'd eaten, and handed me a mug of coffee as his fingers brushed over the sensitive underside of my wrist?

Nope. I was a professional ice queen that felt absolutely no temptation to abandon my post, drop the kids off at school, then wrap myself around Hunar like a pretzel and beg for him to call me a good girl again.

That innocent mishap had put so much ginger in my gingersnaps that I had not one, but *two* pairs of panties on stand-by.

Despite secretly crumbling to bits on the inside, decorating for Christmas had been an incredible balm to my soul. Volunteers had helped hang garlands strung with stars and ornaments. One woman, Ruth, had been a wreath-maker in her retirement back in Oregon, and she made the most beautiful wreaths from not just our pile of supplies, but also the red ferns that crept along the pathways. They were beautiful and felt uniquely like our little colony, sprouting with silver and red tinsel, sprayed with glitter, and mounted above each tower entrance.

I smiled at one of the wreaths as I stepped out into the steamy heat of the afternoon, the bells on my antlers tinkling. I'd been able to move all the decorations off the levicart with Naitee's help, assign a bunch of little printing tasks, and had no more volunteers. The levicart followed me, carrying all the open containers of twinkle lights, humming like bees in a hive.

It was *finally* time to light the place up!

A good amount of cheer had already spread through the colony thanks to everyone helping out. White tinsel snowmen, pink wooden reindeer painted with white spots and red noses, menorahs and fake candles in windows, cloth flags in gold, red, black, and green hanging from balconies for Kwanzaa...

Actually, the balconies were the best part. Not my decorations, but how hundreds of Renatans had decided to go all out in their own homes. Most had draped flags of their home countries next to icicle tinsel and hand-drawn banners with holiday greetings or art. Some units had even worked together, hanging garlands of festive pennants, paper flowers, and popcorn between towers. My favorite was a sagging clothesline of Santa's laundry, the butt of a pair of long johns open and flapping in the wind. It even included a Hawaiian shirt bedecked in pink and red jungle leaves, a nod to the tropical weather.

Hunar's ingenious twinkle lights would be the *pièce de résistance*, the cherry on top. A little sparkle always made things more magical, especially if the sparkle was mysterious. It was the one thing I'd kept off the volunteer list, so that *bam*, one night the colony would just light up people's imaginations.

"Okay, here we go," I told myself, facing my home tower's entrance with my holotab open to the drone mapping software. I held my holoscreen up to frame the entrance, then traced my finger around the doors. A prompt asked me how many drones I wanted placed and what colors they should emit. As soon as I submitted the options, seventy drones self-assigned themselves from the top of their container and flew into formation.

I bobbed on the balls of my feet and clapped to myself as they blinked on in a rainbow of color. They looked *perfect* nestled against the garland and wreath.

"Heck yes! Get it!" I exclaimed, slapping myself awkwardly on the back with a cackle of excitement.

I moved on with a bounce in my step, nestling some twinkle lights into the tinsel bodies of snowmen and red noses on reindeer. As I approached the school pod though, I slowed.

Reha sat on the steps, a hunched figure that took after her father with her light turquoise skin and pink markings. Her mane hung limp, and she hugged her knees, staring at the treeline.

“Hey, Reha!” I called, slowing to a stop a few feet away. The levicart hummed at idle behind me. “Whatcha doing out here?”

She turned her face away, despondent. “I got in trouble.”

My smile fell. “Oh...” I crouched so she wouldn’t have to look up at me. “What for?”

“Glitter oil. They told me I had to wash it off, and when I said no, they kicked me out because of something called *beludonah*. But I don’t get it, why is being a beautiful lady bad?”

I pressed my lips together. Dr Ahlberg had warned us that some shilpakaari cosmetics were toxic for humans so we shouldn’t experiment with them. “Ah. Can I see?”

Reha shrugged, pushing her tendrils out of the way. Her forehead was indeed iridescent and lightly shiny in a cute way, the glitter disappearing into her tendrils.

“Ooo, I like it!” I smiled. “I totally see why you wanted to wear it. It’s super cool.”

The sad lines beneath Reha’s large orangey-pink eyes lifted. “Yeah?”

“Definitely. No way I could pull that off.” I sighed, leaning back on my elbows with theatrical remorse.

“I can give you some. I have enough to share,” she said.

“Aw man, I wish! Belladonna is no joke though. It’s *really* toxic to humans. So if there’s any in your glitter oil...” I ran

my thumb across my neck with a funny face. “Lights out for a human.”

Reha blinked, sitting up a little straighter. Her tendrils shrank away from me in alarm. “Wait, really?”

“Oh yeah. Its nickname is Deadly Nightshade. That stuff’ll kill an adult human in, like, five minutes. Super nasty. But I hear it’s in a lot of shilpakaari makeup, oil waxes, desserts... Totally safe for you, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Why didn’t they tell me?!” Reha immediately reached into her school bag and pulled out a cleanser wipe. She scrubbed at her forehead like someone had drawn embarrassing doodles on her while she snored. My expression softened, taking a cleanser wipe from her pouch to help.

“I think they did,” I reminded her gently, tapping the linguitor behind my ear. “Belladonna means ‘beautiful lady.’ It probably got lost in translation.”

Shilpakaari didn’t cry like humans, but Reha’s mane keened, red glowing from the pink speckles on her cheeks.

“So what happened when they told you?”

Reha huffed, tilting her head so I could get between the tendrils on the other side of her face. “Nothing, I just told them no. I shouldn’t let my beauty go to waste by not learning how to use makeup now when I still don’t need it. I don’t have that long before I start, you know... having pheromone heats?”

Woah. I nodded slowly, trying to digest that information, and decided it was like a human girl starting her period. “Got it. Do you like practicing?”

Reha shrugged. “I guess so. Maan said it’s important, and I don’t hate it. I was pretty popular at school, and everyone asked me for tips.” Then she grimaced. “But the glitter oil itches my mane. It’s hard to concentrate on lessons sometimes.”

I laughed. “I used to wear glitter eyeshadow when I was little. It was the *worst*, but I thought it looked so cool.”

That surprised Reha. She glanced sideways at me as I wadded up all the cleanser wipes and wrapped them in a fresh one to throw away. I was pretty sure the oil was fine, but better safe than sorry.

“Does the beauty stuff get easier as you get older? It does suck sometimes. Adults look at me funny, and none of the boys care at all yet.”

Me, giving beauty advice? *Sheesh*. “I was a total ugly duckling. All stick limbs, straight hips, and mosquito bite boobs. So I have no idea. But now that I’m older?” I blew out a breath, trying to find the best way out of this labyrinth of core life advice. I didn’t exactly feel entitled to dole out wisdom to Hunar’s kids just because we were fake-real coiling. “It’s easier to recognize that there’s more than one definition of beautiful, you know? And someday, someone will see that in you too. Glitter oil or no. It won’t matter to them because they’ll love who you are.”

“I see...” Reha, always a deep thinker, processed what I’d said with a slow, purposeful twist of her tendrils. Feeling a little self-conscious about giving pre-teen advice, I got to my feet and stretched.

“But I can only say that from a human perspective, so take it with a grain of salt. Hey!” I winked conspiratorially. “You wanna help me with a mission?”

Miss Jeong gave me permission to take Reha out of school for the rest of the afternoon. We downloaded the drone software on her holotab, turned up the music, and shared playlists. She played a shilpakaari pop song for me, and I played holiday music for her. We talked about our crushes, and she burst into laughter when I tried to describe cute human boys from my middle school.

Admittedly, I did compare Sean Neely’s hair to broccoli.

We were draping twinkle lights around the clinic when Zufi stepped out, Ezraji escorting him to the end of the ramp. Both shilpakaari men smiled at us, their manes twisting over

their shoulders in greeting. Reha did the same, but I clenched my jaw, hoping they couldn't tell my smile was forced.

"Hi, Ezraji," I called.

"Tinsley," he said, dental ridges bright white against his dark teal skin.

"How's Amelia?"

He gave me a serene bow of his head, hip-long tendrils marbled with light green scars swinging from behind his neck.

"Radiant! Amazing what the human body can do," Zufi interjected.

"Ambassador! Fancy meeting you. Again," I hawed, laughing lightly. I wished *so badly* I could punch him hard enough in the mouth that his stupid dental ridges chipped.

Ezraji stepped in. "Congratulations on your coil, Tinsley. I've never seen a man recover from wasting disease quite like Hunar. I feel like I should thank you."

I blushed, face going hot. Reha looked up at me as I stumbled over my words. It was much harder to act like we were in love with the chief engineer's daughter standing next to me. "Oh, i-it's no problem. Goes to show you how powerful human love can be, right?"

"Indeed."

"It really is remarkable. Wasting disease is a nasty thing," Zufi added. "It should have taken him months to bounce back, but look at him. As spry as the day he left academy, I'd bet. If only we could bottle that magic."

I swallowed down my acidic tone and set my expression with a strained smile, thinking about the vials of pheromones Hunar and Bajora had talked about when I'd eavesdropped before all this began. "Yeah, if only," I lamented with a dry tone.

Ezraji gave me a knowing look, tucking his hands behind his back. "Right. We'll see you tomorrow, Jurek. Tinsley.

Reha.”

The medical researcher disappeared back into the clinic and the lobby doors closed. Lucky bastard. Zufi glanced at my levicart and the lights with approval.

“Your Winter Festival is a smash hit, Miss Adams.”

“Tinsley.”

“Ah, right. Are preparations going well?”

“Yep!”

Reha programmed a string of lights around the long, narrow windows of the clinic, then Zufi gestured for us to walk with him. We shared an internal groan, but sauntered down the road as he inspected the decorations.

“What is this creature?” he asked, tapping a reindeer on the nose. “So cute and inviting.”

“A reindeer from hell,” I said with a straight face. “It delivers coal instead of gifts to bad people, marking them for death.” Zufi raised a brow, and I squinted my eyes cheerfully. “You know, like cheaters and bullies—”

Reha butted in, clamping my hand in hers with a warning squeeze. “*Na’maan* has been letting me help a lot. The *Krismis* legends are cool. And I like the music.”

Zufi glanced down, a clever smirk on his face.

“I take it that you like your father’s new *priya*?”

“Totally,” she said, mimicking my slang. She was lying through her tendrils for me, but I felt warm and fuzzy on the inside as I squeezed her hand back.

As we approached the home towers, Zufi slowed to a stop at a fork in the road. He leaned his upper palms on his knees and met Reha eye to eye. “What do you think then... Is it too soon to invite the family for dinner? I’ve been getting to know all my delegates’ spouses this week. But you’d know best, since you’re the *bahaput*.” He winked at me. “No offense.”

Reha shrugged with more chill in her second thumbs than I had in my whole body just then. What had he just called her? Did I need to roll up my proverbial sleeves? “We could do dinner.”

“Excellent. I have business with the security team for the next several days. Would the weekend work?”

It didn’t matter if it worked or not if the way Zufi held my stare was any indication. This would be a test, and Hunar needed to pass it. “Sounds good.”

“Wonderful! Good luck with decorating, and I look forward to hearing how it goes. I’m sure we’ll run into each other often since I’ll be at the hangar most of this week.” He waved like a human, his hand slightly too stiff, then walked away.

“Bye,” I trailed off, my smile turning sour as he rounded the short red palms up the hill. As soon as he was gone, I rolled my eyes. “Prick—” *Oops*. “-ly jerk. C’mon Reha, let’s T.P. the playfield. You did awesome, by the way! What does *Baha Boot* mean though?”

“Hey, Tinsley?” Reha hadn’t been listening, staring towards the hangar as if she could see it through the jungle.

“Hmm?”

Reha fell in step beside me, a thoughtful look on her face. “How did you encoil my baan? He told us that you’re playing pretend, but it seems real... Was he really wasting because of our maan?”

My clothes suddenly felt too tight. I adjusted my antlers and pulled on the neck of my shirt. “It’s not really my place to talk about that. But, um, he-he was really sick. And no, we aren’t together.” I thought about why Hunar had told his kids about our plan and added, “You guys are his top priority, and I’m just trying to keep him healthy so he can be a good dad.”

“But you aren’t staying in our unit?”

I grimaced. “I give him clothing. It’s comforting for him.”

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Reha said in awe.

As the playfield came into view, Wade’s team was hard at work. Ngozi and Kokebe, the two grey uids with four red eyes and tusks, were measuring and cutting wood while Wade and Mikaela raised booths and fit them with their festive canvas covers. I turned to Reha and blew out a breath before we were within earshot.

“I’m gonna be straight with you, Reha. Talking about your dad’s coil is a little weird for me, especially since it’s not really real, you know? Besides, the most important things aren’t physical at all. Your dad is *amazing*. He works so hard and never asks for recognition. He’s important here. *Super* important. Even if I didn’t like him, I’d help, because he deserves someone in his corner.”

Reha squinted at me. “So what you’re saying is you *do* like him. And not because he’s making stuff for your festival?”

Damn. I waffled, “I-I mean, *pfft, yeah*. Who... who... doesn’t?” Reha held her ground and I crumbled, taken off guard. Were all shilpakaari kids this perceptive?! Pom Pom was even more of a lightning bolt. “Yeah, Reha. I really do. But don’t tell him, okay? He likes me right now because it’s instinct, not because he has a choice.”

Reha put her hands on her hips with a saucy toss of her tendrils. “Fine, but you really should tell him. It’s not like his brain disappeared.”

Yeah, it had just moved south of the belt for the winter.

I bit my cheek and nodded. “You’re right. Hey, good talk! Now, what does *Baha Boot* mean?”

Reha giggled as we resumed walking. “*Bahaput*. It means first daughter, like I make all the social calls. What movies we watch, what games we play, that sort of thing. I’m supposed to help my brothers find coils someday too.”

A lightbulb blinked on in my mind. “Oohhhh, so *that’s* why you’re so curious about all of it, because you get to play

Cupid!”

“Yeah!” Reha’s smile brightened, and her mane spiraled happily. “Well, one reason. It’s fun to think about anyway.”

The whole construction team glanced up at our laughter, and the rest of the day flew by as we programmed twinkle lights and told holiday stories. I gushed to everyone about *biria* nut flour and probably bored them to tears talking about my experiments with using my first batch of dough for yeast cultures. It wasn’t quite the same as Earth—especially since the bubbles looked like foamy blood and scared the ba-jingles out of me—and I had a suspicion that I’d need to use high altitude techniques.

Wade decided the Christmas tree would go on the deck overlooking the playfield, which elevated it above the booths lined up along the edges. It was a genius move. People would be able to see it regardless of where they were standing. With that in mind, Reha and I looked up, winding twinkle lights in and out of tree branches, programming them to blink in soft, random patterns. When the sun set, they’d look like rainbow fireflies.

It wasn’t a traditional Christmas choice, but maybe it was even better. Just like the wreaths with red tropical leaves and the balconies draped in flags and ribbons, it was a Renata thing.

“There you are,” Hunar called as the afternoon turned towards lavender dusk. Reha and I were adjusting our position and color choices now that evening was descending. Hunar joined us, his coveralls tied around his waist, both sets of arms crossed. Like jumper cables connected to my nerves, I soaked up his presence, adrenaline pumping, heart racing. “I heard a troublemaker ran off to decorate.”

Reha’s tendrils hooked bashfully and she hugged his waist. I bit my cheek, knowing her apology was about more than decorating, even if Hunar didn’t. “Sorry, Baan.”

Hunar started, then his surprise melted into a grin as he ran his palm over her mane. “Not you, sweetheart.”

I pointed at myself, batted my lashes innocently, and mouthed, *Me?*

He nodded at the glowing trees and railings, admiring our work. “I see why you like them so much. The lights.”

I put my hands on my hips with pride and beamed up at what Reha and I had accomplished. “I told you they’re pretty cool!”

Hunar’s *senti* wrapped around my elbow. I startled, and he whipped it away, clutching the unruly tendril in one fist, concern grooved into his brow. “Sorry—”

“No, no,” I interrupted, holding my hand out. “It’s fine, remember? I just didn’t expect it.”

His jaw ticked, but he nodded, letting his *senti* go. It slid across my palm, circling my wrist.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. It’s kinda cute anyway,” I said, tapping the tip with my index finger as it explored the path of my veins.

Reha gasped, jolting us both. “My bag! It’s still at school. Can I go ahead, Baan?”

“Sure. I’ll be home soon.”

I blinked, confused. “Didn’t you say Ladh was going to—”

“Thanks, bye!”

Reha attempted a wink, her gill-like nose scrunching up from the effort, then ran off, mane bouncing as she jogged away.

