



SPARED
BY THE
MONSTER

LOADING...VOL. 2



MERRY RAVENELL

SPARED BYTHE MONSTER

VOL 2

MATES OF PLANET 25XA

BOOK 1.5

MERRY RAVENELL



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CHESS

I flopped over.

That was about *all* I could do.

Keiron planted a chain of kisses down my spine while his tail curled around my ankle.

“I regret nothing,” I mumbled. Fuck, I was *tired*. And sore. And I regretted absolutely nothing about banging Keiron with wild abandon the previous evening to celebrate our victory (or escape, I wasn’t sure which it had been) at the inquest thing the previous day.

Even though I’d passed out from exhaustion after the first round. This plague clung like white cat hair on a fuzzy sweater.

“I will bring you breakfast.”

“No, no, I’ll go shower and drag myself to the kitchen.” Breakfast was not exciting. Breakfast was going to be worm paste or worm paste. But being brought warm worm paste in a bowl was a little too much *sad invalid*. I’d never been a breakfast-in-bed sort of girl. Too many crumbs. I groaned. “Fuck. I would kill for some coffee.”

“..coff-ee?” He mouthed the strange syllables. Then there was a pause while the translator provided context.

I prodded the translator. What did the Gestalt think coffee was?

[Coffee: A hot beverage consumed as a stimulant by Humans. Unique to Earth.]

Fuck. Coffee was *unique to Earth*? I’d been so amped up since the Greys had taken me I’d practically manufactured my own caffeine and coffee would have sent me into a cardiac arrest, but now that the threat the Gestalt showing up to take me away had 1) materialized and 2) been negated, I clearly needed

to resume my daily consumption. Especially *this* morning.

I prodded the codex again, but it had no further information.

Oh, come on. In *all the fucking galaxy*, only *Earth* had coffee plants?

I whined into my pillow.

“Chess?” Keiron tugged my ankle with his tail.

“The Gestalt *has* to have coffee. Just by a different name. It can’t be unique to Earth.”

“Many things seem to be unique to Earth.”

I flopped onto my back. Damn, my still-swollen lymph nodes protested getting squished. His gaze wandered over my breasts and his jaw shifted while the grip of his tail tightened. Poor baby, he’d only cum once and not even gotten a chance to use that tail of his before I passed out for the night. Guess he shouldn’t have done such a good job *before* he’d taken his turn.

He’d still been restrained, though. Too worried I was still too frail from the plague. I guess that was fair, considering he’d had to carry me to the bathroom more than once.

Back to coffee.

“Maybe that’s why the Earth system is so *STAY AWAY*,” I said sweetly. “It’s an ancient and secret garden of coffee plants, built by some deranged ancient Gestalt ruler who wanted all the galaxy’s coffee for himself.”

Keiron frowned. His scales shifted to ponderous deep blue. “The thought has occurred to Gestalt scientists that the Earth system was *made* to be what it is to protect it. Perhaps this *coffee* is the reason.”

I sighed. “I’m *joking*. There has got to be coffee in the Gestalt. It probably has a different name.”

He studied me up and down, then bent low and peered at me, his pupils narrowing to slits. His scales turned a smoky sapphire shade. “I was not too much for you last night?”

My clit gave a little shivery-tingle. “Of course not.”

“I was not too *little* for you?”

As if Keiron could be too little for me. “I was so tired.”

The day had caught up to me once we’d tumbled sweaty into the sheets and I’d passed out cold, and only woken up when he’d tried to clean me up and I’d gone to the bathroom to clean myself up instead. Ooo, maybe that was it. “Did I... hurt your feelings?”

A gentle tug on my ankle. “No.”

There was a note in his voice, and a shift in his scales. “You’re such a

liar. I hurt your feelings.”

“No—”

“Kieron, you try to convince me I’m the most powerful psy in the galaxy and *now* you try to convince me I’m wrong when I can literally see you’re lying to me?” I flopped back into the pillows and suppressed a groan.

He flushed with injury and mortification. “We have spoken about tending before. You’ve made it clear you don’t like it.”

The unspoken *but we’re mates, so it’s different now* hung in the air like the sting of onions.

Yeah. Things might be a little complicated now that he and I had confessed all those feelings and such. And maybe there was something to this *Humans are really powerful pys*. Everyone in the Gestalt agreed nobody fell in love without a trinket. *No one*.

Except a Human. Humans could ring the cosmic bell themselves. Sure, I’d teased Taidc about it and he’d been so shaken he’d stared at the pond for a while, and it seemed like Ahane and Erkus mostly wanted to avoid me. But even if I didn’t believe this psychic thing, I had to accept Keiron was The One, and the cosmos had unfurled his tail and the only reason we were together was the Priest had come out of Temple to save our bacon. So it probably was not complete bullshit.

I’d been in relationships. I was not a relationship virgin. And *that* was the issue. Because if Keiron and I had a Human-esque love, then I knew damn well that actually being in love didn’t mean it couldn’t get completely fucked up. The cosmos probably hadn’t waved some magical wand over us where we lived some charmed smutty life together and I rode his big blue cock off into the two-star sunset. Keiron—like every other Gestalt—species I’d bumped into so far wore their emotions on their scales/hide/skin/goo/tentacles/carapace, and I could literally *see* when he was unhappy and stressed.

And he had been unhappy for long enough.

And it wasn’t like we didn’t have plenty of problems. Like Ohade still being in that terrible ward, even if the Gestalt was covering the cost of his care for now. Would he recover? How much? And what about the farm? We were still broke. We’d negotiated sharing the money and glory with the Doctor at the ward, but it could take years before it was officially a “Great Discovery” and any money came our way. There was the problem of me being a Human in a Gestalt where Humans (and Earth) were seen as so

peculiar and dangerous that the entire sector and species were kept in the galaxy's strictest quarantine zone.

A zone so strict only the cheap-ass Greys were willing to venture into it to treat Humans like biological putty that couldn't fight back. The rest of the cosmos wanted *nothing* to do with us. Not even greed or scientific curiosity made it worth it, because when you're a space-faring interstellar-capable society, you just head off to some other undiscovered spot on the map rather than System 3485B or whatever they called my home system. And all those laws about Sentient Trafficking and Zero-Class crimes were still on the books. The only other Humans in the Gestalt had been rescued from Greys and were so traumatized they were in the care of high-ranking Gestalt patrons.

I was alone and on my own.

"I'm just not... I'm *shy* about it," I said tentatively.

"But I am your mate. You don't need to be shy," he said.

"But I am."

"You don't trust me."

"Of course I trust you."

"You do not trust me to tend to your body when you're vulnerable," he argued.

Now that was not true. "Keiron, you literally carried me to the bathroom with this plague business. Couldn't get much more vulnerable."

"You don't *want* to be vulnerable around me. You don't *choose* it. There's a difference between when you are so sick you are past the point of caring, and when you *choose* to be vulnerable."

Is *that* what this was about? Some kind of species-specific post-orgasm caregiving kink?

His scales were tinged with the bloody magenta that indicated he was really hurt, but the cloudy shades told me he didn't want me to know it.

At the same time the idea of him mopping up his cookie-batter-flavored load from between my thighs (or worse: *my ass*) made me flush with the same color internally from sheer cringe and mortification and a feeling best summed up by *nope*.

He released my ankle and slid off the bed.

"Keiron," I said, although I wasn't sure what I could tell him. Maybe I was being dumb. There was a distinct possibility I was hung up on something way too Human. When in Rome and all that.

His scales swirled with the color of storms and sapphires. He told me something in High Dialect that sounded like angels whispering sweet nothings in my ear, but his scales worried me.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“An endearment,” he said, although I didn’t *quite* believe him. Then he went into the bathroom.

KEIRON

Keiron considered the breakfast options. Chess was washing, and he needed to get himself put together before she arrived.

Ahane grilled several skewers of worms with root vegetables. His scales instantly swirled with gold and red. “Brother. Something troubling you already this morning?”

“Just thoughts,” Keiron replied. Many thoughts.

Ahane looked down at the worms, then back at him. “Your mate?”

His scales flushed a deep blue and thickened slightly as they slicked down a fraction. He covered up his annoyance with a terse, “I know you don’t like saying her name, but she is not a *possession*.”

Ahane flushed in return and mumbled, in High Dialect, “Apologies.”

He felt terrible for misleading his brother like that, but he didn’t want to discuss his worries about Chess. His hearts ached while his tail wanted to wring itself in a worried corkscrew. He could pawn off his concerns with his brothers as worries. Ohade’s treatments were a miracle, but they were still broke, and surely Chess’ *thrift* could only go so far. Erkus and Ahane had not been able to finish their educations, and while he could help Ahane with the Lower Practical Sciences to a point, Erkus had had his hearts set on Medicine. And as for Taidc, the Second Scion always secured a partner, not a trinket, and without financing, Taidc could not present himself to the Gestalt as a worthy Second Scion. Taidc’s title of Second Scion was even more worthless than his as Prime.

There was no real choice. He’d have to return to hauling scrap and leave Chess in the care of his brothers. The gambling dens would remain an option, but she wasn’t recovered from the plague, and now it might attract too much

attention. Previously, he had considered those risks a transient consideration and his own life forfeit. Now he needed to think of the future.