“Sneaky spat,” I tsked, shaking my head. Hunar licked his teeth, staring down at my hand.

“She’s had a hard time fitting in, but she likes you a lot,” he gruffed.

“Yeah, I like her too.”

The implications of that hung heavy between us.

“Are you done decorating? I could walk you home.”

The levicart hovered behind us as we strolled back to the home towers, his *senti* running up and down my spine, teasing the hem and collar of my shirt.

“Zufi invited us all to dinner on the weekend,” I told him. “The mighty *Baha Boot* said yes.”

Troubled spirals framed Hunar’s face and he admitted, “He’s been visiting the hangar.”

I nodded. “It’s a test. If I start coming for lunch again, would that be okay?”

Hunar closed his eyes and sighed. “Please. And I could use another... gift.” Asking pained him, I could tell. He hit his fob against the lobby doors, and they whooshed open on *Baby It’s Cold Outside*.

“Come up to my floor. I’ll grab some for you.” I gave him an easy smile, calling the lift, humming along to the music like I normally would. This was just a normal conversation. No big deal. We weren’t talking about panties or standing alone in a little metal box.

We took opposite corners, facing each other with uncertainty.

“Do I worry you?” he asked. “Is that why you stopped coming?”

I chewed my lip. Busted. “The opposite actually. I thought I might make you uncomfortable.”

“What makes me uncomfortable is distance,” he gritted. “It’s suspicious too, which doesn’t help the anxiety.”

“What would make you comfortable then?”

Hunar’s *senti* rolled. “Clothing, objects, tasks that help you... Touching.”

“I can do that.”

Swallowing my nerves, I pushed off the corner and wrapped my arms around his middle in a timid hug. The lift doors opened, and rather than let go, he squeezed my shoulders and lifted my toes off the floor enough to move us out of the lift. Then he collapsed back on the wall, mane rumbling with relief. His tendrils curled into my hair and stole my antlers.

“I want those back,” I said into his chest.

“No.”

Not real, not real, not real.

“We need a plan for Zufi,” I said, pulling my face away. “Lunch every day, and we’ll walk home together. Keep bringing me coffee too.”

Hunar nodded, unwinding from around my hair and shoulders. He knocked his head back against the wall and swallowed, throat bobbing. “Can I touch you in front of other people?”

“Of course. Fake dating isn’t believable otherwise, right?” I said, breathless. I pushed my hair back and motioned to my door. “You wanna come in?”

A husky chuckle accompanied Hunar’s smirk as I opened my unit and a rush of cold air billowed out. “If you invite me in, I won’t want to leave, Tinsley.”

Then don’t.

“Good point,” I joked half-heartedly, wishing he weren’t the shilpakaari version of love drunk.

Or maybe I just wasn’t brave enough to face the possibility of rejection.

I dashed inside and grabbed the two sealed bags on the counter, then added a used red mug and the pen I’d written all my Christmas notes on for our first meeting. Hunar’s tendrils were climbing along the wall towards the door when I whipped back out, my antlers firmly wrapped up in his *senti*. I held up the contraband with jazz hands and his colors flashed.

“What are these?”

“You said objects too, so I thought...” I trailed off as he took them in his lower hands with reverence.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Hunar, I’d give you my dirty socks if it’s what would help you,” I teased, pushing the cup and pen into his hands.

“Not my fetish, but I’ll keep that in mind,” he growled, pressing the button for the lift blindly while he faced me. The doors opened immediately, and he stepped backwards, putting his heels over the seam of the entrance so it couldn’t close. “Good night, Tinsley.”

He looked *perfect* standing in that doorway, Christmas music filtering down from the ceiling, my panties cradled in his lower hands with an unHunar-like amount of gratitude.

How was a spontaneous butterfly meant to cope with all these feelings?

Grabbing the front of his tabard, I pulled him down and pressed my lips to his. Hunar’s mane erupted with bass clicks, swarming my face and neck. The things I’d given him dropped to the steel floor of the lift with a clatter as he pulled on my waist.

I didn’t have to tell him how I felt, but I was powerless not to show him. I’d officially hit the end of my velvet ribbon, and self-control had never been my strong suit. How could I resist such a perfect moment?

BEO binged overhead.

“The lift entrance has been obstructed.”

I pushed back against Hunar’s embrace, thankful for the interruption. I was already taking too much when Hunar wasn’t in his right mind, wasn’t I? Greedy, selfish... I pushed a little harder and he fell back a step. In shock, he let me slip from his hands and mane, a look of pure bewilderment slack on his features.

“Good night, Hunar.” My voice shook. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hunar looked like he might speak, lips parted, eyes wide.

But the lift doors closed first.

19

) HUNAR (

I paced as the spats ran around the unit, latching the side hip of my dhoti. They were red bark linen from Dharatee and came with a matching tabard. Long tapes of linen bound the edges of the top hung like ribbons to just below my knees. I felt ridiculous wearing something so fashionable, but Reha had insisted. She said I needed to put my best foot forward.

She never clarified if she meant for Zufi or for Tinsley, and I had the distinct impression that—

Tahavir dashed by me. “No!”

Reha came next, a mister clutched in her hand. “Yes! It looks good on Ladh!”

“Yeah, and *slimy!*”

“You’re such a brat!”

They turned the corner into their room, screaming.

I stopped in front of the bathroom mirror, ignoring the sound of something banging against the wall in their room, and checked my arms and sides with self-conscious care. Had I missed any spots with the *sachem* oil Tinsley said she liked? If I flashed my colors, did it look good against the darker red outfit?

I gave it a try, my throat, *senti*, and arms pulsing. They’d brightened over the last five days thanks to our plan to fool Zufi. Rather than cool merlot, they were now bright like rubies, pink through the thickest designs and currant near the edges of my stripes. I hadn’t looked this good since I’d been an engineering student. The other encoiled men weren’t kidding when they said humans were a punch to the pearls. I was strong, full of energy, focused, less of an asshole...

And fucking dying.

It had been five sols since Tinsley kissed me. I never brought it up, mostly because thinking about it made my cock swell so often, the only way I could walk around in public was by wearing my fucking toolbelt off-center like an idiot. The taste of her mouth was an obsession now, and more than once, I'd woken up in the middle of the night with my *senti* wrapped around my erection, squeezing pearls from my sac while I dreamed about how hot it would be to see my tendrils slide across her tongue and stretch her lips.

And then I'd see her for lunch, which was exquisite torture. She was a messy eater. Her cheeks would bow out while she chewed, a dribble of sauce catching on the corner of her mouth, and I'd see that little pink tongue dart out to catch it. Glistening, wet, flexible. She'd talk about a printing project or a festival booth or her *biria* nut bread, and I'd clutch my *senti* in my fist beneath the table to keep it from misbehaving.

Afterwards, she'd stay and manage volunteers at the break table while I caught up on work orders and put the finishing touches on the *Krismis* tree. We'd walk to the playfield at the end of the day, watch the spats play, say good night... If Zufi was around, she'd take my arm in hers, twine her fingers in my tendrils, press her lips to my upper bicep or the back of my hand.

Every time she did that, I begged the universe that she'd kiss my palm instead so I could taste it.

I couldn't let myself fall into the coil though, no matter how painful it was to pull back. Zufi wanted to see me hiss and click and posture—all that shit new coils did—but I needed to calm down. I wasn't a tadpole on the verge of my first frenzy, and this was an arrangement. Tit for tat. I help Tinsley with the Winter Festival, she helps me fool Zufi into renewing my contract. That's all this was.

Especially the kiss.

I hadn't known humans could be swayed by pheromones the way shilpakaari could, but it made sense—we could coil together naturally, after all. But it complicated things. I wouldn't let Tinsley's hormones lead her to a decision she'd hate later, especially since it seemed like humans didn't usually have this kind of reaction to whatever human coiling was called...

Did they just call it dating?

Didn't matter. The point was, any pheromones we caught along the way were treacherous, which meant I had to be even more of a hardass about self-control. But maybe...

After this blew over and things settled down, maybe I could convince her to give us a try. Then we'd both know if being a *skhrooj m'gess het* had ruined my chances before I'd known how vibrant and seen she made me feel.

I closed my eyes and rolled her pen in my tendrils. It soothed my desperation, the taste of her sweat and oils mixed with ink and plas. If she didn't want to coil for real, then... I'd make sure there would be more holidays.

Bing.

"*Tinsley Adams has requested access,*" BEO said from above.

I gathered myself, straightened my clothes, and put my mane back in a tight band. It was crawling desperately towards the door, but when I put it up, it was too short to do anything embarrassing. Deep water shils like me preferred to show off our full *senti*, and only used our tendrils in close quarters anyway.

Besides, Tinsley looked at my throat when she thought I wasn't paying attention. I literally bit my tongue every fucking time to keep from pulsing my colors at her.

Glancing towards the brood's room to make sure there were no new holes in the walls, I pressed the entrance access by the kitchen and the door hushed open. Tinsley stood there

holding a bag in both hands in front of her hips, fidgeting nervously.

Fuck...

She wore a little red *Krismis* hat at a slant and a dark green sequin dress that sparkled around her thin curves. The neckline skirted her collarbones and the hem was mid-thigh, where a pair of sheer red tights hugged her legs. Subtle glitter dusted her eyelids and the brown fringe that framed her eyes was darker than normal. Black and heavy.

“What? Oh no, is the glitter too much?” she winced. “I don’t usually wear makeup.”

I blinked, realizing I’d just been staring, standing frozen in the doorway.

“You’re beautiful,” I mumbled, scraping my calloused palm over my banded tendrils. The brood came running, and Reha clapped as Tinsley entered the kitchen.

“You look so good!!” she exclaimed. Tinsley’s nerves vanished instantly. She held up her hand and Reha slapped it, something I’d seen Bree do with Pom Pom. “And that glitter!”

“You like it? Yes!” Tinsley laughed, opening her bag. “I thought of you when I chose it.”

“Hi ,Tinsley!” Ladh and Tahavir said in unison. They skidded to a stop right in front of her and she held out her hands.

“So handsome, look at those sharp tabards! Can I give you guys hugs?!” she asked, wriggling her fingers.

My throat felt parched as she wrapped her arms around them both, their tendrils tapping her cheeks and shoulders. She reached over their heads, motioned to Reha, and grabbed her bag, rummaging through it as they pulled their tangle of limbs away.

“Before I forget, I brought something for you, *wâpos*. It’s a-a...” She stalled out on a hiccup of surprise, the bag tumbling to the ground. I picked it up and when I stood again,

the wells of her eyes were thick with salt water. Ice shot through my veins. Had my spats done something? Was there something in my unit that bothered her? Had we somehow triggered an abduction memory? Concerned, I set the bag down on the counter and cupped her face.

“Look at me,” I demanded. “What’s wrong?”

Tinsley blinked, the water breaking over her fringe and soaking into my palms. My mane purred, palms soaking up the flavor. I brushed my thumbs over the tracks, selfishly taking it all.

“Nothing, just... *wâpos*.” She bit her lip to keep it from quivering and gave Reha a wobbly, apologetic smile. “It’s what my dad called— *calls* me. Can I call you that too?”

Reha, wide-eyed and shocked into silence, just nodded.

“Us too! What would your baan call us?” Ladh asked.

“It’s a gift, son. You don’t ask for something like that,” I chided, squeezing his shoulder with my lower hand. The excitement in his mane fell slack.

“Sorry, *Na’maan*.”

I swallowed hard, hearing him call her honorary mother for the first time without Zufi there to fool. My tendrils burned. *Na’maan* or *na’baan* was also a gift, one that children bestowed at their own discretion. She thought it was similar to some other common word in her language, but that had translated as *maan’ipa*, and was a legal term. *Na’maan* meant my brood wanted Tinsley to stay for good.

My heart raced every time they said it, but I couldn’t tell her how important it was. Not yet.

Tinsley wiped her eyes and cheeks with her forearm. “It’s okay,” she insisted, laughing as her eyes continued to leak. She patted his mane. “I don’t have any brothers, so let me think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” Ladh agreed eagerly.

Tinsley gave him one more pat, sniffed, then opened her bag. “Reha, I made us matching necklaces,” she said, pulling out two short black chains. Every inch, a blob of a different color hung from the chain. “Twinkle lights.”

Reha took it with a raised brow. “It’s pretty ugly...”

I hissed in reprimand, but Tinsley laughed as if that was the best response she could have gotten. “Isn’t it? That’s what makes it fun!”

A rare laugh tinkled out of my daughter’s lungs and shivered her tendrils. She covered her mouth with both hands. “You’re so weird.”

“Yeah, well, *you* like it,” Tinsley nudged her shoulder and looked up at me, hand stretched towards me. “Ready to go?”

Speechless, grateful, I took her hand. “Yes—” I choked back the word I wanted to call her, a word I hadn’t used in a very long time. “Let’s go.”

I held Hunar's hand the entire way to the playfield, where Zufi had decided we'd have dinner. The place was lit and sparkling, all of the festival booths decorated and ready for their vendors. Handmade stockings embroidered with ribbons, bells, and a variety of names draped across one. Ornaments and tinsel decorated another. The only things left to add were the Christmas tree and glitter on the ferns, but even without, there was magic in the air.

Zufi apparently thought so too, though with how much the shilpakaari obsessed over color, I wasn't surprised. We arrived to a spread of colorful cushions and rugs on the deck, their long, beaded tassels draped over the edge of the purple wood platform and catching the twinkle lights in a spectrum of color. He'd had Bajora print up a feast of universal foods too, including some from Dharatee and Samridve that were safe for human consumption.

Begrudgingly, I had to admit that the universal foods were incredible. They tasted real in a way that human food from the food bays just didn't. While Zufi talked to Hunar about business, I fixated on pulling pastry pockets apart, tasting one versus the other. Was there too much acid in this one? Was the heat perfectly distributed or were the tops just a touch more golden brown in that pleasing, homemade way? Was the bottom slightly too soft?

It didn't taste like they'd been printed in a food bay at all. There was no underlying processed taste, like a machine mimicking real ingredients.

Hunar got up for seconds and my investigation stalled as his lower hand brushed across my knee.

“Are you uncomfortable?” he asked, tapping my thighs while Zufi excused himself to get a round of drinks. He sat with one knee up, balancing his weight on one palm as he used his other three to slide my uneaten food onto his own plate. “Your dress is restrictive.”

I shifted my hips, a little pulse between my legs. My ankles were sore, but the cushion I sat on was comfortable. “No, I’m fine. Actually, I really love this,” I sighed with a smile.

He took it upon himself to pick up new foods for me to investigate and taste, a quirk in the corner of his lips. “Yeah?”

“Mhm,” I confirmed, obsessed with his hands and glancing at his bright red throat with a pink tinge in my cheeks. “Do most shilpakaari eat on rugs and cushions like this? Your unit has a dining table.”

Hunar picked up a glistening bright yellow ball dusted in gold glitter and set it gently on my plate. “Mostly. We decided to add them to the units here after looking at human furniture in the archive.” He sucked the sticky yellow syrup off his thumb and forefinger, and I stared at his mouth. He caught me as he held out the plate, striped bronze eyes dilating, a low chorus of hollow clicks emanated from his chest.

We both jumped guiltily when Ladh gasped. Something crashed to the deck and broke, immediately snapping Hunar’s attention away.

“Ladh, are you okay?” he asked.

I took the plate as he glided to his feet and bent down to help his son. The boy was keening with embarrassment as they bent down together to clean up a spilled drink and shattered glass.

“So how are you two getting along?” Zufi asked as he crossed his legs and sat next to me. He slid a flute of fizzy pink *furza* my way and took a sip of his own drink, something black and iridescent like oil. I imagined it tasted like licorice, even though I knew better.

“Great!” I said, taking a sip of the fruity not-champagne, distracted. The kids lined up as Hunar poured them cups of some green juice, adding berries and flower petals per each of their requests. The cups were tiny in his muscular hand, but he took so much care...

He thought he was getting the whole dad thing wrong, but he was acing it.

“Deep water shils are far more solid than those of us from the shallows,” Zufi contemplated, sipping away while I craned my neck, still distracted.

“Uh huh.”

“He must be rough to handle.”

I scrunched my brow. “What? Hunar’s as sweet as they come. He’s got a temper and can be a grump, sure, but he’s not a brute.”

Zufi set his glass down with a victorious smile. “So you haven’t experienced a frenzy yet.”

Oh no...

A hot coal burned my chest as Zufi’s smile grew and I clenched my jaw. *Shit, shit, shit.* He’d led me right into a trap. Hunar had described a frenzy as a starving man devouring a feast, and though the image of him feasting on *me* is what propagated my lusty panty supply, I actually had no idea what he’d be like for real.

Why oh why, didn’t I watch shilpakaari porn vids instead of making a stupid slideshow?

“He works hard to be gentle,” I said carefully.

“Mm,” Zufi agreed, leaning back on his hands. “Not a single red mark. He does indeed have the self-control of a monk.”

I laughed bitterly, popping the yellow sweet into my mouth. It was a bit like a truffle and melted on the tongue, but

I couldn't enjoy it just then, not while Zufi pinned me to a corkboard like a butterfly. "He's not a monk, I assure you."

"Perhaps you're right. He does have three spat to contend with," Zufi sighed thoughtfully. "Most new coils can't keep their hands off their *priya* though, regardless of the company. It's a matter of biology, not manners."

"We don't want to rush the kids," I tried. "They've gone through a lot of big changes."

The moment I said it, Zufi's mane curled over itself in triumph. He leaned towards me, picking his drink back up with laser-focused intensity. "Is that why he doesn't call you *priya* even if they call you *na'maan*?"

He finished off his liquor and set it down, speculative eyes never leaving mine. I had no answer and couldn't think of a lie before he decided he'd won, leaning back on his lower hands. "Hunar's brood is impressive," he admitted. "They're very good actors, if all this theatre is purely for my benefit."

The color drained from my face and left me cold despite the warm jungle air. I trembled, glancing out at Hunar as Reha showed her brothers all the lights we'd put up together. She reprogrammed their colors as the boys shouted out what they wanted. Hunar put his hands on his hips and enjoyed them while they ran around the booths.

"We *are* encoiled. He's done what your stupid contract says," I stammered, biting my lip. "Why can't you just leave him alone?"

"The pursuit clause is very clear, Tinsley," he lamented like an oily politician. "When it was drafted, we had no idea that humans could coil with shilpakaari. I'd hoped, but I didn't know for sure. So I chose my first round of delegates carefully." He ticked them off on his lower hands. "Ezraji, a well-coiled adult. Piro, an untested young man. Bajora, unable to coil with shilpakaari women. Aavar, acute *senti* trauma. Hunar, a coil-malnourished adult. Each of them coils differently, my dear. I didn't choose them for this lightly."

I felt sick as I dabbed my mouth, straightening plates out of nervous, angry habit. “So you’re just playing a pimp then.”

Zufi’s frown deepened. “No.” For the first time, he looked uncomfortable with himself, standing up to avoid my anger. “Long-term intimate relationships. CE Fareshi has spent more than an orbit avoiding human *friendships* let alone the stipulations of his contract. This,” he gestured to me vaguely, “is not a good faith attempt at rectifying that, is it?”

I got to my feet, stamping the pins and needles out of my soles. I felt faint with worrisome fury, confused about how to answer.

Would Hunar get kicked out because of me after all?

I decided to lay everything bare, opening my mouth to make a statement, but Hunar’s hand slipped around my shoulder, pulling me away. His eyes locked on the ambassador, and he flashed his colors with that hollow echo of his that made the hair raise on the back of my neck.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, barely civil. The ambassador held up all four of his hands in surrender, but his tendrils stayed where they were, never sliding behind his back.

“Of course. Tinsley and I were just talking about the future,” he said.

Hunar’s slitted nostrils flared as his palm brushed behind my ear. Could he taste how unnerved I was? Probably. I took a deep breath and smiled, making up my mind.

“It’s getting late for the kids, isn’t it?” I asked. “They have school tomorrow.”

Hunar’s tendrils rumbled, but he nodded down to me with concern. “You wrangle, I’ll pack up.”

I found Taha stalking his brother and sister in a game of hide-and-seek tag, keeping my eyes on the tense discussion between Hunar and Zufi. He didn’t flash his colors again, but his shoulders were stiff, mane lifted in anger.

“Wrangled and ready!” I bellowed, giving their dad enough time to shake it out. He turned away from Zufi, looking me up and down.

“All good?” he asked, not referring to his kids. I nodded, still vibrating anxiously beneath my skin, just not enough to show.

“Yep! Let’s go.”

Zufi walked with us as the kids carried all the leftovers. I made sure we were walking slower than usual, which made them impatient, of course. They skipped ahead, approaching the bend in the footpath where overgrown palm fronds draped across the road and obscured the home towers.

Jumping in shock, I slapped my cheeks. “*Watstakats!*” I gasped. “I forgot my bag!”

Hunar raised a brow. “You didn—”

“No, no, I *definitely* did,” I interrupted, squeezing his hand. “Sorry... I need to go back and get it.”

Hunar’s features were drawn, his attention split, but he nodded. “We’ll go look together.” As he called out to his brood, Zufi stopped walking, looking back at us with puzzled curiosity. “Go ahead, you three. Tinsley forgot something.”

Reha shrugged. “Okay. See you later!”

“Last one there’s a slimy tentacle head!” Taha yelled, sprinting ahead of the others with his leftovers held high over his mane.

I clutched Hunar’s hand in my clammy palm, finding it hard to breathe as the kids ran out of sight. He creased his brow. “Tinsley...” he murmured. “What’s wrong? Your bag is still on my counter.”

I caught Zufi’s eye. He faced us, lacing both sets of hands behind his back.

“Hunar?”

“What?”

I licked my lips. “Kiss me.”

Hunar slashed a glare at Zufi. Then he wrapped his upper hand around my bicep and gave it a reassuring squeeze, forcing his own anger down to soothe me.

“Tinsley, I don’t blame you,” he mumbled. “It’s not your fault I got my family into this fucking mess. You’ve given me more than I could ever ask f—”

“Hunar,” I snapped, grabbing him by the chin. “Stop talking and kiss me.”

Hunar’s breath caught in his lungs for a heartbeat, then his self-control broke. He snarled, wrapped his lower arms around my waist, lifting me into the air so he wouldn’t have to bend over, and crushed me against his chest. My fingers dug into his neck as his upper hands slid into my curls, holding my head exactly how he wanted it.

With a rumble that vibrated my chest, he crushed his mouth to mine, and I instantly opened, tasting the smooth texture of his tongue, the firmer set of lips that dominated mine. Where I’d expected his *senti* to reach for my throat, it coasted up my inner thigh instead, the dress too tight to wrap my legs around his chest without slipping nearly all the way to my hips. The thick tendril reached the edge of my thigh high and found bare skin.

Hunar ripped his mouth away from mine, staring down between us as his lower hands slid over the rough sequins of my dress. They hit my bare butt and he groaned, nipping my collarbone.

“Who am I?” I panted, hyper-aware that Zufi was still observing from up the path.

“*Priya*,” Hunar sighed, then licked the front of my throat and nipped my chin. I couldn’t get my hand all the way around his *senti* at the base of his neck, but latched on and tugged anyway, forcing his lidded bronze eyes to meet mine.

“Louder,” I growled.

“Prrriyaaaa,” he rumbled, mane purring like a crocodile in heat. His colors flashed, and a spectrum of light raced down the length of his tendrils as they squirmed in their band. His *senti* did the same, that bioluminescence Bajora had told me about weaving in and out of his pulsating stripes as if they were meant to dance together.

My insides both melted and frosted over like deep-fried ice cream. Why did the first time he called me *priya* have to be like this?

I reined in my fears that he’d never choose to call me that anyway and yanked again. “Now put me down, honey.”

Hunar growled but slid me down his front until my toes touched the ground. He smoothed out my dress, then gripped his *senti* with a wince, squeezing tighter than was comfortable. I adjusted the front of his tabard too, taking my time to work out the wrinkles of where I’d been smashed against him.

“You’re not leaving,” I told him with a low, serious sniff. “And neither are your kids. You’re staying right here.”

“Tinsley—” he rasped, feet rooted to the spot. He could barely manage to speak let alone move. He was a live wire ready to jump on me again, and it shook him to the core. I gave him a gentle pat on the chest and smiled.

“I need to take care of something. Can you stand here for a sec? It won’t take long.”

He hesitated, so I took off my Santa hat fascinator and held it out to his *senti*. He wrapped his tendril around it and shuddered, finally nodding.

Then I turned on my heel and walked straight up to Zufi with purpose. Rearing back, I smacked his cheek as hard as I could, and after years of kneading dough, I was a lot stronger than I looked. The slap cracked across the ambassador’s cheek, and he stumbled sideways from shock. I chased at his face, one finger poised like a sword between his eyes.

“*You* are a bully and a creep.” My voice vibrated with fury as his tendrils shrank back behind his shoulders in submission. “How *dare* you pressure your delegates into seducing humans that have endured and lost so much? You know *nothing* about what we’ve been through, on Earth *or* after being abducted.”

He held up his hands to placate me. “Tinsley—”

“*It’s Miss Adams to you,*” I roared. “And Hunar didn’t choose to deceive you. *I* did. I improvised, because he’s *important*. To the colony and to me. He should be winning awards for how brilliant his perimeter drones are and how well he’s adjusting to being a single dad, not worrying about ending up homeless with three kids. And it makes me livid that I have to confess that I’m falling in love with him in front of *you* and not in the privacy of our own relationship. Otherwise, you’ll kick him out and I won’t get the chance to—”

I hiccuped as a tear of anger threatened to fall. I swallowed down the sob, but the tear raced free as I took a deep breath. Zufi didn’t try to speak as I found my voice again. Just the familiar night insects filling up the silence.

“He’s staying,” I decided with conviction in a low, menacing tone. “You’re going to renew his contract, and he’s going to stay.”

Zufi bowed his head, his voice frustratingly calm. “Alright, Miss Adams. He stays.”

My breath hitched, surprised. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

I blew out a sigh, quaking with adrenaline.

“But I want you to understand something,” Zufi said with seriousness, pressing his fingers against his cheekbone with a restrained wince. “Shilpakaari women hold all the cards in our society. Men have no leverage. We aren’t venandi that can converge with anyone we like, or advenans with chimera genes. We’ve fought for centuries to better our circumstances, but since a natural coil only happens within our own species?”

He raised his arms to the sides with a bitter laugh. “Every other major species has made huge leaps towards equality while all we do is churn shit. We males instinctively seek monogamy while our *priyas* do not. We hold positions of power less often, are paid less, have fewer familial rights, less representation in courts... Even though we make up two-thirds of the population. I bet that sounds familiar, right?”

I swallowed on a dry throat. “That doesn’t give you the right to push people around.”

“No,” he sighed, glancing at Hunar over my shoulder. “It doesn’t. But I won’t apologize anymore either. Delegates that enter the colony moving forward have no such expectations because the coil *does* happen naturally with humans. But how could I pass on an opportunity to affect so much change when we’re strangled by our own society?”

I turned sideways so I could see Hunar. He was stiff with anger and fear, fists kneading the meat of his palms.

“Thank you,” Zufi said.

Shocked, my palm still stinging, I blinked at him. “Why?”

“For protecting Hunar and his spats. I probably won’t be remembered fondly in history books, but your indignation is exactly what I’m fighting for.” He smiled sadly, then inhaled the night air. “Now, I think I’ll take a walk and keep your refreshing fire for company a while longer.”

Zufi side-stepped me and strolled past Hunar, disappearing down the road towards the twinkle lights. We watched him go, mortified into silence. My eyes slid to Hunar’s *senti*, where my fascinators were crushed in its grip.

“Hunar,” I murmured, holding out my hand. “Are you okay?”

I brushed my hand down his *senti* to soothe him as he stared at the ground.

“We’re staying,” he croaked with uncertainty, as if he couldn’t believe it either.

I bit my lip and for once, kept myself from smiling. The last time I'd fought someone was when Valerie Beaumont pulled my pigtails on the playground. I was a wobbly tornado of feelings: triumph, righteous fury, shame over losing my temper, worry for Hunar...

"Yeah, I think so." I wriggled my fingers and dipped my head to catch his eyes. "Shall we?"

Hunar's jaw ticked with his little nod. He straightened his shoulders, hand hovering over mine with confusion and deep thought. I reached for him slowly so that he'd have time to pull away if he wanted. When he didn't, I laced my fingers through his and his nostrils flared, the stripes on his neck warping as he swallowed hard.

Then I pulled him towards our home tower, heart in my throat.

21

) HUNAR (

My spats and I would be staying.

And I was going to lose Tinsley before I was ready.

I scrunched up my banded mane before it could keen at the thought. Who was I kidding? I'd never be fucking ready. All those reassurances I'd given myself—ask her out after Zufi leaves, work on more holidays together, invite her to lunch, run into her, and for the love of all fucks, *smile* every once in a while—crumbled at the realization that there was no longer an axe looming over my neck. She did it. Whatever she said to Zufi... She figured out how to keep us in Renata.

Which meant we didn't need to pretend anymore.

Which meant she'd withdraw our coil.

Which meant I'd go back to being the *skhrooj m'gess het*.

Maybe she would stay until the Winter Festival was over. That would be enough time to—

The home tower doors opened in front of my face and I blinked, not realizing how far we'd walked. She led me into the lift and pressed the buttons, her *Krismis* music wafting through the space between us. It had been an inviting sound every morning and night, full of warm moments like the spats singing along in gibberish or Tinsley humming one I recognized while she worked at the break table, but now the music was a crushing metronome, a steady march to the end of our arrangement.

I had to drown it out so I couldn't hear the wrecking ball inside my chest.

“I would have lost parental control of the spats if I wasn’t in a coil with their maan,” I blurted as the lift started to rise. “She wanted to send them away when they were two years old, but she couldn’t if I was giving more than eighty percent of my pay to their living costs.”

“Honey...”

“We haven’t been together for more than a decade,” I insisted, bowling over her sympathetic words. I had to say it all before the lift stopped on level two. “So you aren’t causing a mess, Tin. You saved me from one that was fucking killing me, and I—”

The lift doors opened, and she pulled on my fingers gently, leading me out of the lift. I stared at her hand, counting the steps to my unit in a panic. My *senti* throbbed, the taste of her mouth and bare thighs still coursing through my system. I couldn’t let her leave. I couldn’t breathe without her.

I couldn’t.

The unit door opened with a rush of cold, spiced air. Tinsley walked inside, confusion freezing me at the threshold. This wasn’t my unit...

Tinsley faced me after kicking her shoes away, the low light reflecting off her green-sequined chest as she breathed in shallow, nervous breaths.

“Do you want to come inside, Hunar?” she asked, hands curled at her sides.

My mane broke its band, caught between the whirlpool of desperation to keep her for myself and the titanium self-control to maintain boundaries. I surged forward but grabbed the door frame with all four hands just in time to stop myself.

“*Yesssss,*” I hissed, doubled over from the effort.

“Then why aren’t you?” she asked, vulnerability lacing her tone. I groaned as my *senti* latched onto the door frame and pulled, trying to get me inside her unit. She was offering herself up and I was so close to a frenzy, I might go blind.

“It’s all–pheromones. You’ve–never coiled before,” I panted. My elbows bent under the immense strength of my *senti* and I buckled, close enough now to the entrance that my other tendrils curled around it, bending the metal. “I’d–be taking advantage–”

“You won’t be taking advantage of me.”

“What if you hate me again afterwards?” I rasped, looking up at her sweet face, leaving my soul and all its worries bare. Round cheeks and bowed lips, a tall nose and all those silk curls that bounced just like her stride when she was happy. If I ever saw hurt in her eyes again because of me, I’d bite off my own tongue.

“Humans don’t feel the coil, Hunar. We just...” She shrugged and smiled helplessly. “Fall in love.”

My world shrank to a single heartbeat, a single breath, as Tinsley shuffled one step back in her tights.

“Tinsley,” I warned. “You need to let *me* leave first. If you back away, I–”

“I’m not leaving,” she interrupted, sliding back again. “I’m walking to my bedroom.”

“*Chudthi!*” I snapped, grinding my dental ridges together. “I said don’t *fucking* move!”

“Why not!” she yelled, exasperated. “I *want* to make a move. In fact, that’s what I’m doing *right now!* I want your frenzy, Hunar. I want you to grapple me and to put all those hands and tendrils all over my skin. I’m so tired of this stupid charade! I just want something real.”

Something real...

I’d lay down my life for something real with Tinsley Adams.

My *senti* calmed, still holding onto the bent doorway, just no longer pulling me like an anchor chain. It knew I was giving in.

Something real... The words wheedled their way into my brain and caught me, hook, line, and sinker.