And this *coffee* business. He had never heard of it, and the translator offered nothing but that it was a stimulating hot beverage that had been mentioned a few times by a few other Humans. Chess clearly wished for coffee, and she seemed to indicate it was ubiquitous, so a small, trivial, meaningless pleasure that even he could afford to purchase (if he had been Human and on Earth), yet something he could not identify much less provide. He didn't even know where to look for it or any other sort of acceptable substitutes, and he could not afford to take her to the various beverage houses where varieties of drinks from around the Gestalt were served for those with such curiosities.

There were so many things he could not provide her. Like food she enjoyed. Or clothing. Instead, she was compelled to eat worm paste and make clothing from scraps.

And she refused to let him tend to her after making love to her. He pleased her until she fell asleep from exhaustion, but she refused to let him provide basic tenderness. The rejection stung more deeply than he cared to confess. Before, he had kept the injury to himself because he had believed she did not love him. Of course, while cleaning one's partner was considerate, many casual encounters didn't engage in it. Because it *was* intimate. Because it *was* an act of devotion. He had never felt the need to do more than be considerate and polite, and before with her, he had suppressed his desires, but *now*, after he had pushed her delicate Human body to its limits, he craved tending to her. She was his mate. Of all the simple, basic things he could *not* provide, he *could* provide tenderness.

He knew he was a...well, *primal*... in bed. And being *primal* with a little, delicate Human could injure her. He'd had experienced Gestalt partners say he was too much. 25XAs had something of a reputation in the Gestalt, and certainly there had to be people very concerned for Chess' safety with him. There was always that little fear he'd go too far and hurt her, either with his cock or his tail or his claws or the filthy, crude words that came from his mouth. Tending to her quivering, exhausted body after it had taken his honey was... was simply what was *done*.

But the truth changed nothing: she still was, as she put it, shy. She was not *shy*, she was *frightened*. Ashamed. She had to be sick with the bloody *plague* and past the point of caring. That was not trust. That was being near

death.

Perhaps she was lying. Perhaps she not only did not trust him, but he had failed to provide anything even the most basic mate would provide, and she was disgusted with him, so she withheld access to the one thing he could provide to punish him. Perhaps her psy abilities picked up on his humiliation and she understood—even if she was not aware of it—how much of a failure he was and she responded accordingly.

The Twilight Scion. With a mate he could not feed, dress, or honor.

She was impossible to read—her skin never changed color or texture, besides flushing when she was *very* aroused or *very* angry or *very* embarrassed. Or going pale when she was *very* sick. Or those little prickles when she shivered with pleasure *or* fear.

He slammed a drawer.

Ahane gave him a sideways look but said nothing. His scales said plenty.

And now his brother thought he was unhappy with his mate. Or had argued with her. Neither of which was true. He was unhappy with himself: his mate did not trust him. And why should she? He was feeding her pureed worms because she, instinctively, found worms repulsive. But it was the only protein source he had for her. And she never complained. She was too kind to complain. Or perhaps she was simply taking pity on him. Or grinding his nose in it by refusing to chastise him.

His scales flushed almost ruby with sheer mortification at the thought that his mate might be refusing to name all his many failures. Because among his kind (like many Gestalt species), chastising someone for failure meant you believed they could overcome the failure. Accepting it meant total, irredeemable failure.

She did not demand more because she knew he could not supply more.

And she did not even know the half of how disgraced his House was. She *knew*, but she did not understand, although she tried to. He had only brought them some notoriety, maybe even infamy, but it would not translate to financial incentives at all. The eye of the Gestalt cast on his sad House.

“Brother?” Erkus inquired, coming in from the outside smelling of morning and mulch.

Keiron took one of the worms from the grill and shoved it into the processor to turn it into puree. Ahane proceeded to season and baste the remaining ones on the grill. Chess preferred her worm paste flavorless. She could choke it down if it tasted like nothing.

Ahane and Erkus exchanged looks, Erkus' aquamarine pale scales clouding. Then, he, being the one who usually got the job of mediator, asked, "Did things go badly with Chess last night?"

"No."

"Then why are you upset? Ohade is so much better than he was, and now the Gestalt will pay for all his treatments. The woman you love *is* your mate. The Priests themselves vouched for you and made the Gestalt bow."

"You say that like the Gestalt won't remember they aren't the boss of everything," Ahane said dryly. "Now everyone's going to be talking about Humans, and that's *before* they find out that Humans might be a plague treatment."

"That's going to be kept confidential for a long time," Erkus said. "They won't announce it until they're sure, because it would be a Great Discovery."

"You are so pure." Ahane rolled his eyes.

Erkus' scales turned a stormy shade. "A cure for the plague wouldn't just be a Great Discovery. It might be an *Ascendant* Discovery. I'm willing to bide my time because I know the potential upside is so immense. Not just for this House, but for the entire Gestalt."

Ahane spun around. "Have you studied the Earth system *at all*? There is a *reason* that system is off limits, and the more I learn about Humans, the more I think we don't even have a clue about the truth. A Great Discovery isn't worth a damn thing if the cost is opening the Gates of Hell or whatever it is that system is hiding. Cure the plague, kill everyone. Sounds great."

Erkus snorted on laughter, his scales turned bright azure, and he burst out laughing. He walked out of the kitchen.

Ahane called the youngest brother an assortment of crude names, then shouted something after him as Erkus' howls of laughter continued from the dining room.

Keiron scooped paste out of the processor tray. Plain, smooth, beige sustenance. It would meet his mate's caloric and nutrient needs when coupled with the vegetables, but little else. How long could she eat this food and not become miserable? He tried to arrange the paste in a way that appeared more appetizing on her plate, but the paste simply spread further, and he gave up. Spreading it around only made it look *less* appetizing, and she struggled enough with even sitting at the table while they enjoyed their meal.

Ahane asked him, "You aren't counting on this being a Great Discovery anytime soon, are you?"

“No.” He was not counting on it being a Great Discovery at all, or it curing their brother. It was a small bit of hope and, more importantly, a respite from paying for Ohade’s care. It was possible that in a few cycles, the treatment would fail. But perhaps it would give Ohade enough of a recovery he could at least be more comfortable for a time.

“Erkus is so...” Ahane growled.

Keiron sighed. “He’s young. He doesn’t really remember our disgrace. He was a juvenile when it happened.”

Their younger brother had been an unexpected final addition to the family. He’d lived his entire adult life in the shadow of the House’s disgrace, and their parents had died before he’d even been an adult. Keiron and Taidc had managed to keep Ahane in training, and start Erkus on the Medical course the youngest had wanted, but then Ohade had contracted the plague...

He plucked several of the grilled vegetables to put on her plate, carefully cutting them into smaller chunks. Ahane didn’t comment, but his brother’s scales spoke for him. Keiron ignored him. Chess was tired easily from the plague, and if she wouldn’t let him tend to her, he could at least cut the tough root vegetables into smaller, Human-appropriate chunks.

Taidc came down the hallway, scales pulsing with exertion after his workout. He paused by the kitchen, glared at the plate of food for Chess, then gave him a look. “You’re in a bad mood.”

Keiron finished cutting the last chunk.

“Does she not want you now that you’re mates for all the cosmos to see?” Taidc inquired dryly.

Keiron smashed his tail into the tiled floor. Ahane jumped. Taidc’s scales shimmered in surprise. “Do not be *petty*, brother.”

“Then why are you so obviously in a mood? If I can see it, your mate *knows* it. It was your true First Night. There is no reason for you to be angry.” Taidc was merciless and annoyingly correct.

He would not betray that his mate rejected his affections—they wouldn’t understand the complexity. And Humans had many potential mates before choosing one, each requiring great risk of betrayal and loss. Chess had, understandably, learned to be wary of her potential mates and the real possibility of them ultimately proving inadequate. There may have been many more slights and hurtful words she had not told him about, or that she would shrug off in her *that is how it is for Humans* way while he was horrified.

But he could not tell his brothers any of that. So instead, he just pointed his tail at the plate. “*This.*”

Taidc rolled his eyes. “She’s been eating that for some time.”

“By *necessity*, and she doesn’t complain, even though the worms are revolting to her. And this morning she, in passing, told me about a beverage very popular with Humans. I have never heard of it, and the Gestalt has no knowledge of it.”

“So you are angry at her for wanting it?”

“No, I am frustrated it is yet another thing I cannot provide her and she won’t even complain.”

“Considering what Human speech sounds like, we should be grateful,” Taidc commented.

“Good morning to you too, Taidc.” Chess’ voice carried from down the hallway, lilting in her teasing way.

Keiron glowered. How his mate suffered his brother with such good cheer bewildered him. But Taidc’s scales turned a forest green shade at the base. Chess passed the entrance to the kitchen, glanced in, saw the worms, and kept moving to the dining room.

“Good morning, Lady-Scion,” Taidc said, trying to recover from being overheard.

“Look at you with the civility so early,” she said cheerfully, which only seemed to unsettle Taidc more.

Keiron took her plate in one hand, and a second stack of plates in the other. He carried both into the dining room. She smiled at him. His hearts beat a bit faster, but a hot rush of anxiety washed his scales black-blue-magenta. An equally quick dart of her eyes took it in, but whatever she thought of it, he couldn’t tell. Her skin and face betrayed nothing.