We could rub each other the wrong way later, I decided. How wrong was it for me to be selfish for a night? Maybe the *only* night in my future, because no one would ever measure up to my little cyclone of chaos and rainbows. I'd been battered like a shell in the tide, and she'd picked me up, taken me home, and wanted to...

To cherish me.

Maybe like I cherished her.

Though surely not as profoundly. She was too young and too untried to understand the depths to which she'd dived to save me. Her soul was intact, and mine was as brittle as sun-dried plas. I survived for everyone else but hadn't *lived* for myself in years.

And I owed it to her—to me—to believe that she knew how she felt.

I stood up, the toes of my boots encroaching on the entryway, but my shoulders hunched like a predator. All my mane's desperation filtered into the calm before the storm, the unrivaled focus of a coil ready to chase down his prey.

"Walk away, then, *priya*," I rumbled, unblinking as I heeled off my boots. "See what happens."

Tinsley backed up one step, her tights sliding against the tile. I paced forward, untying one side of my tabard just above the hip. She did it again, transfixed by my hands as they slowly pulled the red ribbons apart on the other side, running the lengths through my fingers all the way to the ends in a slow, dangerous display.

My breath was loud now, air filling my lungs at a progressively deeper and slower pace. My muscles primed themselves as if I were flexing, even though I wasn't, preparing for the dives of old, stimulating my metabolism and running a fever to keep me warm at extreme depths. My heart

was slowing to half its usual pulse, each beat so forceful and over-extended that my chest visibly thumped.

Tinsley stared. Assessing. Choosing. I waited, frozen in place. My stripes were already glowing, but the bioluminescence that accompanied them pulsed once like a lure, the only thing I couldn't help myself from doing.

With a sharp breath and blood pooling in her cheeks, Tinsley turned her back to me and walked down her cluttered hallway. I didn't wait a beat or give her space. I followed so close that her heat caressed my tendrils. She was nervous, intimidated, excited... I stared at the back of her neck like a hungry shark, frothing for the muscles on either side of her spine that were separated by the gentle divot along the vertebrae.

The bedroom door hushed open and my *senti* snapped forward, wrapping around that delicate, exposed column. My *priya* gasped, her thin fingers clutching my tendril as I gripped her dress and pulled her against my aching groin. I only squeezed hard enough to feel her pulse and esophagus as she panted, *senti* draped across her collarbones like a queen's wesekh. Pleased, my mane vibrated and hummed as I walked her to the bed.

"Down, *priya*," I demanded. My vision vibrated. Desperate, thirsty, so thirsty...

Tinsley shuddered, palms out to catch her weight on the mattress. The silicone bands that held her curiously cut tights around her thighs peeked out from the hem of her dress, just tight enough to make her flesh bulge above them.

A primitive shiver raced down my spine and I ripped my tabard off, unwilling to remove my *senti* from her neck. The ruined top hit the wall and slipped to the floor as I pushed her dress up to expose the well that fed me, healed me, *owned* me.

Sequins scraped Tinsley's hot skin as the delicious fat of her ass and thighs shivered. They left pleasing red marks along her dusty pale flesh that I massaged away with my lower

palms. I needed to remember, because soon I'd be mindless. The frenzy was rumbling in my veins and stealing my mind.

Arching her back so the cleft of her mantle spread open, she strained to look back.

"Hunar..." she breathed, pushing her hips back in invitation.

I fell off the cliff.

I snarled as the need to thrust my pearls into her womb addled my instincts. I rose above Tinsley's hips and knelt on the bed behind her, pressing down on her shoulder blades with one upper hand while the other gripped her hip in a frenzied vice. Her cheek and chest pressed into the bedding, and my *senti* loosened, slithering between her mammalian mounds to soak up the taste of skin I'd never dared touch before.

Groaning, I fit my lips around the nape of her neck, right where she'd have pheromonal glands if she were a shilpakaar. Her neck surrendered as I sucked the salt and soap from the thin silk that disappeared into a fuzz beneath my mouth. She bent her head forward, a small sound breaking from her throat. And breaking *me*. My sanity, my patience...

I unlatched my dhoti with rough lower hands and pushed them down my hips until my cock rested along the length of her scorching mantle. She moaned, gripping the sheets in her hard-working hands, and rocked her hips as best she could, pinned beneath the greater weight of my wide shoulders. Hot, thick waters slipped along my reservoir, filled to the brim with pearls that strained my channel and caused a delicious tingle up and down my spine as she swayed that tiny bit beneath me.

Cock gripped in one lower hand, I dragged the harpoon head through those waters, searching for her entrance. I was blind with need, going on instinct, and as soon as I found the dip and change in texture, sheathed myself to the hilt.

"*Chudthi*," I snarled, baring my canines against her neck. I licked her vertebrae as I withdrew and dove back in again.

Tinsley was a furnace inside. And *wet*. Slippery with all the syrup she'd given me in her gifts. Unlike the others, I'd never looked at human pornography or anatomical charts. I'd thought I'd always be stuck in Corsa's horrible, loveless limbo before Tinsley shoved her way into my heart. Whatever she had was different, *so* different from a shilpakaari woman, and a fog of concern obscured my frenzy.

"Hunar, fuck me," Tinsley hiccuped, pushing back on me in desperation. My cock jolted against something inside her, the end of her channel, and she mewled, her spine straining to press her seat bones against my hips with force. "Like... like a piston."

That, at least, was the same.

I dug my upper fists into the mattress on either side of her shoulders, lower hands gripping her ass, and did as she asked, rolling my spine and clenching my abdominal wall with each stroke. I crashed into her like the tide and bowed my head over her silk, letting my tendrils grip her curls and test the corners of her mouth.

And Tinsley fell apart beneath me, nodding and pleading, her knuckles white from holding on. My *senti's* tip twisted around one of the tight, brown buttons on her chest, the modest mound quivering with each hammering stroke. Saltwater forced its way from the corners of her eyes, weighing down her lashes and staining her cheeks.

My cockhead swelled, muscles clenched. I was going to come hard and fast. My mane rumbled, and a deep, triumphant code rumbled through my chest and *senti*.

Victory, it echoed.

Tinsley gripped my straining wrist for support as my rhythm faltered and pearls squeezed their way through my head like lightning. I keened in uneven, broken moans as jet after jet of semen spilled into my *priya* and forced me out. One, two, three pearls made it into her tight, volcanic body before the pressure of her walls forced me back. I rocked just

the tip in and out of her, looking down at where our bodies met with fascination and humility.

“Thank you,” Tinsley moaned in a ragged breath. She kissed my tendrils as they wiped her features of sweat and water, opened her mouth to them and let them graze her tongue. She was rubber, her muscles too shaken to hold herself up.

I pressed a kiss against the back of her neck and withdrew. A dribble of pearlescent cum dripping to the sheets between her knees.

“Thank you,” she sighed again.

As if she thought we were done.

“Did I hurt you?” Hunar asked quietly. Sense had returned to him, and I wondered deep in the shadowy pit of my conscience if it really had been a pheromonal frenzy and not feelings on his part.

“No,” I assured him, trying to find my voice. “You were amazing.”

Amazing was an understatement. Was there even a word to describe him? I felt like Hunar was a sea god, towering hundreds of feet high with such a commanding presence that I had no choice but to obey.

It was freaking *hot*.

I looked back at all the times we’d fought in the past and wondered if I’d ever felt the dark, guttural excitement that his demands elicited now. Would it ever feel the same to hear him grump about printing queues and late shipments or brush his hand against my shoulder to get my attention?

No, of course not.

Something real crashed down on me so hard, I couldn’t breathe. There was no hangover cure for Hunar Fareshi. I needed him now and forever, no differently than water and air. As spontaneous as I was, I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking if I could move in. Could I say the three magic words directly to his Scrooge McLoveMuffin face yet? How fast was too fast? Was all of this just pheromones for him like he’d worried for me?

Oh god, I’d never asked... I’d just lured him into my unit.

“You’re leaking.”

His observation snapped me out of my panic. I looked between my legs at the sheets with a mortified gasp, trying to close my legs and clench everything back in. “Oh my god!”

Hunar chuckled between his panting, tilting my chin back up with his *senti* to keep me from looking. Its tip brushed across my itchy cheeks where tears were drying in their tracks. “From your eyes.”

“Oh... you mean, crying?”

“Mm,” he purred with an edge of uncertainty. “Isn’t that bad?”

Hunar’s tendrils dipped to the small of my back and kneaded my aching spine. He pressed slow circles into the meat of my rear end and all my worries fell away. He wasn’t skipping the aftercare like a booty call. Frenzy *and* feelings, maybe. Relief and heat burst in my chest.

“You’ll have to get used to it,” I teased breathlessly, hedging my bets that this something real might really be *something*. “I cry a lot. Especially in bed. It’s just so overwhelming, I can’t help...” A divot formed between my brows as Hunar’s tendrils slipped down my back like so many monstrous fingers, feeling every curve as his hands pushed my knees apart. “What are you doing?”

A humiliating amount of fluid dripped down my swollen clit. Something about the size of a marble fell free with a soft *thump*... one of his pearls, no doubt. I felt them deep in my channel, but with his upper hands massaging my inner thighs, they were dislodging one by one. By the bass hiss rolling through his tendrils, Hunar loved the sight.

I put my weight on my elbows and bowed my head to look down the length of my stomach. Hunar was kneeling on the floor, staring at my messy pussy. I squirmed in his grip, but he snarled.

“Hunar!” I pleaded, scandalized.

His *senti*, bright red and pulsing, tapped my clit and my thighs shivered as if it were electric. I was wound up so tight,

even his breath made my channel clench.

“You didn’t come,” he growled, stretching open my labia with his thumbs. “Your flavor isn’t as deep as your gifts.”

“My panties?”

“Keep your eyes on me,” he demanded, pushing my legs further apart. “Don’t look away while I learn you.”

My heart stuttered. I’d never been on display like this. Everything I’d ever experienced had been... well, *normal*.

Dinner, a movie, then a tussle that sometimes led to an orgasm, but more often than not, left me needing to finish the job afterwards. They were rushed encounters that always felt like a performance, compressed into the length of a movie scene because that’s what people my age had grown up thinking was the way to show passion. Impatience and quick, loud fakies.

What Hunar was demanding was so *much*. He was thorough and his appetite monstrous. He wanted the feast to last, to savor every cut of steak and dribble of grease, to lick the plate clean. I was so swollen and tight that my muscles quivered.

So did my heart. I’d been the flirtatious one this whole time without ever knowing just how much of a kraken I’d been tempting. No one else would ever compare. I fought to keep my eyes open rather than rolling back in my sockets in anticipation, praying he was really mine now.

Hunar’s *senti* pressed into my entrance, slipping easily into our mingled fluids, and a sweat of excited helplessness broke out on my shoulders and forehead. I mewled involuntarily as its firm tip corkscrewed, pressing against my walls this way and that. Hunar wasn’t fucking me with his *senti* like the frenzy that had just stolen my soul.

He was *exploring*.

All the way to my cervix. He pressed against it, testing the edges, curling his tendril over itself to make it thicker as it crushed his pearls. His *senti* was as thick as my forearm, and

the combination of pushing in and stretching my entrance had me panting.

Nevermind the absolute muscle. Each of his tendrils was like a python, and his *senti* was king. It flexed within me, and I *felt* its power. His mane swarmed my sticky thighs, constricting around my flesh, ripping into the tops of my red thigh highs, ripping my dress around the hem and destroying sequins. I watched Hunar like he'd commanded, so overstimulated by all the foreign sensations that I felt dizzy.

"We taste good together, *priya*," he rumbled, pressing his tongue against his canines, swallowing the taste that his tendrils put in his mouth. His throat worked hard, sucking every drop from his taste buds like honey.

"Mhm," I whined while biting my lip, pressing back with a needy grimace, my clit so swollen that just the air was enough to make it throb.

Hunar's grip tightened, bronze ovoid eyes flashing on mine. Still curled over itself like a hook, his *senti* withdrew and scraped against the bundle of spongy nerves that made my channel light up like a Christmas tree. His tendrils shivered, vibrating my hot skin.

But when one of his thumbs pressed on my clit, the air rushed from my lungs and my limbs shook.

"Oh my god," I shuddered, perilously close to falling right off the edge. I didn't need a familiar circular rhythm and a slideshow. Turns out, I just needed Hunar's intensity. My channel throbbed, empty and wanting.

"Ahhh," Hunar rumbled with realization. He pushed the hood of my clit back, then down, in a circle. He pet the taut ramp between the swollen bud and my slit with his index finger, flicking the sensitive tip until I gasped and squirmed away.

With a triumphant crocodilian purr strong enough to tingle my thighs and butt, Hunar inserted his *senti* again. This time, he curled the tip up so it hit my g-spot as he slowly,

thoroughly fucked me. I closed my eyes, laying my cheek against the sheets as my arms gave out.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Is my *priya* too weak to hold herself up and watch her coil fucking her like no human ever could?” Hunar asked, nipping the crease at the back of my thigh. “Should I stop?”

“Don’t stop!” I begged, rotating my hips open as far as possible, all shame gone. “Please, *please* don’t stop.”

Hunar picked up a rhythm that swayed me back and forth, wet lashes pressing into the bed. His thumb found my clit with confidence, churning it in circles as his lower hands spread me open, pulling it taut.

My body locked up within moments, the breath forced from my lungs as my stomach bottomed out and I came. I shuddered like I never had before, legs and abdomen so uncontrollable that Hunar held my weight in his tendrils, upper palms balancing my hips. I milked his *senti* and his red stripes flashed, splashing color across the walls.

“What a good fucking *priya*,” Hunar praised viciously. He yanked me over, turning the world upside down as his *senti* withdrew with a rough pop. I hiccuped as he slammed my knees into the bed on either side of my biceps and snatched one of my tight brown nipples between his dental ridges.

How had I ever thought he was being patient? Hunar was possessed, focused, intent on thoroughly owning me, body and soul. My nipple popped from his lips, and he stuffed his own *senti* into his mouth, sucking it clean with a growl.

“*Deliciousssss*,” he hissed from deep in his chest. Coded echoes right at the edge of my bass hearing compressed my chest like a second heartbeat.

Hunar pressed his cock into my channel along with a finger curled to bump up against my g-spot with every thrust as he bottomed out again and again, hips hammering into the backs of my thighs with ferocity. I threw my head back, crying out, begging, clawing into his forearms as tears streamed down

my temples and into my hairline. Hunar wrapped his *senti* around my throat, and I opened my mouth, sticking out my tongue. The first three or four inches filled me to the cheeks, muffling my cries of overwhelmed pleasure.

Hunar licked my teary temples, tendrils gripping my hair. I met his eyes with a wide stare, disbelieving. I'd never come twice, even by myself. But here I was, my pussy swelling around his cock, ready to burst with every hard thrust.

When the tension in my abdomen snapped, his rhythm stuttered, caught deep inside me as my channel swallowed him whole. He rocked with tight hips, a snarl exposing his triple canines, and then he was filling me with pearls again, crowding himself out even as my body wouldn't let him go. His possessive glare turned to wonder as he sat back on his knees, watching my body work his.

"You're fucking magic," he said, short of breath. He pressed his thumb to my clit again as my knees fell open, too wobbly and sated to hold themselves up, and I pulsed again, feeling raw and electric.

"And you're *mine*, Tinsley Adams."

"All yours," I rasped, meaning it.

Hunar's striped eyes were blown out to the point of a drug-induced high. His cock popped free, glistening in the low light as it bobbed against his chiseled abdominal wall. He hooked two fingers into the crowd of pearls nestled against my womb and drew them into his palm.

I was still as wobbly as jelly, and he easily nestled between my legs again, our chests pressed against each other. Tongue swiping the corner of his mouth, he held up one of his pearls, fingers wet with iridescent semen. When his eyes drifted to my lips, I stuck out my tongue and he placed the pearl in my mouth like it was an oyster throne.

Sweet citrus, like oranges on Christmas morning. I rolled it around while he watched, giving him a dazed smile, and his posture stiffened with focus.

“More,” he hissed, rubbing the next against my lips as I swallowed. I opened my mouth again as he aimed his cock towards my pussy. Rubbing his harpoon head in our mess before sinking into my body, his tendrils massaged my throat and chest.

My eyes rolled back, and I committed myself to drowning in Hunar’s frenzy until dawn.

Lavender painted the sky as Surya rose somewhere beyond the horizon. From Tinsley's window, Big Blue was visible, the pre-dawn catching the poisonous water planet's atmospheric halo like a silvery knife.

I sat on the edge of her bed, staring at my forearms and *senti*. I was naked, but clean, having hoisted her into the shower for one last frenzied fuck before she finally fell asleep, limp as a noodle in my arms the moment she was under her blankets.

I hadn't been able to sleep. Too wired, too worried. So here I sat, waiting for the wardrobe to finish cleansing her comforter so I could tuck her in again.

Sweet? Sure, it was a sweet gesture. But also indulgent.

Flexing my fists, the stripes on my arms rippled. I glowed with health, *literally*. My ruby markings were visible in the thin light as if illuminated from behind. But my heart clenched with concern. I looked back at Tinsley's serene face, her silk a messy nest around her features as she scrunched deep into her pillows and breathed in soft little sighs. Her mouth was open...

Was that drool?

I smirked, but it was short-lived. We'd said and done a lot of things last night—mind-blowing things—but coming down from the high of a frenzy we'd strung along for weeks had me twisting my tendrils with concern.

Humans don't coil, we just... fall in love.

I clung to those words hard. As far as my instincts were concerned, I had to play for keeps. She thought I'd been too

wound up in her body to notice the wobbly insecurity she was so good at hiding. Every time she thanked me for making her come or wrapping my tendrils around her throat, it had sounded too much like she thought she might lose me when the sun rose. Like I would ever deny her.

Or... this was her way of showing gratitude, and last night was just the same as every pair of underwear she'd given me. A gift for us both to remember the first Winter Festival because she thought we shouldn't be encoiled afterwards.

I rubbed my face with one upper palm, scrubbing away that thought. There was no fucking way. Everything I felt was real, and Tinsley was a shit liar with a heart of gold that could move mountains. We weren't bad at communicating. Against all odds, we made a killer team.

This? This was both of us being gun-shy because we started off fake and didn't know when the lie had morphed into the truth. Going through the motions for Zufi had muddied the waters.

Which touches had been quiet confessions?

What if *all* of them had?

No more circling each other, hoping the other was psychic and could figure it out. I needed to step up and make a clear offer. Take a sure chance, even if it felt like I was diving without a parachute.

Did my heart always beat this fast?

Fuck.

I had a list of things to do longer than my mane. I couldn't stay any longer.

The wardrobe emitted its low, harmonic *vromph* sound, signaling the end of the cleaning cycle. Caught up in the clouds of my mind as I imagined a timid future—mornings that smelled of spiced *sīdur* and Tinsley's silk on my pillow—I draped the warm comforter over her body and picked up my dhoti and tabard, both wadded up on the floor. Backing out of

the room was physically painful, and I stared intently at her sleeping features until the door hissed shut.

My tendrils shuddered and I gripped the red linen to my groin a little harder, but I reined in the temporary despair. I had less than a week before the Winter Festival, a festival of gifts and gratitude.

What could I give Tinsley that would show her how much I love her?

My *senti* rumbled with ideas, but I hissed it into submission.

Pearls didn't count.

I pulled on my dhoti, having to hold them closed since I'd destroyed the latch in my desperation the night before. The tabard was a lost cause though, so I thanked my lucky stars it was too early for most people to be awake and padded into the kitchen to toss it in the trash.

But I stopped mid-stride, looking at the mess on the counter.

No, not a mess...

Creamy violet powder covered a square foot of the countertop, surrounded by storage cubes, their labels glowing with different human words. *Synthetic mammalian infant formula, general, fermenting ryhidon maternal fluid, zepesti vinegar from pickle jar, egg whites separated from yiwreni cocktail, crushed wine-making vidisti, citrus concentrate...*

Most of the labels were long winded, suggesting Tinsley was using human culinary terms that my native Dharateen no longer translated well. Fermented maternal fluid...?

A memory resurfaced of Tinsley walking into the hangar the morning after I'd coiled for her. My mind had been so addled that I'd completely forgotten the bag she'd held up, filled to the brim with the powder now strewn on her countertop. All I'd been able to think about was how to rub her scent into my pores and paint her skin in semen without losing my self-respect or violating her in the process.

I tasted the powder with the sensitive ridges of my palm. *Biria* nut. My eyes grew wide.

It was—what was the powder used to make bread—flour?

Indeed, stacked on a plate near the food bay was a display of different breads, all misshapen in different ways. Some darker, some pasty. Some flat, some collapsed. I picked up a curious jar filled with a red, frothing paste and immediately set it back down. It tasted sour and poisonous. *Biria* nut for sure, but also something *alive*...

I moved onto a stack of plas notes scribbled with combinations of human numbers and letters and smeared with dried pastes of varying degrees of aubergine. I winked on my bionic eye and took a few snaps, storing them in my holotab. She was trying to find some sort of ingredient replacement. It translated as “riser” but that wasn’t really a word in Dharateen.

Most puzzling was a stack of printouts of molecular compounds. Glucose, fructose, sucrose? Sugars. Sodium bicarbonate? Salt. Potassium bitartrate... some sort of acid. Why would she be breaking down compounds? I needed to ask Bajora.

I took more snaps and sent them all in a comm as I entered the lift moments later, holding the waistband of my dhoti closed in one lower fist. My luck held and no one was awake between our floors.

But when the door to my own unit swished open, I came face to face with Tahavir, a cup of water poised comically in front of his puckered lips. He grinned up at me. “Hi, Baan.”

The door slid shut, trapping me with my offspring in the middle of my walk of shame, and I groaned under my breath, trying to cover my bare chest with my upper hands. “Uh, morning, son.”

“How is Na’maan?”

“She’s sleeping well.”

“Why doesn’t she sleep here?”

I shuffled to the nearest dining chair and sat. Tahavir set his upper elbows on the table and swung his hips back and forth like spats do, not teasing me but torturing me nonetheless with his sharp eyes. He was the most childlike of his brood, but the most empathetic.

It would slowly kill me.

“Because,” I said slowly. “We... we haven’t talked about it.”

“She said it was to give us space to be your priority.”

Was I standing in a microwave? Because even my bones warmed up hearing that. I bit my lip like Tinsley did, her daily mannerisms rubbing off on me in all the ways I obsessed over her, and immediately licked the sting from my lip, rubbing a hand over my mouth.

“Do you *want* her to sleep here?” I asked, clearing my throat.

“Who, Tinsley?” Reha asked, rubbing her eyes in the hallway.

“Seas save me,” I sighed, staring up at the ceiling for strength. I hadn’t even constructed my plan yet.

“Yeah,” Tahavir confirmed, nodding sagely like a human as his sister joined us. He slid his water her way and she took a big swig, sitting primly in the seat across from me. She waited for me to continue, as assertive as if she sat in a boardroom. I held her stare, but my tendrils twisted.

“I was worried it would be uncomfortable. You haven’t been away from your maan for very long and it was...”

“Shitty?”

I coughed to hide the little smile at hearing her swear for the first time. “Yeah. Also, language.”

“*You* do it.”

“And I was wasting away less than a satbit ago, so I wouldn’t count me as a shining role model.”

“Why not? Na’maan’s right. You’re an awesome baan.”

The roots of my tendrils tightened as if I might keel. I swallowed hard, lacing my upper hands together on the table. “Thanks,” I managed.

“And we like her,” Reha added. “A lot.”

“And hugs!” Tahavir added. “Hugs are so great. Maan never gave them to us unless you came to visit, and Virhek wasn’t always nice if she wasn’t around.”

“Did he hurt you?” I asked, unable to tiptoe around the subject anymore. My stripes flashed, instantly furious at the thought. “Did your maan...”

Tahavir and Reha looked at each other, then both shook their heads.

“He threw things sometimes, and didn’t like us being around,” Tahavir admitted. “He could be mean, but he never did anything *bad* bad. Maan just didn’t care a lot. She really wanted us to go to a guardianship and said you were standing in the way of our futures.”

My lower hands clenched into tight fists beneath the table.

“But Tinsley isn’t like that. We’re old enough to know the difference,” Reha cut in with finality, and I swallowed my fury. I could talk to them about the past and what they wanted to do about it later. Right now, my spats wanted to talk about the future, and frankly, so did I.

Reha grimaced though, looking around the unit with disdain, and my soul sank a few more inches into my gut. “But Baan? This place is *so* tiny. Ladh kicks Taha out of bed every morning because he sleeps like a furnace, and it’s impossible to share one bathroom. You only have, like, two of everything too, so we have to share bidets and cups. Can’t we get a bigger unit yet?”

I grumbled about having more than two cups but curled my tendrils in agreement. My daughter was right. “Zufi approved us to stay last night, thanks to Tinsley. I haven’t

talked to her about living together but,” I swallowed around the thick trepidation stuck in my throat, “we can’t convince her without showing her, right?”

Reha and Tahavir both jumped up with screeches of excitement and flung their arms around my shoulders. I chuckled, that lump in my throat melting away.

What would it be like to walk into a *home* at the end of each day? Tinsley’s place felt like a refuge. It wasn’t just her scent in the air that comforted my laborer’s bones. From the first moment I stepped inside with my spare mediplasma in hand, it had soothed something in me I’d let turn brittle through years of ISU vessel pods and bachelor dorms. The feeling of belonging somewhere.

Even if this unit were bigger, Tinsley and my spats deserved that too. I huffed a self-deprecating laugh once I realized... it’s what she’d been chasing this whole time, wasn’t it? Feeling like she and the other humans belonged here instead of being dumped and hidden away.

I could make that happen for her. And the other humans? We could work on “cultural infrastructure” as much as she wanted.

“The top half of Home Tower 03 is full of empty family units,” I said, intertwining my tendrils with theirs. “I’ll reserve one this morning. Reha, you tell Miss Jeong that you and your brothers need a few days to move. We’ve got a lot to do before the Winter Festival, and I need you to orchestrate some drone work. Think you can handle that?”

Reha’s eyes twinkled with purpose. “You got it, Baan. I still have the twinkle lights on my holotab.”

“Then you know the basics,” I assured her with a fond hand on her mane as I disentangled their limbs from mine and stood. “Tahavir, you get breakfast started while I, uh...” I glanced down at myself with a self-conscious tick of my jaw. “Put on some clothes.”

Tahavir broke for the kitchen as I shuffled down the hallway, and Reha took advantage of the empty bathroom just as Ladh stumbled out, squinting at me with a groggy sniff. “Did I miss something?”

I smirked, patting him on the shoulder as I disappeared into my bedroom.

I wouldn't dare take the chance to tease him away from his siblings.

Stretching my toes towards the end of the bed, my eyes popped open. I knew instantly that Hunar wasn't there, that telltale slope of someone dragging me into their gravitational well absent. I kneaded my pillow with my fingers gently, a pang of worry tap-tap-tapping away at the back of my sternum.

Logically, I knew he had to get back to his kids, but he could have woken me up instead of slinking out like a one-night stand.

Or was that all it had been after all?

"Aaaagh," I growled, scrubbing my hands through my hair. I sat up like a zombie, all of my curls falling straight into my face. My nipples shrank to points in the cold air, bummed that there wasn't a warm shilpakaar in bed next to me to keep the goosebumps away.

"Shut up!" I pointed accusingly at my comforter, throwing it aside with a huff. "I'm Canadian. I don't need a buff Scrooge to save me from the cold, okay? I can do it myself!"

Was I being ridiculous? Yes. Did I need to burst with all the pop rocks exploding in my chest? Also yes. So talking to my furniture like they were people was the name of the game.

I grumbled and griped, opening the wardrobe with a flourish, deciding it was a "she" as I complained about boys. It smelled a bit like warm plastic, the scent of finishing a cleanser cycle. It confused me since I usually added the fresh spritz option afterwards to make my clothes smell like "Aescipolian Breeze." I squinted, tapping my fingers suspiciously, then whipped my head around to stare at my comforter.

Which should be a crusty, wrinkled reminder of a humiliatingly hot night.

It wasn't. It was fluffy and fresh.

I snorted and rolled my eyes, but a smile spread across my face anyway as I grabbed my most festive casualwear.

"I'm still mad," I said down at the floor, imagining Hunar's unit was directly below mine. He'd robbed me of that first morning afterglow. The one where you nuzzle and press your butt back and maybe make gentle love in the warm morning light.

Prone to over-analysing, I had to admit that cleaning my comforter didn't necessarily mean anything. He could have just felt bad leaving me freshly showered under crusty covers.

I padded into the bathroom, spots of water still drying on the tile walls from a shower session I barely remembered, and looked at myself in the mirror. Fading red marks roped around my arms, neck, breasts, hips... They were everywhere. My stomach flipped as my fingers slid down one near my collarbone. They looked like thick jellyfish lashes, but they felt like the warm aftermath of a good massage. Some of them would develop into light blue bruises for sure.

Then I looked back up at my dumb face with its dumb, blissful smile, and gave my cheek a little smack.

"Stop it," I warned myself sternly. I needed to act like an adult, not a lovesick puppy. I had things to do! I had responsibilities! The colony was counting on me to make sure this festival went off without a hitch.

So I pulled on my elf socks, elf tee, and reindeer antlers, then slid down the hallway back into my room with a bare butt, having forgotten my panties and shorts.

I ended up scrapping the panties in favor of a pair of green tights. I was content to show off some of Hunar's marks—like the one peeking out from my neckline and the pink remnants of his grip on my wrists and biceps—but the marks on my thighs were just for me.

Unable to stand it anymore, I checked my holotab for messages as I walked to the kitchen to print up some breakfast on autopilot. If Hunar had been human, he would have texted me, but there was nothing there. His icon wasn't active either. It was midmorning, so he was probably busy with work, but still...

I had a good time.

See you after work?

What are you doing later?

Good morning, priya~

A few comforting words like that would have been nice.

I blew out a breath, nibbling the inside of my cheek as my coffee printed, and something caught my eye. The cubes I'd been using to store potential leavening agents for my *biria* nut flour were out of order. Stretching out my hand to pick one up, I paused.

Drawn into my flour from the afternoon before was a truly ugly heart. It looked more like a bean than the iconic symbol, with the bottom and top center divots slightly too round.

Joy just about burst from my chest like that alien baby in the movie *Alien* as I traced the awkward heart Hunar had drawn with his finger.

Screw the standard morning-after text.

This was *way* better.



My reindeer antlers jingled merrily as I practically skipped into the hangar with a jug in my hands around lunchtime. Pulse racing, hands slightly damp, dopamine-fueled permanent smile chiseled into my apple cheeks... I must have looked like the cheeriest psycho on Yaspur.

But I couldn't help it. Two pearls still nestled inside me, and I rubbed my thumbs over my slightly bruised wrists with affection. My cheeks blazed with bristly embarrassment as Piro bounded up to me, his sleek periwinkle tendrils catching the rainbow of twinkle lights framing the big doors. He wore a Santa hat, the little puff bouncing against his mane.

"Hi, Tinsley!" he said, wiping oil off on his coveralls.

"Hey, Santa. Who gave you that hat?" I teased as he took the jug from my hands and carried it towards the workshop.

"Naitee," he said, a few of his tendrils curling bashfully at the tips. "She made some with Rambir after school."

"Mhm."

"This is for Hunar, right?" he asked, motioning to his workbench. I nodded, pressing my lips together to keep the blush from burning my face off.

"Yup!"

I did a quick look around the room, but no one else was there. Maybe they were all outside eating lunch? It was a nice day, with some fluffy clouds and a breeze to wick away the humidity. The thought of seeing Hunar for the first time since he'd groaned my name and sucked on my shoulder in the shower had me short of breath. The faintest little pin pricks of his six canines still dotted my collarbone. I couldn't stand the anticipation much longer.

"*Syalī* thought you'd probably stop by... He's working hard on, uh, work orders. In the home towers? Lots to catch up on." Piro winced sheepishly as my spirits dropped.

"Oh, okay," I said, trying to maintain some of my usual pep.

Piro was a terrible liar. Was *I* this bad of a liar?? No wonder Zufi never bought our fake-real coil act. I was tempted to torture the truth out of the lieutenant pilot but decided not to. Whatever Hunar was working on, that ugly bean heart made it obvious he wasn't avoiding me on purpose. He *had*

shirked a lot of his regular work to help me, after all. And who knew what sorts of demands Zufi was making behind the scenes.

“I guess I’ll message him instead.”

“I think he’s on Do Not Disturb, but you should definitely try.”

“Should I?”

Piro chuckled. “Definitely. Any guy would melt over a comm from his *priya*.” He made a point of nodding his ovoid eyes at the red tendril marks on my neck. “Oh, and the *Krismis* tree is nearly done! *Syalī* said he’d set it up as soon as the components cooled.”