Another Human probably could have read all the subtle cues and told him what she was thinking, but he would have to stumble through somehow and hope he would be able to train himself to see whatever tiny cues she might betray.

She smiled as he set the food down in front of her, her bright eyes full of glimmer and sharpness. His hearts kept up their painful, throbbing tempo. Before his confession, mistakes hadn’t mattered so much.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” she told him, a little sharp flick of her gaze taking in the magenta tinges on his scales. “Really, I don’t mind. It’s just meaty oatmeal.”

Her comment caught him off-guard. “I know you don’t like worms.”

“I like starving less, although I have lost some weight.” She patted her torso like this pleased her.

This concept of Humans being able to change their body mass into adulthood unsettled him. It was possible to starve most species in the Gestalt, including his. But body composition changes were the end-stage of starvation. Many species had organs or internal structures that stored high energy tissue reserves that were activated once food became scarce. His own species had such structures in their torsos, which resembled a string of beads wrapped around their digestive organs, along with the more common knot of such tissue at the start of the large intestine, in addition to the ability to enter torpor.

A 25XA—and many other species—that was so starved it had to begin body composition changes was nearing death. Once that tissue was lost, there was no way to restore it or repair the damage. Starvation or even using hunger as a torture or siege tactic was a Zero crime, along with a war crime, and had been for millennia.

He had watched his brother waste away as food became too painful to eat, and Ohade had chosen starvation over the agony. That had been when they’d realized they could no longer care for him at home. Taking their brother to the Ward, *leaving* him there...

Now that he permitted himself to notice, she did seem a little... thinner... something very slight in her jaw and her face and her hands.

His scales flushed an Erkus-like turquoise with distress at the realization, although he tried to comfort himself that this was not end-stage starvation for a Human, and she would be able to regain her lost mass with proper care. He just had to encourage her to eat. She did not need to lose more weight. She was already borderline frail.

But how could he encourage her to eat when the food he had for her revolted her? Perhaps there was an option he had not yet considered. He would have to find a solution to the problem of feeding her more enjoyable food. She deserved to not be disgusted by every single meal she was served. She already picked at her food and didn’t finish her plates.

Perhaps there was some common spice she would enjoy. They could afford simple spices. They even grew some. He would take her out into the flavoring garden and have her sniff things to see if she favored anything.

This was a problem with a solution. He had to not accept defeat and

simply find it.

CHESS

Keiron's scales were a shade of blue I hadn't seen before—sort of green tinged like the Caribbean. Pretty shade, but left me unsettled. Erkus wore the pale blue shade naturally, on Keiron, it looked...worrying.

Blast. I was trying not to screw up my marriage (was that what this was? Had I gotten married? I think I got married.) and this whole *aftercare* thing was going to be an issue. His tail was trying to tie itself into a knot the way it was wringing itself like a towel about to dish out locker room punishment.

He set my plate before me. Mmm, worm paste and vegetables. The root vegetables were the same that got served at almost every meal. Reminded me of taro crossed a few generations back with a yam, so pretty bland with just a tiny hint of nutty sweetness. The worm paste was really more like a puree, although everyone called it paste, and it was a little sticky. It didn't taste like anything and was easy enough to shovel into my face and pretend it was some watery oatmeal or unsalted cottage cheese.

Keiron better not be getting tangled up with his own tail about my food either. I patted my sides. Did feel like I'd lost a few pounds, and he looked almost nauseated at me mentioning it. Why the heck did it bother him so much? Was it just that I'd been sick enough to lose some weight?

Hell, back on Earth, I had *prayed* to get a tapeworm. I would have volunteered for the Gestalt plague.

"You know," I told Keiron, "we've got a parasite on Earth called a tapeworm. Lives in your digestive tract."

"And?"

"Years ago, people would swallow them as a diet aide. So they could lose weight and get thin. You'd swallow the tapeworm egg and hope it hatched

and attached and just keep right on eating whatever you wanted and the tapeworm would feed off it. Totally was outlawed in my home country a long time ago, but I used to hope I'd get a tapeworm from some dirty water or bad meat or something."

His scales washed a pale blue tinged with black-blue stains at the tips. "What?"

"Just saying I've got a few spare pounds. An alien plague knocking off a few isn't going to hurt me at all. You don't need to worry." Hell, at my height, I could be fifty pounds lighter and maybe *then* people would look at me and say, *okay, Chess, maybe it's time to eat some pizza.*

There was plenty of buffer. He had nothing to worry about.

Taidc regarded me in washed-out emerald horror while Erkus almost went sea-glass pale blue. Erkus stumbled over his words. "Humans ate *parasites* for... for *vanity*?"

"Oh, that's just the start of the crazy shit Humans will do in the name of appearance," I told him. "Wait, you don't have that sort of thing here in the Gestalt? Body modification?"

"Well, we do," Erkus said slowly. "But..."

"Swallowing parasites is a bit crude?" I asked. "*Primitive*, even?"

"Yes." Taidc's scales returned to their usual salty green.

"Humans can change body mass?" Erkus asked, still a beautiful sea-glass shade.

"We can influence our physiques with diet and exercise. Oh, and genetic predispositions and all. Used to be everyone believed that more food, you get fat. Less food, get thin. But modern science is revealing it's way more complicated than that."

Taidc snorted and muttered, "*Modern.*"

"That's right. My super-primitive Human ability to recover from starvation and come back *strong*," I told him sweetly.

Ahane and Erkus both snickered. Keiron just looked annoyed. Taidc flushed emerald with exasperation, but at the roots of his scales was the deep forest that betrayed his mortified annoyance.

I ground it in a bit deeper. "I wonder what *modern* Gestalt science would make of our metabolisms. Considering modern Gestalt science on the subject *doesn't exist at all.*"

Taidc glowered at his meal.

Erkus smirked, a bright, exquisite blue, and while he didn't say anything,

his scales radiated humor.

Taidc growled at him.

Ahane snickered, turning a bright ruby red with laughter.

Taidc's dark mortification increased. Keiron just watched, his scales turning a smoky blue shade that screamed *you asked for it, brother* smugness.

I dipped one of the chunks of root vegetable into the meat paste to see if that improved my experience at all.

It did not.

I managed to choke down my mistake. Taidc watched.

"Those are two flavors that don't go together," I told Taidc, so my throat had something to do besides gag.

"I thought you objected to flavor entirely," Taidc replied.

I bit down onto a chunk of vegetable just to annoy him.

I took another bite of worm paste. Needed to get the protein in, and it was easier to slurp my meaty oatmeal when they weren't also chowing down on worms in front of me. Slurp down the meat smoothie and save my vegetable portion so I could be polite and eat with them.

Taidc returned with the platter of worms, while Keiron brought in the drinks. His scales were still tinged with magenta. As he took his seat next to me, he curled his tail around my ankle.

My cat—which I was not allowed to name, per Ahane—wandered into the dining room and jumped up onto the bench next to me. It surveyed the food, chirped, then curled up and went to sleep against my thigh.

Ahane glared at Keiron while Taidc rolled his eyes.

"How much did we pay for that cat?" Taidc asked Ahane.

"Enough to be ripped off, but it's too late now. That's clearly not a purebred."

"A purebred what?" I asked.

"Cat," Taidc said like that explained everything.

"Well, on Earth, *cat* just means it's a feline. You'd say something like, I don't know, a *Persian* cat or a *Ragdoll* or a *Sphinx* to mean purebred. If you say you have a *cat*, everyone just assumes you've got some mutt delivered to you by the cat distribution system."

"You have a cat distribution system?" Keiron inquired while Erkus practically trilled with fascination at this idea.

"No, no, that's just what people call it, because cats have this tendency to just... *show up* and bam. Now you have a cat."

They all looked at me like I was insane. So I said, “Earth cats aren’t like Gestalt cats. They’re a lot like *this* cat. But sort of smaller. And less trainable.”

Ahane flicked his fork at Taidc before Taidc could say something salty and took pity on me by explaining (perhaps with too much patience), “Cats are working animals. They’re valuable on farms. Kit-kits are even *more* valuable. They’re companion animals. No one wants crossbreeds. But *that* animal was sold to us as a purebred, with papers and chips. It was lower priced because it was smaller and a bit of a runt. But I’ve suspected a while now we got scammed, and now I’m sure of it.”

I looked down at my Not-Cat. “So it’s *not* a cat?”

“I think it’s a crossbred. Maybe not first generation, since it looks so much like a proper cat, but probably a grandparent was a kit-kit. See, sometimes kit-kits get born with a temperament regression. It’s a genetic flaw. So instead of log that the parents produced a regression, unscrupulous breeders will report the kitten died. Then the kitten gets sold off to someone who can get fake papers for it, and the kit-kit gets bred to low-quality or culled cats with their own flaws, and—”

“Suckers like you come by and buy a well-priced kitten,” Taidc said.

Ahane cursed at Taidc and the translator just bleeped [*EXTREME PROFANITY*]

“Enough,” Keiron said firmly. “There was never anything obviously wrong with the animal until—”

“Until it met a warm bed and transformed into a kit-kit,” Ahane said.

Keiron looked at my not-a-cat. “It would seem to be behaving as a proper kit-kit, even if it does not look like one. Even an ugly kit-kit is still more expensive than what we paid for this animal.”

“We don’t *need* a kit-kit,” Ahane reminded Keiron.