We chatted a bit more about the tree and the ornaments, then Piro invited me to eat lunch with the rest of the guys outside on the tarmac in the shade. Aavar and Bree sat sandwiched together on the ground, her cross-legged and him with his knees out to either side behind her. They tossed me a beer, teased me about my telltale red marks, and taught me a hologame they played most days to bet on chores. It was relaxing, and when they asked if I’d be eating lunch with them on the regular, I decided that yes, I definitely would.

I spent the rest of the day there, hoping desperately that Hunar would stop by at some point to check on the printing bay while I sat at the break table and polished up the final details of a White Elephant gift exchange.

“White *Elyiphont* ...” Bajora mumbled with a question in his tone, looking over my shoulder. He raised a brow at me as he slid a levimat beneath one of the shelves with his boot. “What is that?”

“Humans wrap presents for Christmas and put them under the tree,” I explained. “But mostly just within our families. So if there’s an office party or something, each person brings an anonymous present and chooses one at random. I thought it’d be nice for the festival since we don’t all know each other. And that way, we get presents under the big tree.”

“Huh,” Bajora mused, bringing up his holotab. The levimat whirred to life with a magnetic *whomp* and the shelf rose just an inch or two off the grated floor. Bajora ushered it out through the narrow path by the lockers and called back to me. “Should the rest of us participate even if we don’t have human partners?”

“Duh!” I yelled after him.

“Send me the details and I’ll pass them around.” He walked back into the lounge and put his lower hands on his hips with a thoughtful scrunch of his brow. “What if I want my gift to go to someone specific?”

That piqued my interest. I raised both eyebrows, waiting for him to elaborate, but he dropped the levimat to the floor and crossed his upper arms in defiance. “You won’t tell me who?”

“Nope.”

“Fine. You give them a separate gift. The White Elephant exchange is completely random.” As an afterthought, I added, “You can still send it anonymously though. Just put on the tag that it’s from Santa or a secret admirer.”

He grunted, shuffling the mat under the next shelf, and changed the subject. “Heard you figured out how to make flour from *biria* nuts. How’d you dry them?”

I grimaced, hunching my shoulders like a gremlin. “I might have set my food bay to warm for twelve hours...” It was definitely longer than that, and my food bay did *not* feel the same afterwards. “I’ve managed a yeast culture, but fat amount of good it’s done so far. I can’t make anything consistent, which is frustrating.”

“Oh?”

I shrugged, jetting off a mass comm to exchange participants. Their gifts were due by the afternoon. “Baking on Yaspur is like high altitude on Earth. Add in a new type of flour and who knows what sort of bacterial culture in the yeast, and it’s been slow-going. I can make unleavened bread,

sort of, but the *biria* nuts don't like that. I tried to make some ancient focaccia a couple nights ago because it can rise on its own sometimes, and it just crumbled like feta." I sat back with a wistful sigh. "And I want bannock. And cookies, and pastries, and warm-from-the-oven sourdough and just... a lot of things I haven't figured out how to do yet."

"I didn't understand half of those words and I'm a culinary engineer," Bajora snorted, lifting up the second shelf and escorting it away. "It all just sounds like freaky human chemistry to me."

"Exactly!" I threw my hands up, slouching in my chair until my chin hit my chest and my heels were outstretched. Blowing a curl from my forehead, I kicked the air with a growl. "It's different from grilling a hunk of meat, or whatever Imani says they did on Huajile when she was there. I can't just put fire under some raw ingredients and expect magic. I need bacterial cultures and chemical reactions that rely on the air instead of heat. At least, that's what I need to start. *Then* I need consistent temperature control."

Bajora searched through his holotab, throwing down the levimat and kicking it under the next shelf. He scrolled through images and tables of complex equations with a human shake of his head. "Shilpakaari breads are all unleavened, so I guess we don't have that native on Yaspur or Dharatee... It looks like yiwreni breads are, but their planet died a few decades ago and the atmosphere was drastically different than here. Whatever method you'd usually use, looks like it's only on Earth at this point."

"Yup. I've got the yeast culture started though. It just takes a while to get it right," I admitted. "It'd be best if I could have something like baking powder though. If I had both, *and* some base ingredients like raw eggs, butter, sugar, I'd be absolutely golden. I could make so many new things with the universal ingredients!"

"Baking powder, like your flour? And butter... that's made from mammalian milk, right?"

“That’s right.” I scrubbed my hair with a grimace. “But it’s not technically cooked. We churn milk to make it clump up, but milk and yogurt and all that stuff?”

Bajora nodded, already knowing what I’d say. “Food bays don’t print raw materials or cultures.”

“Yes! It’s so frustrating.”

Bajora’s mane spiralled thoughtfully as he sent another shelf out of the room.

Thinking about it was exhausting, so I let the topic die off. It was my next major project, but I needed to get through the Winter Festival first.

Bajora clapped me on the back like a big brother, jarring my teeth as he chased away the overwhelming task of reinventing my passion on an alien moon. “Chin up, *na’syalī*. I know you hate the food bays, but they’ll get better and more intuitive over time. Especially if you’re able to make me some samples to work from someday.”

I smiled sadly.

“But right now, I need to boot you.”

“Huh?” I blinked. He nodded towards the exit.

“Hunar’s making me expand the workshop, which means I need to concentrate. Says I gotta get it all done before the festival or I can’t go.”

“What a bully,” I scoffed.

Bajora chuckled, his mane twisting up with amusement. “Something like that.”

“Alright, I’ll scram.”

“Thanks, Tin,” Bajora said, meaning it. “I do like your company, even if you hate my food bays. You make Hunar a *lot* more tolerable.”

“Hah hah.”

He flashed me a wicked grin, then followed the next shelving unit out into the hangar. I gathered my bag and adjusted my antlers, drinking the remnants of my water before setting the empty cup on Bajora's workbench by the cleanser. Then I drew a heart into the dust of Hunar's workbench, snapped a photo, and sent it to him as I walked down the hill.

The Winter Festival was *finally* here. It should have felt like the blink of an eye, but so much had changed in the span of just a few weeks that my brain couldn't compress it all into such a short amount of time. I couldn't believe how much we'd been able to accomplish.

Though Hunar had delivered the Christmas tree while I wasn't there, the magic of seeing it was enough to make some Renatans cry, including me. It was statuesque with thick bushels of needly branches, the color traditional for a spruce tree, though the tips were frosty blue. White glitter adorned every bough, and a big red ribbon cascaded from the tippy top to frame the tree on either side. I was sad I'd missed Hunar, but when one of the smaller children asked if Santa brought it? I bit my cheek, nodded, and gave him a hug.

My Santa certainly had.

Now it was still mid-morning, but there were people buzzing all around the playfield. School was canceled so the kids could play and make cute costumes outside. Even the refugees like Siatesh, Ngozi, and Kokebe were lounging around, relieved of their patrols for the celebration. All of them wore badges, paper crowns, felt headbands, tinsel necklaces and had been liberally draped in popcorn garlands. The younger kids were decorating them like Christmas trees, giggling and asking probing questions about extra eyes, tusks, fur, claws. The group of men all showed off, strutting their new holiday cheer as if they'd won medals. Smiles infected their usually stoic expressions, and it had a magical effect.

Most humans were slightly terrified by them, as standoffish and haunted as they'd been when they'd first arrived. Beyond Siatesh, Ngozi, and Kokebe, the others didn't

interface with humans nearly as much, and they weren't species we were very familiar with. Only a handful of us had ever met a hjarna or advenan, and no one had ever seen guvers, uids, or yiwreni.

But today? They were all here with us, part of the community, and spreading a sense of fun that would forge exactly the kinds of bonds I was hoping for.

“Okay, is everyone ready?!” I asked, standing on a bench so people could see me. The crowd of a couple hundred clapped and hollered with excitement to start putting their ornaments on the tree while *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree* rang out over the speakers. Piro and Bajora stood near Aavar and Bree, all of them holding up giant glittery nuts and bolts on colorful ribbons. Bree cupped her mouth and took a deep breath.

“WOO YEAH!” she bellowed.

“Do yuh magic!” Omi called out from behind them, one of Siatesh's upper arms around her shoulder.

I brought up the twinkle lights app on my holotab and lowered five branches into the awed crowd. They brushed their hands over the needles and branches in amazement, gingerly placing their ornaments as they took deep breaths, hoping for that seasonal whiff of terpenes to take them home for a moment in their minds.

“Ho ho ho!” Wade bellowed, dressed in a velvety red muscle shirt and sweatshorts. He'd polished his nose with a bit of red paint for the classic drunk Santa look and showed off his farmer's tan with pride. A handmade ball cap with a white puff glued to the top shaded his eyes. “Ya did a fancy job on this, Tinsley! Look fast—”

He tossed me a surfboard ornament that he'd carved by hand, painted, then spritzed with the same glitter decorating the ferns. I admired the little knicks and imperfections, and the tiny signature that proclaimed *Wade, Year One* in gloppy paint on the back.

“Reckon my old funboard’ll look good up there,” he explained with a wink.

“Thanks, Wade!” I called as he swaggered away, not missing the fact that he skipped the line of people waiting to put their ornaments up on the tree. He snapped out a towel by Ngozi and Kokebe, then laid down for a nap in the sun with a self-assured grin. That old charmer lived in a constant state of troublemaking.

“Oh, how *beautiful*,” Marcella sang, patting her chest with a wide, beaming smile. She shook her head and her soft white hair bounced in its high ponytail set with finger waves. Wearing a red wide-legged suit and a white lace collar, she looked very much like the doting elderly Mrs Claus, just one hundred times sexier.

Ambassador Zufi walked a few paces behind her with his hands behind his back and gave me a brief nod. My genuine joy at seeing Marcella dressed to the nines stiffened.

“You’ve really outdone yourself, *dolce*.”

“Thanks, Marcella. I couldn’t have done it without your backing.” She gave me a hug and I looked up at Zufi. “Or Hunar. He’s been invaluable.”

Zufi’s mane curled with reserved amusement as Marcella hummed with agreement. “Ambassador Zufi has told me as much.”

“I bet he did.” I couldn’t help the dry note in my tone.

“He’s a wonderful man, once you get past his prickly exterior,” the slimy jerk said, as if we shared a secret. “And he has big plans for this colony. Aspirations you inspired, no doubt.”

I scowled at him over Marcella’s thin shoulder. Just days ago, he’d been ready to kick Hunar out. I glanced at his tendrils suspiciously, expecting him to get some satisfaction out of how my pheromones had changed or something equally invasive, but they swayed contentedly behind his shoulders.

“Now! I’m going to put my ornament on the tree. Which branch is the most visible?” Marcella asked with glee, holding out an ornament that looked like a wheel of parmigiano surrounded by a tiny tinsel wreath.

I directed her to the largest one, three branches away, and she wandered off, giving people hugs and cheek smooches and all the things Marcella always did, stealing the show with her vibrance. When Zufi cleared his throat, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Christmas was supposed to be about coming together, not huffing childishly at the man that nearly stole my Scrooge away.

“May I also put an ornament on the *Krismis* tree?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said with a pinch of fake pep as I sent three smaller branches back to their spots on the tree trunk and brought down three more, substantially larger. I pointed to the one on my left. “That one’s best, if you want a photo op for your office.”

“That’s alright. Mine is something personal.” He slid in next to me among the throngs of Renatans surrounding the new branches and held out a panoramic plank of *biria* wood burned with six photorealistic portraits and names. I took the ornament from him, its silky ribbon pooling in my palm. “My spats.”

“You have kids?”

He smiled sadly. “Two broods. My youngest three left their guardianships four years ago. It’s been difficult to reconnect with them.”

“Guardianships are like foster homes?” I guessed, having heard Hunar talk about them.

“More like permanent boarding school communities.” The ambassador took the ornament back and looked for a good spot to hang it. “There’s a human saying that translates perfectly into Dharateen.”

“It takes a village?”

“That’s the one.” He tied the ribbon carefully around a sturdy branch, gaze far away. “It’s an imperfect system, especially for parents that want to be involved but can’t make the sort of sacrifices required by law.”

“Eighty percent of your income...” Hunar had looked exhausted and hollow when he’d told me that in the elevator.

“Among other factors. Mainly, I’m at the mercy of my political appointment. The authority isn’t a bad perk, don’t get me wrong,” Zufi admitted. “But I couldn’t raise my spats without help, so I agreed to what most do and deferred to their maans’ choice of guardianships. Visitations, holidays, school fairs... I saw them often, but I wasn’t there for them. That much is obvious now that they’re grown.” He admired his work, positioning the ornament. “I always thought my goals were worth that sacrifice, but now I’m not so sure. I owe you and Hunar a debt of gratitude for reminding me how precious family is.”

“Yeah, well, don’t you forget it,” I rasped, trying to hold back a slew of confusing emotions. Screw Zufi. But also, good job. And maybe sorry? I should still be mad, shouldn’t I? *Watstakats*, I was so confused. Grudges always slipped through my fingers like oil, but I really, *really* wanted to hold onto this one.

When he finally met my eye, folding his hands behind his back again, his smile was broad and genuine. Of course he could see my anger crumbling. Stupid politicians. “I won’t, Ms Adams. I’ve already apologized to Hunar for the whole fiasco, and agreed to expand the program as he sees fit so that Renata can become more than three home towers hidden in the jungle.”

I sniffed and rolled my eyes. “Fine! I forgive you.” Then I pointed in his face like *nokhomipan* used to do to me when squirreling my way out of trouble. “But *only* if you bring your kids to the next Winter Festival so they can see your dumb ornament.”

Zufi's mane hissed with laughter, all four hands raised in surrender. "I'll do that. A bit of nepotism never hurt anyone, right?"

"He did what?!" Marcella stole our attention as she scoffed, hands on her hips. "That pompous—"

"What happened?" I asked, Zufi hot on my heels as we joined Marcella and Piro. The poor guy held two heavy machines in his hands, tendrils scrunched up with apology.

"Ferulis," Marcella hissed, slicing her hand at the machines.

Bajora leaned over Piro's shoulder with a grave wink. "The chairman sent a gift for the festival. Extra secret, arrived just in time."

Zufi chuckled. "I've never seen the chairman give a diplomatic gift to anyone. Ever. You must be breaking him down."

"He sent a letter." Marcella displayed her holotab, scandalized, and lifted her chin to read it aloud. "A gift to the peerless Mrs Bianci on this festive occasion. May the dirt stain your silk slippers and bugs drown in your wine. My sincerest regards, Intersolar Union Council Chairman of Defense, Executive Officer of the Union Fleet, Very Decorated War Hero, Aescopis Ferulis. *Sincerest!*" She threw her hands up, pacing in a tight circle. "Ha!"

I bit my cheek with amusement as Bajora grabbed Piro by the arm and slipped away. Aavar made grabby hands at them from atop one of the booths, hoisting the machines up.

"At least the 'very decorated' comment jives with the holiday..." I said distractedly as Marcella continued to vent.

Hunar was in charge of inspecting deliveries. My heart skipped, hoping that I'd see him amongst the crowd. I craned my neck this way and that, trying not to give in to disappointment.

Maybe he hadn't shown up yet, but he definitely would once the sun set and the party really started.

There was no way he would miss it.

The gift exchange was finished, and most of the booths were now raffles or makeshift carnival games, having run out of items to sell or trade for. The Winter Festival was a huge hit, and even though it was getting late, everyone was laughing and having fun...

And Hunar wasn't there.

I'd given up trying to be an adult sometime halfway through the gift exchange and slinked away to comm him, hiding in the shadows of the treeline and the back of Ruth's booth, lined in little wreaths and mistletoes tied with intricate ribbons. His icon was still on Do Not Disturb, so it was a futile effort, but I still hoped he'd see the missed comms piling up and panic.

But it was just me that panicked, wearing a smile that cracked like old porcelain the longer you looked at me. For once, I didn't care at all about Marcella giving a speech and thanking me, or all the hugs and tears and people telling me how much it meant to them to have some slice of togetherness.

What I'd really wanted was to share the festival with Hunar and his kids. I'd thought that's what he wanted too, working his butt off so he could be here, but I must have interpreted him wrong somewhere down the line. I mean, we were different species... Miscommunications were bound to happen, right? I'd never told him directly that being here was important to me.

That level of maturity didn't make me feel any better though. My heart still ached, and I'd chewed the inside of my lip so hard to keep my sorrow private that it was swollen and tasted like iron now.