Keiron glared at him, but it was Erkus who said, “It was a serviceable cat. Then it helped Chess get better. Now we have a kit-kit. It will be a good minder for Keiron’s young.”

I damn near choked on my not-taro chunks. Keiron’s scales washed to a pale shade of twilight. “There are no young yet, Erkus.”

Fuck, I *hoped* there were no young yet. It wasn’t like Keiron had even suggested any birth control. It had to exist in the Gestalt, but was there anything for Humans? Did *he* take something? Was it too expensive? Which would be a pretty Earth-like irony: *birth control is too expensive to provide*

for free, so you totally get stuck with a baby instead! Yay!

Ug. Make it make sense.

Erkus' scales didn't change from their lovely aquamarine. "I meant *eventually*. A little guilt and concern there, brother?"

Taidc's scales turned a shade not unlike a very dangerous dark forest, but he said nothing. He didn't need to. It'd just be more *we can't afford* talk. And he was damn right. We could *not* afford a baby. And nobody even knew if Humans could have a baby with a 25XA, or if that'd even be a good idea to make a baby if we could even make a baby at all.

Okay. Deep breath. This was the Gestalt. Interstellar alliance and all that. Super advanced civilization. They had to have figured out procreation. Nothing to worry about. Keiron and I could discuss this like adults and go find some space-condoms or whatever it was 25XAs used.

My not-a-cat snuggled against my thigh and purred, then made a little happy chirp.

Ahane swore [*EXTREME PROFANITY*].

"Not a cat," Erkus said while Keiron sighed and the not-a-cat chirp-purred in a way that made me almost squeal with glee, opened its eyes, gave me a lazy blink, and then chirp-purred again. Now I *did* squeal with glee. It was so *cute* and *perfect*. Even if it did have a mouth full of triangular shaped teeth.

"If I find that seller," Ahane growled, "I am shoving that cat's pedigree chip so far up his cock it will get lodged in his balls."

"**Y**ou're still bothered," I told Keiron as he clearly got ready to go somewhere. He hadn't said where he was going. Didn't seem to be getting ready to go out into the fields and fix fence with Ahane and Erkus, though. Not the vibe I got.

Keiron slid his tail around my ankle with slow, hesitant tenderness. "I am worried about you."

"Why?"

He ran his claw along one of the still-swollen lymph nodes in my neck, then again along the back of my neck. I winced. Those were still really tender. "You are still not better."

"It might take my body a few weeks or even months to clear the infection, but it's won." Score one for Humanity.

The magenta at the root of his scales seemed almost dark purple. “It’s not just that. Although that is a great deal.”

Did I have to play twenty questions? Was he not ready to talk about it? Did I push? Did I leave it alone? Because 25XA showed their emotions on their scales, but did that mean you pried, or did you just pretend not to notice and let them talk about it when they were ready, because everyone *knew* you were thinking, and you’d actually *talk* when you were ready to talk?

He said, “I’m going to have to leave soon.”

My insides sank. Now that I was *officially* Mrs Keiron, Lady-Scion, no more gambling dens. No more talk of smuggling me back to Earth. It was back to the daily grind. And that meant he’d be gone hauling scrap being the Gestalt’s most overqualified garbage man. In the giddiness and rush of the trial and the revelations and Ohade, it hadn’t occurred to me that...

I swallowed a lump in my throat as the reality of my situation washed the glow away. If I’d had scales, they’d probably have turned a concerned shade, too. Instead, I arranged my face into as benign a mask as possible so Keiron wouldn’t worry more than he was. Nobody had ever accused me of being an optimist (I was too much of a realist, and the galaxy was too harsh a place for optimism to flourish), but I was stubborn.

“I figured,” I said, although I hadn’t figured. I’d only distantly thought about it. “Can I come?”

“No. It would be dangerous. The Greys might try to steal you back, and I do not go to the most savory places.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his scales. “That’s how I met you. And you need to stay here for Ohade. Unless you’ve had second thoughts on sharing blood with him.”

“Of course I haven’t had second thoughts.” I hadn’t gotten the space-plague just to let all these luscious antibodies go to waste and leave Ohade trapped in that awful ward, leading a life where someone might have been doing him a kindness to smother him with his pillow. “I just...I got used to having you around.”

“I don’t want to leave you. I want to stay with you.” His scales turned a painful magenta tinge.

I pressed close to him. “I want you to stay too, but I understand.”

“I won’t be so far away that it will cause you to go hungry,” he added. “At least, I hope I won’t. I don’t know how sensitive Humans are to that.”

“Guess we’ll find out.”

The gambling den had been a good idea, but I understood if he didn’t

want to go back to that well over and over, and instead maintain *some* semblance of respectability. Especially since we were sort of cheating, although I still didn't believe I had any psy abilities. Most species seemed to be pretty transparent with lousy poker faces. Didn't make me psy. Technically, bring a psy wasn't against the rules, but that's just because nobody thought they needed that rule.

Hauling garbage with a no-questions-asked policy was a little more honest, even if about the same amount of legal risk. I felt along the scales of his chest. "Just don't take any risky cargo, okay? The taxes are all paid and Ohade is taken care of, at least for a little while. I don't want to see you on trial again. I don't think the Temple will save you this time."

Keiron smiled. Some of the magenta evaporated, leaving clear twilight blue. "I will be more selective in the hauls I agree to. Now I am going into town to find a new contract, and do some ship maintenance. You will be fine here?"

I'd have rather gone into the city with him, but I'd have just been in the way, and my lumpy body was a bit telltale I'd had the plague. Or at least, it *might* be, and I had already caught people looking at me warily on the tram when we'd gone to the trial and then when we'd gone to Ohade. And I'd been covered up fairly well, and the brothers had concealed me with their bodies. And I didn't want to risk bumping into those punks who had jumped Keiron coming back from the casino.

Better I just hung out with my new not-a-cat and watched ye olde boob tube to try to figure out how to survive in the Gestalt. And any possible cunning or sly way to maybe get a message to Earth, so my family wasn't mourning my death. And to discover if the Gestalt had anything resembling coffee, even if it was unaffordable, because a girl always needed to have goals.

I had *plenty* to do.

"I will stay out of trouble," I said.

"Be good," he said, voice husky as his tail swept along the curve of my ass, flicking back and forth right at the curve and making my pussy tingle and dampen for him. "And when I return, I want to take you to our spice garden."

"Spice garden?" Him palming my ass while talking about flavorings surely had to be a translation error.

He withdrew his touch and headed out.

CHESS

“We’re not going anywhere near the worm vats though, *right?*” I asked as I pulled on the woven reed sandals that Ahane had made for me, so I had shoes to wear. They were pretty comfortable. Very casual. Very alien beach bum. Given I’d never loved shoes and had been barefoot as much as possible—and questioned my choice to become an attorney given that would mean heels—sandals had been like *score*.

“No,” Keiron said as he watched.

I waited for him to tell me if his outing to find his next haul had been successful, but he didn’t.

The house had a sort of battered perimeter—the stone courtyard with the empty pool, for example—and after my experience with the worms, I had strictly confined myself to the house and its immediate surroundings. Not that I’d been up to long hikes through the massive, sprawling spread recently.

“Can the not-cat come?” I asked as my not-cat watched the unfolding exodus from the house.

Keiron looked at the feline. “It has been all over the farm.”

The not-cat blinked at him like it understood Keiron’s subtle shade about its laziness.

Keiron brushed his fingers along the small of my back and we headed out the back of the house into the courtyard. I had swept it, but the breeze had just blown more leaves and dried grass onto it. There was a chill in the air, even if the day-sun felt warm. I shivered. “When does winter come?”

“We are in mid-autumn,” Keiron said after a pause while the translator explained Earth’s concept of seasons to him. “We have a much longer season cycle than Earth. Each of our seasons is equal, roughly, to one Earth year.

Most years. We have a slightly variable orbital period, due to it being a binary star system.”

We were going into a *year* of winter? Yikes. At least I’d be able to enjoy autumn for a good while yet?

Eep.

“Does it snow?” I asked.

Another pause, then, “Yes, of course. I think the snow is very beautiful.”

Well... as long as I didn’t have to *drive* in it. I also didn’t ask how the house stayed heated, or if we were going to be huddled up for the winter. No point in giving myself nightmares. Then again, snuggling up with Keiron didn’t sound so bad either. You know. To stay warm. Survival and all that.

He led me down some well-worn dirt paths marked by a couple of slender posts topped with lanterns to an area I hadn’t seen. Not-Cat scampered ahead, loping easily like he knew where we were headed. He disappeared into the tall, swaying autumn grasses. At the end of the path were some basic wire and trellis fencing about chest height, wrapped around a large garden patch.

The fields were far across the sea of grass, this was something else.

Keiron opened the gate and let us in. Not-Cat had crawled between the wires and was already stalking something in a back row.

“This is the spice garden,” Keiron said.

It smelled... not amazing, exactly, but very interesting all the same. There were rows of various plants. Some looked like standard-issue Earth greenery, while others were clearly *not* Earth. Some looked like just sticks stuck in the dirt. Others were actually packed into pebbles and not dirt. Some were sprawling ground-cover contained within little wooden corrals, while others were small trees or stalks.

“It’s not much,” Keiron added, his voice steady but his scales the humble shade of blue. “We don’t have anything too unusual. Erkus mostly looks after it, and he is very careful about what we plant to keep the soil in good condition. And to not waste expensive seeds if he’s not sure he can grow it.”

“There’s so *much*,” I said.

Keiron gave me a bewildered look. “This is very small.”

“Really?” This was not a *huge* garden or anything, but it was firmly in the “ambitious weekend project” category. There also looked to be various open rows that had been mulched over. Probably the spring and summer crops.

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m still impressed. So why did you want to show it to me?” Since

he didn't think it was impressive, not sure why we were out here, but it was fun all the same. Something made terrible *squee! squee!* Noises. "Um... what's that?"

"Your pet has caught vermin." Keiron told me the name of the vermin, but the translator just went with *a small rodent*.

"And Taidc calls him useless."

"I want you to sniff the plants," he said.

"...why?"

"To see if any smell like you might enjoy them on your food. Or at least similar to things on Earth."

"*Oh*. Well, okay, sure. Some of them *look* similar to Earth plants. Like that looks like it could be basil." I pointed at a very leafy green bush that did look like basil.

"Nothing in here will hurt you." Keiron looked over his shoulder as not-a-cat trotted down our row with something *very* large in his maw. "The same cannot be said for vermin."

"What the *hell*," I asked faintly as not-a-cat dropped the "mole" at my feet and purr/chirped loudly.

"It has brought you a gift," Keiron explained.

"Well, yes, I know, but *that's not a mole*, Keiron." The creature not-cat had caught looked like an overgrown mink had produced offspring with a garter snake. It had *huge* teeth and barbs on its snout and wicked claws to go with its plush, dark fur. "My cat could have been hurt!"

Keiron snorted. "We buy cats specifically to hunt prey *much* bigger than this."

I crouched down and pet my not-cat. It purred loudly, head-butted my palm, and raised a paw to place over my wrist. "Good little murder-beast. You can eat it."

"It won't eat it," Keiron said. "But I'll tell Erkus he can skin it. The fur is valuable, and it looks like your cat had a tidy kill."

"Good murder-beast," I told kitty again.

Kitty chirped, then loped off to go find something else to kill.

"Not a purebred," Keiron muttered.

I suppressed a smile and started to methodically sniff each plant in the garden. The one that I thought would have been basil smelled more like a mint, and when I tasted it, it even tasted somewhat like mint. More of a basil-mint situation, which wasn't my favorite combo, but was something from

Earth. Most of the others smelled varying shades of unpleasantly pungent and compost-heap-ish, but a few were sweeter and lighter. “What’s this one?”

He told me the name. [NO TRANSLATION]

“It smells like raspberries,” I said.

He didn’t even try to pronounce that.

I tentatively took one of the leaves, squished it in my fingers, and inhaled. Yep. Berry pie. I licked it. A tart, almost bitter, berry taste exploded across my tongue. I smacked my lips, then went back in for more. “Oh, wow. That’s amazing.”

It tasted like a fruit juice from Earth. Almost. It needed some sweetener—it was *tart*—but it had awesome potential for tea.

“It is?” Keiron inquired.

“I bet it would make a great tea,” I said. “Or pie.”

“But you do not like any of these?” He pointed at some other plants.

I wrinkled my nose. Some of them smelled like a compost heap, others like cut tomato vines, others just too pungent. The intensity was overwhelming and vaguely nauseating. Like a whiff of them made me want to go *oh, no*. They did not smell like food. “No.”

“Those are the most commonly used flavorings. Especially this one.”

The one he indicated smelled like a compost heap and very strong white pepper, and I vaguely remembered the flavor from one of my first efforts to eat the worms. “No offense, Keiron, but it’s revolting.”

His scales rushed a smoldering blue. “But you like that one.”

“Many Humans would like this one. It tastes and smells like berries. In my part of the world, we have this flavor called *mixed berry*, which is a combination of popular berries. People love mixed berry desserts and drinks and jams.”

He frowned. “That is not a popular plant here. The leaves are dried, and then one leaf will be thrown into a sauce or stew to add sharpness and fragrance. It is considered essential in that regard, but is otherwise not used. But that is a flavor Humans would enjoy?”

“Humans from my part of Earth, sure.” I was not up-to-date on the appeal of *mixed berry* throughout Earth. And, granted, I *had* met the occasional person who did not like berry flavors. But their loss, more for me. I couldn’t pronounce or parse the name of the plant, so I just mentally dubbed it Mixed Berry. It did have a non-specific berry flavor. Raspberry? Blueberry? Blackberry? Huckleberry? Boysenberry? Lingonberry? Cranberry?

Strawberry?

All of the above. It would make a great tea. If I could find something to sweeten it, it might be next level.

Keiron made me sniff the rest of the plants, which were mostly unappealing but very interesting, and some of the scents were nothing my Human brain or experience had ever encountered. A few of them were very floral, almost. Maybe those had potential too. I wasn't opposed to eating flower-flavored worm paste. I'd once had a weird ice cream flavor that tasted like those fancy soaps Grandma had kept in her bathroom smelled. You know, the pretty soaps you weren't supposed to actually *use* and were shaped like seashells and roses.

The ice cream had been very odd, but I'd eaten it. Mostly because I'd always wanted to experience those soaps.

"Erkus does a really amazing job with this," I said, taking in the garden.

Keiron's scales washed a dusty twilight violet. "Yes, he wanted to go into Medicine. He's turned that to plants. He spends most of his time in the fields, but this is his..." he paused while he sorted through the options in the translator.

"Pet project?" I suggested.

Keiron frowned. "Like a kit-kit? How can a project be a pet?"

"Exactly. It's a project you keep around because you like it, not because it's practical or especially useful. Does that mean my not-a-cat gets upgraded to *not* a pet because it catches vermin?"

"We never said it could not catch vermin. Just that it was very lazy about doing so. A proper cat is eager to patrol its territory and hunt. That...cat...has always been lazy. Even poorly bred cats are not lazy."

"Oh, man, I have to wonder what you'd think of Earth cats." My not-cat sauntered out from between some plants, like it knew Keiron had been talking about it. I held out my hands to kitty, and kitty went *brp!* and jumped into my arms. I laughed and snuggled it. It was like having a living stuffed animal. Well, aside from the terrifying shark-like jaws and murder-claws and the body that felt like holding onto a carry-on sized plush muscle torpedo capable of bringing down prey three or four times its size.

Keiron sighed in his *we got scammed* way.

"If this is a part-bred kit-kit, I can see why the purebreds are so valuable," I told Keiron, very pleased with my mutt.

"They are the most prized companion animals in the Gestalt," Keiron

admitted grudgingly. “My grandparents had one when I was very young. They are bred to be perfect companions to a single person, although sometimes they will accept a mated pair. They are considered prize gifts to give to a future partner.”

I smiled. “Really. Job well done, Twilight Scion.”

“But that is not a kit-kit,” Keiron said, mildly annoyed. Then, he added, “You do not give kit-kits to children. It’s believed that that sort of companionship sets unrealistic expectations for youngsters. But they are considered a very symbolic gift to give to partners. Either to your pair-bound to symbolize esteem, or your mate, to symbolize the sort of love you will always share.”

“Aww. That’s so fucking sweet.” I held out my kit-cat with both hands. It dangled happily from my grip, purring and blinking at me. It had a pale gold belly flecked with little gold dots and striped bands. “I don’t care if it’s not purebred. I love it. I kind of even like the murder-jaws and murder-claws. Think it’ll walk on a leash and I can take it with me when I go to donate blood for Ohade?”

“Kit-kits can be taught many, many tricks, and often accompany their owners in public, although because they are so valuable, it is not done casually due to risk of ransom. I don’t think cats can be taught anything. But your cat does not look like a kit-kit. It looks like a very nice cat, and it would be quite foolish to steal a cat.”

“People don’t steal cats?”

“It’s a very good way to be seriously injured. Cats are highly territorial. They object to anything of ‘theirs’ being disturbed. That is why they are used as farm guardians.”

“I wish I could give it a name,” I said.

“You promised Ahane. Or, more to the point, I promised Ahane on your behalf.”

And Ahane was still salty about getting ripped off. My opinion? Ahane had gotten the better part of that deal. But I might have been biased.

I put my kit-cat down. It promptly started licking its shoulder. *Slurp, slurp.*

“This was very successful,” I told Keiron, who still looked dissatisfied and troubled. No idea why. He clearly did not think it was successful. Time to give him a little nudge. “Do you think Ahane or Erkus could figure out how to make tea from that berry plant? Or the flowery ones?”

He coiled his tail around my ankle. “I’m certain he can. Even if he will be bewildered by your palette.”

“Oh well, you say that like they aren’t all bewildered by the rest of me. I’m used to it by now. I take *pride* in keeping them guessing.” I shifted closer to him. If that berry plant turned into tea tasted half as good as it did raw, it was a *winner*.

His scales shifted to a swirling twilight blue—my favorite shade—with light magenta tips. Ooo. Party was about to start. I liked parties. Time to invite myself. “I think you should make good on those threats of what your tail was going to do to me.”

“Threats? I have never threatened you.”

“Now isn’t the time to be pedantic, Keiron.” I pulled away from him and headed towards the house.

Keiron, being very clever, got the idea.