Wearing a sparkly ugly sweater despite the muggy evening, I hugged myself and walked down the aisle of amazing displays, staring up at the twinkle lights and the holographic flurry of big, frothy snowflakes that fell on the crowds. That's what Ferulis had sent Marcella. Snow. It was magical.

But I was done. I had no more joy to spare when I couldn't even fill up my own coffers. The party would last whether I was there or not, especially with so many people bringing drinks and snacks now. I needed to go home, get some sleep, and forget about Christmas for a few days.

“Hi, Na'maan!”

I shuffled to a stop. “Reha?”

Paintbrush poised above Tahavir's cheek, she sat at the school's booth, a little line of classmates waiting behind him for their own designs. Miss Jeong handed out ginger candies and waved, the little bell on the end of her elf hat tinkling as she knocked it.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, flummoxed and not too graceful about it.

Reha's tendrils danced with excitement. “Putting my makeup skills to good use. Painting faces is a lot of fun!” She pointed towards Pom Pom and Rambir, who wore matching snowflakes with white and blue glitter on their cheeks.

A little bit of the gloom melted away as she started painting her brother's nose bright red like Rudolph. “That's awesome, *wâpos*. Is your... is your dad planning on coming tonight?”

“Hi, Mrs Fareshi!” Miss Jeong interrupted, handing me a ginger candy with a little pair of tongs.

“Hi?” I blinked down at the candy with a stitch in my brow. I'd picked the kids up from school a lot the last few weeks, but surely she knew we weren't married... right? I took a breath that stung, ready to correct her.

“The festival is amazing,” she gushed. “I’ve never seen the children this happy. Thank you fo- *aya!*” She dropped a ginger candy into the dirt with a start, then bustled away to get a napkin, her shiny black ponytail swishing across her shoulders.

Alone with Tahavir and Reha beaming up at me, I swallowed my correction and smiled as best I could. Clearing my throat, I redirected my question. I didn’t need to drag them into whatever was happening with Hunar. “Where’s Ladh?”

“Here!” he called, waving a fistful of stockings at me. Thumping to a stop, he held them out for my inspection. “Did the lady spell our names right?”

“Woah, humans can write with *string?!?*” Tahavir gaped.

The four stockings were quilted in dark red and green with little tufts of yarn hanging from their loops. Each was embroidered in cursive English. *Reha, Tahavir, Ladhran, Baan.* I brushed my thumb over them and gave him a genuine nod of happiness. Fuck the bittersweet notes. This was about them, not me. “They’re perfect.”

A bright teal, calloused hand set a fifth stocking in my palm. I clutched it with a hitch in my lungs, frozen and staring at the embroidery. *Na’maan.*

“We spent all day trying to decide how to spell our names in *Ying’lishi,*” Hunar murmured hesitantly.

“English,” I corrected, a sob of laughter bubbling up my throat.

Hunar wrapped his big arms around my shoulders and waist, and I buried my face in his chest as I wailed, overwhelmed with relief. His tendrils surfed through my hair as his coding echoed from his chest like a deep, soothing drum.

“I know how hard the last couple days have been. I’m sorry, but I promise... I mean I *hope...* it was worth it.”

I reared back and smacked his shoulder. “No, it was *not* worth a lousy stocking!” I sniffed. Hunar chuckled as I wailed on him a few more times.

“You don’t like the stockings?” he asked.

Brushing my cheeks on my shoulders, I pressed the collection to my chest protectively and huffed. “*No*, I love them.”

Hunar’s grin softened, and though he didn’t reach for me with his hands, his *senti* wrapped questioningly around my wrist, as if I might pull away. Paint splotched its length, and the faint scent of drying paint filled my nose as I sighed.

That’s when I really looked at Hunar’s loving expression. His eyes were uncharacteristically sunken, as if some of the luster of the coil had withdrawn from his exhaustion. He wore his usual coveralls, but wrinkled and dirty. His hands were in bad shape too. A few scrapes with avocado-colored scabs and smears of blue dried over his knuckles.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t answer your vid comms,” he admitted, his tendrils reaching for me. I leaned into them, recognizing the starvation in his tone. He shuddered, tired shoulders rounding out with solace. “If I heard your voice or saw your face, I would’ve gotten tangled up in you and never left.”

“You look like you haven’t slept for days.”

He laughed, placing an affectionate palm on Ladh’s shoulder. “I haven’t. None of us have. It’s been all hands on deck.”

“All hands for what?” I asked, bewildered. Surely they hadn’t spent all this time quilting their own stockings or something. He was covered in *paint*...

With a tick of his jaw, he looked over the festival. “Do you need to stay until people leave?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Good,” he sighed. “Let me show you then.”

With a nod to his kids, Hunar wrapped one arm around my elbow, and led me towards the home towers.

I'd hurt Tinsley, no question. Sure, she cried quick, but she wasn't ashamed of it. She bounced back fast with a signature Tinsley smile and sense of enthusiasm that never tired. So when I'd seen her hugging herself as she tried to slink away from the festival, I'd felt like the moon's worst asshole.

Needless to say, the nerves were hitting me hard. I should have thought this through better, but I was more comfortable with action than with talking it out. Planning for the future had never really panned out for me in the past. I'd rather build it with my own four hands.

"Where are we going?" Tinsley asked, looking over her shoulder at the tower I'd spent the afternoon vacating with my brood, where her unit sat untouched.

"To see what I've been working on. It's on one of the upper floors."

I avoided calling it a gift. It wasn't. It was bribery of the first order. My fingers had itched all day wanting to move her things myself. The idea of putting all of her stuff in *our* unit was reassuring in an instinctual way. Her taste mingling with mine... I led her to Home Tower 03, catty corner to where we used to live. Hopefully.

"All this time, I thought you were going to make it up to me by ripping my clothes off," Tinsley laughed hesitantly. Her tone was careful, as if she were walking on eggshells. My *senti* rumbled, stripes flashing at the thought.

If she liked what I was about to show her, that's exactly what I'd planned.

Human holiday music just the same as the other lobbies wafted through the doors as I swiped my fob against the access

panel. The lift was already on the ground floor, so I ushered her in.

As soon as the doors were closed and we accelerated upwards, Tinsley wrapped her arms around my middle and buried her face in the divot between my sternum and abdominal wall. She breathed in, her protruding nose scrunched up against my filthy tabard. Attuned to her coil, I felt the bump of her heart calm down, the creak of loosening tendons and ligaments, as she drank in the scent of my hard labor.

Fuck me, but slithering right up against her bare skin and decorating her arms and legs with marks again was a painful need gnawing away at my civility. Pearls crowded my reservoir with a delicious ache. I couldn't tell which was more dire: the need to douse my painfully dry semi-aquatic skin in water, sleep, or rededicate myself to my *priya*.

When the doors opened, I almost swore, my *senti* sneaking down the length of her spine.

Later. Hopefully.

I took a deep breath and pulled back. Tinsley swallowed hard. "We're still together, right?" she asked. "I mean, our... our *coil* is real-real. I didn't read that wrong, did I?"

"Fuck, I hope it's real."

I steered her to the door on the right, framed in plants, my heart thudding as she blinked at the homemade ornaments the spats had tied up on the leafy purple branches. I exhaled, pointing her to the access panel. "Open the door."

The uncertainty and confusion in her expression sharpened. Tinsley bit the inside of her mouth, chewing on the sensitive backside of her lip. She pressed her palm to the panel and the door wooshed open, filling the hall with the metallic scent of drying paint and adhesives. We stepped into the humid jungle air. Every balcony and window was open to vent the fumes. It wasn't the crisp chill Tinsley preferred, but when everything dried in a couple days...

My stomach fell through the fucking floor. What if she hated it? I'd been inside her unit twice and had been a bit preoccupied. First time I hadn't cared to look, and the second time I was in a frenzy. All I'd had to go off of was that article about her bakery and some scrolling archive of interior decorating inspired by *Krismis*. It had simultaneously been overwhelming and not enough. I could get any little detail wrong and it would feel uncanny and strange.

"Oh my *god*," she hiccuped, fingers clapped over her unhinged mouth. Round eyes ringed in white roamed over the four-bedroom family suite. The varnished planks of merlot *biria* wood underfoot, rich with grainlines and felled with Ngozi and Kokebe's help. The alcove cut into the wall in the living room that mimicked a hearth, holographic flames licking the blackened tiles and casting warm orange light over the cushions of the sofa.

Tinsley took slow steps, looking here and there, lingering on the traditional shilpakaari dining room. Instead of a human table and chairs, the spats had chosen a low round table with cushions and thick lounge pillows. Three pendulum lights hovered above them. She froze, staring into the kitchen as if it couldn't be real. Heat crackled along the tips of my tendrils, hoping beyond hope that she liked the *biria* cabinets and shell knobs carved into flowers. The handwoven rug beneath the sink. The thin linen towels. I'd had them shipped in from a Dharateen importer in Samridve. They were real. *With imperfections.*

Just how she liked.

"Hunar, this is incredible." Tinsley whipped around, big brown eyes looking up at me with disbelief and questions. "Is this your new unit?"

I cleared my throat, pressing the tip of my tongue against my canines. "It's *ours*," I said with rough emphasis. "If you want it."

"Ours," she repeated.

I nodded, holding her gaze. “Ours, *priya*.” My gruff voice broke like a dry husk on the word. “For as long as you’ll have us.”

Tinsley jumped, wrapping her arms around my neck and mane. She buried her face in my shoulder as I caught her, my lower hands cupping her hips, uppers cradling the back of her head and shoulders. She nodded against me and I keened, probably squeezing the air out of her lungs with relief and gratitude. My tendrils flicked the corners of her eyes and behind her ears, along the sensual nape of her neck and the corners of her mouth. Every sweet little place I’d dreamed of touching the past three days without sleep or rest.

“I’ve never tried to make a home before,” I rumbled. “Did I do alright?”

She nodded, face still hidden.

“If you want to change anything—”

“Absolutely not,” Tinsley huffed, glaring with a sharp reprimand.

“Your demands have grown on me,” I assured her with the hint of a smile, brushing the tiny silk above her eyes with a tendril. “I promise I won’t mind.”

Tinsley bit back a smile, bumping her forehead against my cheek. “Hey, honey? You better show me the bedroom, or my clothes might combust.”

My colors flashed in the intimate warm light, codes knocking through my chest and mane as I carried her down the hallway. She glanced in the spats’ rooms, one for each of them, painted in colors of their choice and only partially unpacked.

I stopped in front of the bedroom door and set her slowly on her toes.

“The bedroom,” I started, brushing my palm over my chin. “It’s inspired by you, but not... directly. Not like the living room.”

Tinsley clasped her hands together with nervous excitement, then stepped up to the door.

I looked over the interior with a critical eye. The living room had taken up most of my time. I'd prioritized it specifically because Tinsley loved family and her bakery. The bedrooms seemed secondary to the power of a first impression, so none of them were finished.

Like I said, bribery. I did all of this because I loved her, but also because I wanted to fucking *keep* her. Forever. That moment she'd walked through that entryway? It was the moment I'd obsessed over. The moment when she'd see "us" and feel at home.

Again, *hopefully*.

"It's not done yet," I explained as she looked at the rippling waves of soft light over dark blue walls. "The things you said about imperfections and your roots back on Earth..." I cleared my throat as she brushed her fingers over the silky sheets and brassy chrome bed frame. Most of the furniture came from the importer. I didn't have any family heirlooms. Just old snaps and comms. "It made me think back to how I cut ties with Dharatee when I was younger and dumber."

Tinsley stopped, her face turned to the wall. I'd hung a brass rod all the way across the room from steely grey rope. Hundreds of loops of silver thread fell in puddles on the floor, evenly spread across the length of the bar.

"Is this macrame?" she asked, getting a closer look. She picked up one of the large spools of thick silver thread from the floor, then put it back with care. My heart jumped into my throat. I only had a couple dozen rows finished. It was barely two inches wide.

"Technically, it's a tape lace coiling net. Men where I'm from make one for their *priya*. To try to convince her to stay. Long term." Tinsley looked back at me. I set my jaw with determination. "Which is what I want, Tinsley."

I took a few steps forward to slide my hands up the backs of her arms, to tease her throat with my mane.

“Long term?” she murmured.

I pressed my forehead to hers, cradling her jaw with one hand as she twisted to make eye contact. “You’re my sunrise, Tin.”

It was the truest thing I’d ever said out loud to her. Our unit? It faced the sunset because she liked things cozy. I didn’t need to chase some glorious morning light because I’d gambled all my chips on waking up next to it every day.

“Fuck yes! If that’s not a proposal, I don’t know what is,” Tinsley breathed, her cheeks flushed. Turning in my arms, she yanked on one of my tendrils and pressed our mouths together.

We exploded into a mutual frenzy, ripping at each other’s clothes, grappling with each other’s manes. Tinsley shoved her shorts down her glittery green tights in a rush as my upper arms shirked the sleeves of my coveralls. She tripped with a squeak that I met with a needy hiss, picking her up out of the tangle at her ankles and throwing her onto the bed.

Too starved and bursting with pent up worry, the restraint I’d clung to broke like a dam. I pushed Tinsley’s legs apart and dug my fingers through the delicate net covering her mantle even as I sucked on the damp fabric. It tore easily, her glistening brown and pink slit spread open beneath my thumbs and tendrils from the tension of the garment.

Tinsley shuddered, her abdomen tightening, thighs quivering. I sucked on her little nub as my tendrils swarmed her entrance, all vying for the wet heat I coveted so desperately. The fountain of my health and brittle old heart. I would never be satiated.

She grabbed hold of my *senti* before it made its pilgrimage into her body though, squeezing it with both hands. My breath hitched as she jerked my head to the side, and my mouth popped from her swollen entrance. Gripping her inner thighs with my lower hands, I rumbled in warning.

“Tinsley...” I snarled.

“Call me *priya*... please?” she panted, wrapping the end of my *senti* around her palm. I grinned, my canines glinting in the rippling light.

“Be a good *priya* and let my *senti* fuck you till I need to change the sheetssss,” I hissed.

But the stubborn sprite defied me. A swarm of tendrils made room for her hand as she dipped her own fingers inside her channel and held my eye, stealing some of her thick waters for herself. When she slipped her fingers along the length of my phallic tendril, spreading her own taste across the muscle, my eyes rolled back with a groan, mane crowding itself out of her mantle again.

She worked my *senti* until her palm grew hot, mesmerizing me with the push and pull, the way she gripped the end like a belt. My cock strained as my lower hands pushed my briefs down so I could rut the mattress, my tendrils sawing into her in a chaotic rhythm that made her breasts heave.

Ravenous but not mindless, I felt the moment she held her breath and reached an upper palm to her throat, holding her in place. My *priya* wasn't allowed to wriggle her way out of ecstasy in *our* bed, in *our* unit. Especially not when her hot, slick rhythm on my *senti* made my cock jump and spill pearl after pearl on *our* sheets.

Then with a broken cry, she came and I lapped it up greedily, still coming, still hard. She held my tendril like a lifeline, squeezing to the point of pain and I relished every sting.

I climbed up her body and slotted my harpoon head against her swollen channel as she nodded, nails dragging down my abdomen. I pressed her fingers harder into my skin, giving her permission to clutch and grip and bite. We'd leave marks on each other tonight.

I'd make sure of it.

Everyone needed to know what she'd given me for
Krismis.

EPILOGUE

) TINSLEY (

I pushed my butt back as Hunar rocked his hips in a languid rhythm, two of his arms gently hugging my ribs and hips as he coded and flashed his colors in the lavender morning light. It was our good morning routine, still draped in a sleepy warmth beneath the covers as he gave me the pearls that had built up in his reservoir overnight. There was no way I'd ever get tired of waking up to his cock rocking between my thighs or his tendrils draping across my neck like a scarf.

He nipped my earlobe and came with a moan, knocking two pearls against my womb. I clutched his thigh to keep him there for a few breaths longer, feeling his shaft pulse inside me. Then I kissed his *senti* as it tapped on my lips, and he chuckled like a drum full of gravel.

"It's time to get up, *priya*," he murmured, licking the sting from my ear.

I pouted, refusing to open my eyes. "Five minutes."

The water turned on in the bathroom in the hall and we both looked up from the pillows.

"How much you wanna bet Taha got the mirror before Reha?" I asked with a sly eyebrow waggle.

Hunar bit his lip like I usually did, though I'd had to stop myself for the last week since I'd worried it to bleeding. "Mm, lunch. If I win, we eat in the workshop. If you win, we go out on the tarmac with the others."