KEIRON

She tasted so sweet. The way she kissed him now—was it different? It felt different. Wilder. Softer.

His hearts surged and shoved blood into his cock. He groaned and grasped her ass and lifted her against him. She made a sound of surprise but obediently lashed her thighs around his hips, and he groaned again as her wet pussy ground against him through his pants. His claws kneaded her ass, pulling slightly at the cleft, and he longed to pleasure her there too—but she was shy about that.

Curse these foolish Human males who had taught her to be ashamed and timid and hurt her.

He carried her to his—*their*—bed and deposited her on the mattress. The action delightfully tousled her, and she looked up at him with her limbs and hair and dress all askew, her lips flushed and swollen, and her eyes focused wholly on him. Her dress had shifted, exposing one breast while the other remained covered, and the skirt rode up around her thighs, pooling between them to obscure her beautiful pussy from view.

Her gaze traveled to his groin. She bit her lower lip.

Such delicate little tells. Like the *faint* way her lips were a bit pinker and plumper, her eyes a bit more dilated, that little bit of her lip. All secret tells, all little secrets she told him.

He undid his pants. His cock surged free, engorged to its full potential. She squirmed slightly and her scent intensified in a musk that pleaded for him. Slightly salty, like the ocean. Pure. He stroked his shaft with regret. He'd risked it before entering her when he was this engorged. It had been amazing and intense and a terrible idea. He couldn't fuck her that hard again,

not when she was his proper mate, if she wouldn't permit him to tend to her like she deserved.

He wasn't just going to... use her... it was too filthy.

Even though the shaft dripped honey, pleading with her to accept him. It dripped over his fingers.

She moved towards him, lips parted.

His mate.

"Wait," he said hoarsely.

"Wait?"

He focused on her, his senses sharpening to see the way her skin quivered with her pulse, the faint flush over her lips. He used his tail to shift the fabric of her dress away from her thighs. She shifted, uncertain, but held still as he lifted it, revealing her flushed, moist, swollen petals for his purview. Not all of it, fully, offered, but enough he groaned and his honey increased as his balls churned, demanding he part her thighs and enter her, feel her body struggling to take him as he indulged his most base, raw, crude wanting.

Shame heightened the flush under his scales, turning them a bloody purple hue. She shimmied towards him and wrapped her lips around the head of his cock, licking up his honey. It dribbled onto her breasts and hit her dress. She used both little hands to cradle his balls and stroke his shaft.

He groaned and rewarded her with a swat on the ass with his tail. She moaned on his cock and he nearly exploded in her mouth. His honey kept dripping onto her dress.

His mate, devouring his honey with such enthusiasm.

He ran his claws through her hair and asked her in High Dialect, "*Do you want to swallow all of it, little mate? Do you want me to fill your belly with it?*"

She squirmed and moaned and tried her best to take more of him in her mouth. The way she unhinged her jaw was really quite impressive... the soft little noises she made, the way some of her saliva and his honey drooled from her lips...

He said more profane and crude things to her, tugging her hair gently to encourage her to take as much of him as she could manage. She eagerly complied.

He grasped her hair and pulled her back. This was making a mess. "Enough."

"Can't wait?" she teased, admiring the way the head of his cock flared

outward when he was like this, and the pattern of veins and ridges meant specifically to please her. She licked another drop from the tip.

“*You know I can,*” he told her in High Dialect, and she shuddered all over in pleasure. “*Back on the bed, mate.*”

He chose the antiquated, primitive, and decidedly rude word for *mate* that had, once in the Gestalt’s distant past, carried far more crude connotations. That she was to submit to his considerable lust, that she existed for his pleasure, that she existed to take his copious seed and produce offspring for him. It was a degrading thing to say, but sent a fierce jolt through him, and she shivered and mewled like she knew exactly what he had said—and her response was *yes, Twilight Scion, as you wish.*

His cock *hurt*. He growled, scales hardening. She made a soft sound in response.

No.

He wrestled himself back. He couldn’t fuck her. Not this engorged. Not this...

He said the antiquated word again. “*Mate.*”

“Yes,” she whispered.

His cock spurted. He pushed her thighs apart. Her pussy waited for him. Her scent tore at him.

No. He was going to taste her and caress her first.

He knelt at the edge of the bed and tugged her to the edge. Her feet hit his shoulder blades as he drew his tongue along her wet slit. Gently, he parted her lips to expose the beautiful inner folds and her little jewel, and sampled her taste. She moaned. He groaned as his cock spurted against the blankets and the urge to sink himself into her nearly overwhelmed all of him.

“Keiron,” she gasped his hand and her fingers scratched harmlessly at his hair and tips of his ears. She tore at him as he slowly explored and tasted her, swirling his tongue around her little jewel before caressing it with his talon, holding her lips apart to tease just inside her tender channel with the tip of his tail.

“*I am not convinced you are eager for me, mate,*” he told her, hating how much it made his balls churn to talk to her that way, and how his honey trickled from his cock in a steady stream.

She mewled.

He surrendered to the urge to move over her, his cock brushing her thighs.

“Yes,” she breathed, squirming under him.

“Patience.” Her pull was intoxicating. Her scent. She was *his*. And of course, that made it *real* now. Reality had changed. His perception of her had changed. He groaned as he brushed on a nipple with his claw and suckled the other. Her scent begged him to be inside her.

No. I will only leave her raw and dripping and she will insist on cleaning it up herself. I will find another way to please her.

She whined at him and pulled his hair.

He’d never had a female beg for his cock before. Not *really* beg, and she was *begging*.

“Here.” He brought his tail around and slid it along her thigh. She mewled, and he transitioned to High Dialect as he slid his tail into her waiting pussy. “*You enjoyed it so much before.*”

She moaned. His tail shifted shapes inside her, exploring what shape pleased her most. He said crude, debase things to her in High Dialect, about how she would submit to him and his cock and he was going to fill her womb with his honey, and that last one made her moan. Could she understand it, even if she didn’t know the words?

Thinking about filling her made his cock offer a spurt of fluid that splattered across her belly and slid down her hips. He cursed at himself. She’d already accepted his honey. He didn’t require more, and the urge for his cock to be fucking her was absurd. His tail was doing a very good job for both of them.

He rocked back on his heels and watched while stroking himself. She reached down and rubbed her pussy, her gaze on his cock. The novelty sent shocks through him. Did she enjoy watching him?

Well, why not? He enjoyed watching her.

He also enjoyed filling her, and she loved to be filled. He shifted his tail, willing it to press against her tight channel more, and she moaned and arched off the blankets. His tail was slick with her fluids.

His tail was a lucky bastard.

“*Behave,*” he told her, stroking himself firmly. “*And I might eventually give you my cock again if you can handle my tail.*”

The urge to go and lick her and pleasure her jewel while his tail fucked her was overwhelming. He fought it back—if he succumbed, he might give in to the urge to fuck her properly. Her scent begged him for that, for all the pleasure his tail gave her.

She arched off the blankets with a cry, a rictus moving through her body and wetness splashed his tail.

Watching her finish on his tail, the way her body quivered and trembled and flushed, and the beautiful clear shine of dampness all over her thighs was too much. He shifted to his feet off the bed, stroking inside her with his tail while he breathed hard and the last of her pleasure reverberated through both of them.

A final stroke of his cock and he groaned, spurting in thick arches and ropes that splattered the tiled floor.

He panted and gasped along with her as spasms coursed through his balls and the base of his cock, and a few more splatters of honey hit the floor. He slumped with one hand against the edge of the mattress.

There. It would be a mess *he* could clean up. He had cleaned up this sort of mess many times before while he'd kept himself company. That seemed fair and equitable.

He turned his attention to his mate after the last lingering spurt passed. His balls felt unsettled and his mind was murky, but she seemed appropriately disheveled and with a delicate pink flush over her limbs and on her cheeks. He stole a caress with his claw over her pussy and shuddered as his balls clenched and his cock twitched while his second heart pumped a rush of blood. He took a breath and tried to settle, but the sensations of her needed a hunger.

"It's different," she murmured.

"Yes," he agreed, trying to ignore how he wasn't satisfied, and the filthy, primal things in High Dialect wandering around the back of his mind.

"Why?" She shifted, offering him more of her body.

"Because we've acknowledged the truth."

"How does that change anything?"

"Shall I take you into my old office and show you?" He had left his old office behind long ago when he'd had to give up the Sciences.

She peered at him over her shoulder. "Is it like *Box Duck Noodle*?"

Ah, the small children's show she watched. "Yes. Now we exist in a perfectly acknowledged reality. We opened the box and looked inside and there was us."

"Aren't you a romantic?"

He had never let himself contemplate being romantic and tender with his mate. He had stayed focused, strictly, on the requirements his House had

needed and not let himself get distracted by his personal preferences. Had he ever been romantic? He couldn't recall. Perhaps not. "I try."

She laughed. "No, I don't think you do. I think it just sort of happens."

Perhaps she was right.

"Something's bothering you?" she asked.

"No?"

"I can see it on your scales."

"Just that I worry you're happy," he said, evading the question.

"Keiron."

"Do you love me, little Human?" he asked, throat tight and voice husky.

"You know I do, you big blue jerk. Especially your tail."

He could not resist swatting her bottom with it. She laughed and rolled over, offering him a view of her lovely ass, before she squirmed to the edge of the bed. He swatted her bottom once more, then surrendered to the urge to palm it with both hands. He gave the flesh a considering squeeze. "Perhaps," he said, spreading the cheeks very slightly, "my tail will pleasure you a different way next time."

CHESS

I squeaked. “Um...”

He gently pulled my cheeks apart a fraction. So there'd be no doubt about what he was talking about doing with his tail. And it didn't help I was wet and slippery and sort of tantalized by the idea at the same time I was like *nope*. I was still a bit horny, too. His tail was great, and playing with myself while he jerked off was also hot, but damnit, why hadn't he given me his cock...denial was fun and all, but I had a creeping feeling he'd not been playing sexy games with me.

“I've never done butt stuff,” I said, pretty mortified to confess it.

Keiron released my ass. I turned around to face him. Almost slipped in some slickness on the floor. He was a mess, sort of dripping with his own cum.

“*Stuff?*” Keiron frowned quizzically, then looked down at himself, then brought his tail in front of his face, then told me, “I was not planning on *stuffing* you with my cock, although I know how much you enjoy your pussy being full. Your *butthole* is much more petite. My tail is more manageable. Although I was not going to *stuff* you.”

The way he carefully annunciated *butthole* made me snicker as I died from mortification and my pussy started to plead to get stuffed full of the way-too-large alien cock, which he had *denied* me all of five minutes ago. “I didn't mean... *stuff*... I meant...”

His scales flushed a deep sapphire tinged with luminous magenta. “You enjoy when I am so engorged I have to force my way into you, and when I swell even larger and cannot leave you right away. You love the feel of my honey flowing into you. But do not worry. I will not *stuff* your more tender

orifice.”

Yeah, and he had just denied me that. The flush of his scales said he was turned on, too.

“That’s... not what...*stuff* means... it’s a noun too.”

His scales went matte with that familiar *what stupid Human nonsense is this*. “Yes, I am aware.”

“It means random items of no determinate type nor shape, but usually small and inconsequential.” I pointed at the small sewing basket I had on the floor by the bed. “Like that. That would be *stuff*. We’ve used *stuff* before.” I distinctly remembered using the word *stuff* a few times in previous conversations.

“Wait, it does not mean things you put into places so they are full?”

I suppressed a snicker. “No. It means random items.”

Wait for it...

“How does your species communicate!” He practically tore at his hair for the umpteenth time. His tail writhed in frustration. “*To stuff* means to *fill* something until it is over-full, while *stuff* means random items that may or may not fill up a space?! Not items specifically intended to *fill* a space?”

“Yep.”

He broke into High Dialect. It probably translated to *how does anything happen with your fucking species!*

“Keiron, I’ve said *stuff* to you many times before,” I said.

“I thought you were being hyperbolic,” Keiron said dryly. “Exaggerating the quantity of thoughts in your head, or feelings in your heart, or things you were concerned with, or the degree of disturbance. Such as when you say *I am stuffed* you are not *literally* stuffed to the point of bursting with food, you are merely over-full. Or when you tell me *I have a lot of stuff to do*, I presume that your schedule is overly-full and you are task saturated. I did not realize you meant random trivial items not worth naming. Like when you were telling me about how Humans courted. You told me there was much *stuff* to weigh seriously in choosing a mate. I thought you meant it was an overwhelming amount of information. Now you tell me that *stuff* was trivial?!”

Ohhhhh shit. I waved my hands. “Wait, wait, it’s also a type of verbal shorthand too. *Instead* of telling someone everything, you just say *stuff*. But *stuff* can be very important. It’s a way of minimizing what we’re trying to say, especially if we’re trying to avoid going into detail.”

His eyes narrowed as his scales swirled. “So you have been trying to *avoid* detail.”

Well, yes. And no. “Sometimes I’ve tried to glaze over things, but when I point at that,” I pointed at my basket, “and say *it’s full of stuff*, do you really want me to say *it’s full of* then enumerate every item in there?”

He grumbled.

“*Exactly*. Or when I say humans have to weigh a lot of *stuff* with choosing a mate, it’s so many items that we can’t be specific. And it’s going to be different for every Human. So we just say *stuff*. Yes, it’s a way to avoid getting specific, but it’s also a way to avoid burdening other Humans with details they don’t really care about.”

“I care about details,” he said stubbornly. “I have to! You are entirely details! Tiny details! I *need* details!”

“I am not tiny details.” There wasn’t anything tiny about me. Except my patience for idiots. That was very, very, very tiny.

Now his scales turned practically dark blue-black. “You are entirely details! Everything about you is a tiny detail. Your Human language and communication is adapted to deal with a species that also has powerful psy abilities and can infer meaning. Is every Human language so maddening and non-specific?”

“I’ve heard English is really difficult to learn.” I admitted sheepishly. “Do you want to go wash first? You’re messier than me. I can clean up the floor.”

His scales twinged scarlet. “No, you should go first. I will tend to the floor.”

“You sure? I don’t mind.” He was miffed, and it wasn’t about *stuff*.

“Of course I do not mind.”

His scales said he minded. But fine, I wasn’t about to spoil what had been a really nice time with banging my head against a big blue wall. We could circle back to whatever had gone wrong.

Then again... the Keiron I had *known* up until *very* recently hadn’t been my mate-mate. Well, he *had* been my mate, but he’d been putting on an act that he *wasn’t* my mate, while I’d been believing I was crushing hard on the galaxy’s best fuck buddy.

Were things going to get *weird* now that we were *official*?

Oh no.

Okay. I was going to act perfectly normal and like I was cheerfully happy. I headed off to the shower.

CHESS

Planet 25XA had public access.

Well, they didn't *call* it the public access channel, and it didn't seem to run tape replays of the local "are Humans even real" conspiracy theorist group meeting down at the basement of a lodge for their monthly *the government is lying to us*, but instead ran an assortment of very basic *So You're On Planet 25XA* type programs, explaining the local customs, transportation, legal system, among other things.

It had taken a lot of fiddling with the TV-esque device, since there weren't really sequential channels, more than an algorithm, and with enough prodding, the offerings varied. Clearly, the algorithm (or AI running it) could not parse why anyone residing in a non-tourist area of the planet would want to watch this channel, hence the difficulty finding the stone it had been hiding under.

But I paid rapt attention while stitching a tiny seam while a cheerful narrator that looked like a humanoid fish waved their fins with all the energy of an overly enthusiastic tour guide at infographics explaining how to wait for, summon, ride, and navigate the expansive automated transit system. They also made it cheerfully clear that private vehicles needed special permits, so don't you even think about joyriding, you silly-billy. For an extra cost, the automated travel pod-busses could be summoned to you, otherwise, please consult the timetables and leave the rest to the AI.

Apparently 25XA was a very popular planet not for tourism, but because of the Temple. There were other Temples across the Gestalt, but far from every planet had one, so it seemed like this entire channel was devoted to the large number of tourists who came to 25XA to go to the Temple to procure

trinkets. It was also a spaceport with lots of cargo. Not a tourist trap planet, more a busy seaport with some important infrastructure.

I learned very important 25XA lessons like how to find, identify, and order food at various establishments. Beverage and tea options comparable to what was on other planets. Disreputable parts of town for tourists to avoid. Various entertainment options. Proper etiquette mostly seemed to be *don't be a dick* with a few extra steps, along with what behavior was allowed in certain areas of the city, and that “enforcement” was minimal for “rambunctious behavior” in disreputable parts of cities. There were recommended attire offerings for various scenarios, along with where to procure said attire, and (and this was stressed) body parts that were expected to be covered while on 25XA.

Never seen such a wide variety of genitals. Rule 34 just got a *massive* expansion.

The Gestalt operated on a firm *when in Rome* attitude when it came to attire and behavior on any given planet. There was a General Code of Etiquette that was kind of a cultural failsafe if you found yourself on a planet you hadn't intended to be on, and there was also an official, quick-reference “Proprietary Scale” (not the best translation) that the Gestalt employed so that any given individual could quickly identify how formal/strict/restrictive a planet was relevant to the General Code of Etiquette. The Gestalt was so large and encompassed so many worlds that the Scale had been established for the sake of safety and not inadvertently starting wars.

Relative to the General Code of Etiquette, 25XA was considered moderately bureaucratic, moderately formal, with a noted risk of “managed” violence, with the quick reference note of:

*One of the original planets of the Gestalt, this planet is old-fashioned and formal with complicated etiquette and escalating discipline hierarchy. A general familiarity with planets of this Etiquette Profile is sufficient to comfortably navigate 25XA after a brief orientation available at the Guest Agency on all commercial docks. 25XA is forgiving of visitors who unintentionally breach protocol or etiquette, but intentional or excessive deviation will be met with harsh penalties. Military and combat training and service is mandatory on 25XA, and 25XA does permit denizens to enforce protocol with escalating violence. It is **strongly** advised that inexperienced travelers unfamiliar*

with navigating planets of this Etiquette Profile to purchase Entanglement Insurance, to register with the 25XA Guest Agency, to remain only in the recommended areas of the four largest cities, and to hire handlers, especially if traveling outside the cities. Entanglements with 25XA denizens, administrative, and/or law enforcement agencies can result in your stay being very unpleasant.