"Deal," I said, giving his *senti* a handshake. He slipped from between my legs with a loving rumble of his mane and stood from the bed, gloriously naked and already checking his holotab for work orders.

Me, on the other hand? I shimmied to the edge with a lot of leg twisting and hip jiggling, then rolled to my feet. Striking an Olympic pose with my hands up in the air and my ankles crossed, I felt proud that not a single drop had leaked from between my legs. It was a move I was slowly mastering, much to Hunar's disappointment. But making the bed was the *worst*, so if he wanted to watch or felt a frenzy coming on, I had a towel ultimatum.

It had worked once... That was progress, right?

"You'll have to shower without me," Hunar said, his bronze eyes sharp as he searched out his clothes. "Big shipment."

"Okie doke!" I said, waddling to the bathroom. "See you for lunch."

He bent his forehead to mine, slid his tendrils through my hair in the way shilpakaari couples did, then planted a kiss on my forehead.

"See you for lunch."

"I love you," I tacked on as the bedroom door slid open. It was more of a human thing, but he never once questioned my need to hear it. Instead, he smiled, tying his coverall sleeves around his waist.

"I love you too."

"Taha, *c'mon!* You got the bathroom first last time!" Reha complained, pounding on the bathroom door in the hall.

Ka-ching.

Hunar sighed at the ceiling, then left, ushering Reha out to the kitchen to eat breakfast while she waited. Ladh dragged his feet after her with a big yawn that echoed down the hallway.

"Thirty minutes!" I bellowed before the bedroom door shut. A chorus of groans got lost in the shower as I jumped in and suds'd up.

Forty minutes later, the kids and I were on our way to school. Reha liked to walk a few paces ahead, but Taha and Ladh held onto my fingers with their tendrils as if I were holding their hands. They cuddled like toddlers too, pressing into Hunar's and my warmth on the sofa while I force fed them all my favorite holiday classics after dinner. Apparently shilpakaari boys were just like that—as affectionate as puppies and mostly mild—while the girls were observant and rebellious. In a species that routinely had three spats per brood, it was probably a matter of parental survival that two of the three were usually well-behaved team players.

“Okay, you guys,” I said, pulling up short. They all stopped and looked at me expectantly. “Remember what we talked about? This is your first day getting to learn the human stuff. *Wâpos?*”

“All the cool kids try to sit in the back, but I should share with everyone. It'll make me supremely cool,” Reha said. I pointed at her with a coach-like wink, then turned my finger to Ladh.

“Tiger?” He always woke up late and his mane purred in his sleep. It drove his siblings nuts, but I loved it. Also, his stripes were coming in early. Perfect nickname.

“Always keep my hands above the desk?” he asked, squinting with uncertainty.

Brightening stripes also meant he was going to pop unwanted and embarrassing tents soon. Better safe than sorry.

“What about you, Cookie?”

“If someone complains about uh, *kooteez?* I should roll my eyes and say girls are cool too,” Tahavir answered.

I clapped him on the back, sniffing back the tears of team pride. “Good man. Alright, you guys are officially good to go.”

“Is it really that different from the afternoon though?” Reha asked.

“No, but I’ve always wanted to impart playground wisdom.” I gave them each a kiss on the forehead and shooed them off towards Miss Jeong. “Have fun! And remember, humans are weird and that’s okay!”

They waved as they jumped up the stairs, manes bouncing back and forth. Rambir and Pom Pom met them at the door, practically knocking their poor teacher off the landing. I gave her a wave too, then hustled to the hangar.

The Winter Festival had already been packed away into new storage pods near the hangar’s scrapyard. It only took two days to take down the official decorations and the ones people donated. I’d felt awkward working in the hangar at the break table after all those tasks were complete, but everyone just smiled and made me feel welcome.

It probably helped that I laughed at Bree’s outbursts and yelled at her tools with her when all the guys ducked for cover.

So now I spent my mornings in the hangar until lunch, closing up the Winter Festival and thinking about other holidays. Like Halloween! It wouldn’t be for another six months if I wanted to follow the weather, but that gave me enough time to plan for real.

And figure out my yeast cultures so I could actually *bake*. That’s what I spent my afternoons doing at home, trying to make better cultures and get my dough to rise.

And force feeding poor Omi my experiments, of course. Besties were an invaluable resource. They never lied if something tasted bad, but also never said no to trying the next horrible thing on the list.

“Morning!” I called out, bouncing through the hangar doors. It was still early, dew gathering on the walls and the windows of the transpos. Piro, Aavar, and Bree all sat around a crate, cleaning parts on the far side of the hangar, where the landing platform hung over the jungle valley below like an Olympic diving board. They waved as I turned the corner into the engineering lounge.

Bajora had expanded it to twice its original size. The shelving was no longer double-stacked, and the break table, chairs, and lockers were downright comfy in their own nook. There was more light too, what with the entire bank of windows cleaned of pollen and grime. Long steel tables had been moved in over the last couple days, and crates stored on their bottom shelves. The workspace was for a new engineer Hunar hadn't been able to tell me much about, other than the fact that they'd be working with a molecular printing bay, which was apparently hard to get access to outside of a proper lab.

"Hi, honey!" I called, immediately spying Hunar huddled together with Bajora and someone else, talking about the machine and two crates that now sat upon the table next to the windows. Many of the crates were open, I realized as I hung my bag in Hunar's locker and joined them. "What's up?"

Hunar took me by the shoulders, jaw ticking with gruff uncertainty. "The molecular bay finally arrived."

"Cool! And the engineer?"

"In a minute." He wrapped his tendrils around the straps of my tank top and brushed back my short curls. "I, uh, did something. Without asking."

"Okay..."

Bajora snorted, leaning back on his workbench and crossing his boots at the ankles. Hunar hissed at him, spinning me until my back was to his coworker.

"Molecular bays are used to print basic compounds, minerals, lipids... You name it. Stuff like potassium bitartrate, galactose, and... *Fuck*. Bajora?" He glanced over my shoulder.

"Anthocyanins."

"Thanks."

"Wait, I'm not following," I said, flummoxed. "Galactose is in a lot of dairy products. It's a type of sugar. I don't know

what anthocyanins are though. Potassium bitartrate... that's tartaric acid, right?"

"Stop trying to pad it out, *syalī*. Just show her," Bajora pushed, his mane rumbling.

Hunar scraped his forehead and tendrils with an upper palm and exhaled in a whoosh. "Yeah, alright." He stepped aside, revealing a *hjarna* with powdery blue skin, tattooed from crest to toe in gold and black. I recognized him with a smile. He was one of the refugees that had arrived with *Siatesh*.

He turned to face me with his *holotab* open and the machine behind him still whirring through some sort of start-up procedure. His giant black eyes met mine and he bowed his crest.

"I don't think we've met," he said. "Yulang. You must be Ms Adams."

"Tinsley. Nice to meet you."

"Yulang is certified to use the molecular bay," Hunar explained. "And he's agreed to tutor you until you can pass your certs."

My brow creased, blinking up at my coil. "Huh?"

"It'll be a bit more like *cheating* on your certs, yeah?" Yulang said with a criminal grin. "But you'll get the gist."

Bajora pushed off his workbench and set a crate on the steel tabletop. He withdrew a stack of matching bowls, a set of packaged ladles, some silicone cups... That crate had been there for several days, hiding on a low shelf. What did the others hold?

My heart skipped.

"You're the new engineer, Tin," Hunar murmured, squeezing my bicep. "Food bays are regulated not to print uncooked foods or ingredients, but molecular bays can. Your workbench can incubate cultures too. Like *yoaghurt*. Yulang dredged the human archives and made a recipe book to get you

started. You just ask him for the compounds you need, and he'll teach you how to produce them.”

“Oh my god,” I choked up in shock, pressing a hand to my mouth to keep them from seeing it quiver as I stared at all the things Bajora was unpacking. Most of them were novel shapes but their functions were familiar to me. Knives, sifts, baking molds, rolling pins, graters... I had to lean my weight on Hunar's grip. With a shaking hand, I reached out and brushed my fingers against a silicone brush I'd have used for egg washes back on Earth.

But the tears really flowed free when I noticed that amazing, blobby Octopus bag hanging from the window between our work areas. I'd thought it had been packed away with everything else before I could claim it for our unit's kitchen.

“Whatever you make,” Hunar continued, brushing his thumbs over my cheeks and swallowing the salty taste of my tears, “Bajora would like to use it to improve the food bays. It's how we justified the addition. It'll make things taste a lot bet—”

“Yes!” I breathed. Had I even blinked? My hands were shaking. “Yes, I'll do anything.”

Hunar chuckled, gently pulling me towards his workbench. He sat, and I slid right onto his knee as his mane lapped up the tears itching my cheekbones and chin. His smile was warm, and the echoes in his chest soothed me while he rubbed my arm and held my waist.

“Think about it for a while, *priya*. You don't need to give him anything if you don't want to.”

“I want to. The food bays are an abomination,” I sniffed. “No offense, Bajora.”

“None taken.”

Hunar smirked, then presented me with a bouquet of purple wooden spoons tied with a red velvet bow. “Late Merry *Krismis*.”

I hugged them to my chest with a wobbly *tsk*. “Hunar, you literally gave me the biggest gift of my lifetime.”

He shrugged. “The unit? Pure bribery.”

“The festival?”

“Cultural infrastructure.”

“Family,” I insisted.

He shook his head. “No, *priya*, that was your gift to *me*. And the molecular bay is work. Doesn’t count. But these?” He tapped on the wooden spoons seasoned with *sachem* oil, the faint scent of cardamom perfuming the air. “Made them by hand, and they’re imperfect as fuck. Look, that one’s asymmetrical. Drives me nuts.”

I hiccuped with laughter, caught between sobbing and guffawing. He was right. It was a terrible spoon.

The *best* spoon.

And I’d use it every day for the rest of my life.

SNEAK PEEK

QUIT YOUR WANING , BOOK 3

› JIHAE ‹

“You sure you don’t want help cleaning up today, Jihae?”

Miss Sexton’s thick gingery hair curled up around her face full of freckles as she hung on the doorway, bag slung over her shoulder and her shoes on, ready to dash out the door. She always asked on her way out and I always shook my head with a smile.

“*Ani, ka~* Shoo!” I teased in Korean and English, waving my hands like she was a nuisance. “Just say hi to Mary for me, okay?”

She rolled her eyes, cheeks tinged pink. “Okay, fine. But you know I’ll stay and help any time.”

“Go, go,” I insisted. She blew me a kiss, then disappeared in a whirlwind of frothy layers and clattering metal bracelets.

I craned my neck to watch the school pod door close, a stack of plas docs and foam toys piled in my palms, then immediately blew the hair from my forehead.

“BEO, play *I Fell in Love with the Mudang*, episode twelve.”

“Sure.”

The blank wall we used as a projection screen lit up with the opening credits of the silly K-Drama series. The camera swiped left, then right, pausing on Taehun’s ghostly superhero pose, Soin’s puffed up cheeks as she ate jjajangmyeon and dribbled it on her shaman’s hanbok, and her grumpy but lovable grandmother in attack mode with her broom to shoo the ghosts away...

I didn't usually watch romantic comedies, but for some reason, the recent Winter Festival made me sappy. I needed a breather from my award-winning dystopian and psychological drama streak anyway. Besides, the ghost romance was the perfect palate cleanser for my Christmas clean-up.

A lot of couples loved the winter season in Seoul, but I'd been eating my own jjajangmyeon during lonely couple holidays for years. Christmas, Valentine's Day, White Day, Bbaebbaero Day... If you didn't have a date, it was tradition to eat the infamous black bean paste noodles. I was sick of them.

But I was also a freelance packaging designer with a home office and no coworkers to set me up with their friends. I didn't miss my job, but I *did* miss the dead of summer and the history of my culture. You could *feel* it. Seeping into the stones and the trees. Especially in the quiet, eerie moments that were so rare in the city.

I guess that's why I'd turned to movies and dramas since settling into Renata. So I could get a little bit of that thrill back. I liked the jolt of feeling like I was being watched from the shadows of the tree line after binging a zombie show like *Kingdom* or *#Alive*. I hoped Mrs Fareshi would organize a Halloween festival soon so I could indulge myself a little.

Totally enthralled with the show, I made my way around the walls of my classroom mostly by feel, pulling tinsel off the display boards and shelves, cutting snowflakes from where they hung from the ceiling. It took me three times as long as it needed to, the sun setting behind the red jungle trees well before I stepped out into the humid evening and the sound of insects. I set the trash by my foot and pulled out my fob to lock the pod.

"*Aya!*" I jumped as my fob fell to the black grass, then shook out my trembling fingers. I really need to start wearing it on a necklace or a bracelet. Every time I left, I dropped the little silver thing and it bounced straight into the grass.

Stupid hyperthyroidism.

I jumped down the stairs and parted the thick blades with my hands, looking this way and that in the worsening dark. Triumphant, I held up my fob with a smug self-pat on the back and stood.

Something along the edge of the jungle across the mishmash of footpaths caught my attention. A four-legged shadow the size of a draft horse watched me with yellow reflective eyes, his back legs lower than his front, though longer, with knees peaking higher than his spine.

I gasped out of instinct, a zing of fear racing to my toes, but I knew that figure. It was Sizzle, the bilong on our security team. He was probably on his way into the jungle for his patrol shift. I stretched up onto my toes and waved over my head.

Sizzle lifted his face to the sky and trumpeted a greeting in that eerie, hollow call that sounded more like a dinosaur claiming territory than any movie could ever replicate. Birds erupted from the canopies. Then he slinked into the ferns without rustling a single frond.

Now *that* was a monster.

Maybe I liked them in movies and nipping at the back of my mind, but Sizzle?

If I ever came face-to-face with his infamous mouth, I just hoped I survived.

Note to My Readers

Happy Holidays!

Or perhaps a Very Merry *Un-Krismis*, if you're chasing the feeling of the holidays in July. ;) I hope you enjoyed this sweet little story about Renata's favorite Scrooge and its cheeriest sprite. Hopefully it was fun, fanciful, and full of aural hallucinations! Mulled cider, *mmmmm...*

An important recognition. Lifting up human cultures is one of my priorities in this series. Even if I write a character that acts, speaks, and looks differently from me, I'd still be writing from my own perspective without the collaboration of generous people within these communities. More than anything, I want to represent my characters with authenticity and complexity.

Tinsley Adams was a much different challenge than Omi Shaw from *Watch Your Orbit*. Many First Nations and Indigenous communities are extremely private about their sacred practices and history. When I began the search for consultants on this book, I faced a lot of resistance for just making the request.

And that's alright. For many, I imagine it's perceived as a colonial invasion of privacy. And for an author or researcher, the process of asking a community to trust you not to use their culture as a tourist attraction is intimidating. The labor of getting things right and honoring their experiences is worth every discomfort, though, and I feel honored that I was trusted with Tinsley's Cree heritage.

So who helped you this time? I was lucky enough to have two incredible voices on this book. Fellow sci-fi romance author Holly Hanzo is Ojibwe. Tinsley's reserve is a real location shared by both Woodlands Cree and Ojibwe peoples, so I'm incredibly thankful for Holly's sensitivity read. Also, her books are sweet and fantastic! [You can find Holly's books here.](#)

And from the bottom of my heart, I cannot thank Dakota Chickeness, a reader and cultural facilitator from Treaty 6 Territory in Canada, enough for her generous collaboration and openness. She gave me immense confidence through her warm constructive criticism. I am so lucky to count you as a friend and reader.

~ Etta

Other Books By Etta Pierce

Intersolar Union Series

Convergence: Intersolar Union Alien Romance, Book 1

Resilience: Intersolar Union Alien Romance, Book 2

Vigilance: Intersolar Union Alien Romance, Book 3

Persistence: Intersolar Union Alien Romance, Book 4

Resistance: Intersolar Union Alien Romance, Book 5

Alliance: Intersolar Union Alien Romance, Book 6

Over the Moon Series

Watch Your Orbit: Intersolar Colony Romance, Book 1

Eat My Moon Dust: Intersolar Colony Romance, Book 2

Quit Your Waning: Intersolar Colony Romance, Book 3

Please consider visiting my [Content Notes](#) for an in-depth guide on content details and trigger warnings for each of my books.

About the Author

ETTA PIERCE is an academic whose imagination simply won't be confined to her many career goals. As a result, she's turned to the delicious salve of romance fiction.

Everyone needs a guilty pleasure, right?

Want to talk directly to the author? [Hit her up on Facebook!](#)

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