But planets like 374AD or 986YU were party central. 384P or 47382? Extreme risk of violence due to cultural norms and Etiquette Profile, hiring expert handlers and native-fluent translators being a *requirement*, or else your chance of unintentional death was somewhere around ninety-six percent. And 473h? You were greeted upon arrival with the need to pass a “test of strength” or else you were told to get back on your ship and get lost. Which was an improvement over Certain Death if you sneezed too loudly. Which, yes, was a thing on 47382.

Between public access and the slightly aged-up kiddie shows, I had a lot of continuing education to slog through while I hand-sewed clothing. Perhaps I could ask Ahane if he could make me something resembling a proper sewing machine from spare parts out in the barn.

My not-cat, however, was *more* than content to remain belly-up in a basket, snoring and making murder-mitten biscuits through all of it.

Keiron stepped into my room, scales a smokey shade of twilight. “*My love.*”

I shivered with pleasure at the High Dialect. Like angels and heavenly bells. Sent my skin racing and a deep, primal pleasure right down my spine. Fuck. It was amazing. Almost *too* intense.

He crouched down beside me, the fabric of his pants creaking slightly.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. Because something was wrong. He had that *broody* to his scales and expression.

“I have a contract,” he said. “I have to leave.”

“For how long?” Obviously: that was what Keiron did. And fleecing folks at shady gambling dens couldn’t be our new profession. Had to be our pastime so we could keep up *some* semblance of respectability. Back when Keiron’s goal had been to return me to Earth, burn that candle at both ends.

But now that I was going to stay on 25XA (and truly appreciated how impossible returning me to Earth would be), well, playing 4D Rainbow Chess a great deal was only going to piss off everyone at the dodgy Rainbow Chess bars *and* draw attention from the tax authorities.

“It is a short trip. But still long enough to be away from you.” He caressed my neck with his talon.

“I’ll come with.” I offered.

Another long, slow caress of his talon. “You know it’s too dangerous for you to come.”

“Is it really, though? Everyone knows we can’t pay ransom.”

“Remember the two who attacked us under the suns coming back from gaming. We aren’t worth much, but we’re something to someone. I don’t like leaving you alone at all. Especially since you will be due to give blood to Ohade while I’m gone.” His scales darkened in the middle, like a band had constricted around each one.

I brushed my fingertips along the back of his hand. “I’ll be fine. I don’t have to go down to the sketchy part of the city.”

While there was another, smaller Plague Ward in a glittery part of the town that catered to the *extremely ultra mega* rich who were also *extremely ultra mega* connected, Ohade’s Ward catered to everyone who *wasn’t* a glitterati. I didn’t need to traverse ten blocks of increasingly sketchy buildings while the smell of burned sugar and plastic hung in the air, then step down an uncomfortably damp back alley to access a dimly lit private “clinic” that may or may not have been using the Plague as a way to harvest High House 25XA scales to be made into jewelry.

His scales turned a few shades darker. “I don’t like how dismissive you sound. You must be careful. You’re a Human.”

“Exactly. I’m a Human. That means that everyone is going to be looking at me, which means I’ll attract a lot of attention.”

His voice took on an aggravated, stern rumble. “*Chess*. Not all attention is *good* attention.”

I loved it when he said my name. And perhaps administered a little discipline. Maybe if I kept brushing off his worry, he’d start growling at me in High Dialect. “I promise I’ll be careful, but you can’t expect me to have an escort everywhere I go.”

“Why would that be unreasonable?”

For a list as long as my right leg and his cock, of course. *He* was being

unreasonable. “So your mother never went *anywhere* without bodyguards?”

He grumbled. “No, she went places alone, on occasion. But *you* are not *her*. I will tell Taidc he has to go with you.”

If it stopped him from fretting so much, fine. “Fine. Now, where is this haul taking you?”

He leaned forward a bit. “*Fine?* You won’t argue about Taidc going?”

“Why the hell would I argue about Taidc going? Taidc might argue, but I won’t argue.”

“He won’t argue.”

“So where are you going?”

His scales deepened their blue hue while a rush of concern moved over his entire body.

“*Keiron.*”

“It’s Guild. But I am concerned what you’d do with the information.”

Holy shit, was Keiron going to turn into Mr Overprotective now that we were *official*? Blue may have been the color of moods, but someone needed to create a color called *Keiron Blue* at this rate. “*Do* with it? What could I *do* with it?”

“I’m not sure. Hence my concern. And it pays enough that I will not take a non-Guild return. I want to come back to you. I do not want to be away for a long time on my first run.”

I leaned forward and kissed him, slowly, lightly. His scales rewarded me with a grudging flush as his anger slipped from his grasp. I bit his lower lip teasingly, which earned a *who do you think you’re kidding* look, and then I told him, “I’ll be fine. *Please* stop worrying so much.”

He leaned closer, his pupils constricting to a slight oval shape. His tail slid up the back of my thigh, over my ass, and along my spine. Before he could start worrying again—because there was a flush of color creeping over his shoulders, and he was about to talk himself out of doing this run—I asked, “When are you leaving?”

“Now. This is a short run.” He gave me the specific date he’d be back in 25XA Standard Time, which sounded like maybe an Earth week. I really needed to sit down and figure out how time passed on 25XA relative to Earth. Maybe I’d even be able to figure out how long I’d actually been gone. Keiron had warned me time across vast distances got a little strange when traveling at faster-than-light speeds through the sub-firmament, especially when traversing near exceptionally massive objects or the galactic core or at certain

“speeds” in not-normal space, and while I might (for example) have *experienced* being gone a certain number of months, time on Earth may have experienced a somewhat different amount of time. And that was before you got into the hot mess of different planets, having evolved different concepts of time.

Entire *wars* got fought over time in the Gestalt.

But I *did* understand the concept of *now*. He hauled scrap, and if someone needed something hauled *now* and was willing to pay for it, then he needed to head out *now*. “Then what are you still doing here?”

His scales shifted with a soft purple-blue shade, seeming to acquire a texture both velvety and shiny. His talon caressed the still-tender lymph node behind my neck, while his finger-pads pressed into my skin, careful to keep his claws from piercing me. “Lingering.”

Fuck. Way to make me melt into a puddle. “Well, go get to work and stop worrying. I can’t promise I won’t scar Taidc again and you’ll miss it.”

He chuckled and gave me a playful swat with his tail before getting back to his full height and quickly heading out the door.

It hurt when he left. Like half-melted candy pulling apart.

My not-cat flipped over and wriggled out of its basket, and gave me a head-butt and raspy meow-grunt as it rubbed against my spine.

I ran my hand over its ears, hating the strange, gutted ache.

“We’ll be fine, kitty,” I told my not-cat.

Fuck, I hoped it was true.

KEIRON

He would speak with Taidc before he left so there would be no misunderstanding, and he would not put Chess into the position of having to ask Taidc for an escort.

His two hearts fluttered and his tail tingled with tension, like the scales and plates had suddenly become too tight. Leaving her went against his instincts. She was still so new to 25XA; she knew nothing of the Gestalt, and the Gestalt had nearly taken her from him once. And she seemed so accepting of his leaving. It almost hurt.

Worries clouded his scales.

Taidc wasn't in the house—he was down beyond the barns in the old training courtyard that had been part of House 8 for generations. It crumbled now, the paint faded, the trees and vines and plants overgrowing the walls and panels, and while serviceable, the beauty of it had been left to erode under the suns and wind. He'd seen images of it when it'd been in its glory, but even by the time he and Taidc had been old enough to be taken to it to begin learning, the elements had begun their inevitable erosion.

And once there would have been many members of House 8 training, of all ages, but now there was just Taidc who persisted day after day. Many days, Keiron joined him, and of course, Erkus and Ahane, but Taidc was Second Scion. This was Taidc's business and duty, even if most of what Taidc did day by day was work the farm with Ahane and Erkus.

Of all of them, Taidc had probably lost the most of the life set before him when the House had truly collapsed. He had studied Higher Military Applications, the standard course for Second Scions, specializing in covert warfare and personal combat. That course of study had not been the standard

choices for people in his position, and despite the unconventional choices, he'd still been the top of his finalized class. Or would have been if that honor hadn't been denied him because of their House crumbling. He'd still been able to enter the provisional military for his obligatory service, earned "exemplary" status, the highest classification that was often not awarded at all. Taidc's "exemplary" had been the first awarded in the provisional service in the last eight crops. Keiron himself had earned a "distinguished," which was a significant accomplishment. Taidc should *easily* have secured himself a full commission, with multiple commanders looking to recruit his abilities.

Instead, he'd been told his *unconventional skillset* had prevented any interest.

Keiron had been in the military at the same time on a full commission, and when their idiot cousin had disgraced the House and ruined everything, he'd been discharged and told to *tend to family concerns*.

In return for leaving quietly and not appealing, Keiron had been able to keep his rank, commendations, and granted a "distinguished" discharge. Not that his rank and discharge class had any value beyond the small pension he received, and he knew better than to try to get his commission reactivated.

His original plan had been to secure his trinket, then use his mate's political connections to get his commission re-activated and his brother a commission and he'd rebuild House 8's dignity and connections from the military side while his mate dealt with planet-side politics, and eventually he'd be able to transition to his original objective of the Sciences.

Now, with the House in utter shambles, the only career option for Taidc was to become a mercenary.

The Mercenary Guild option *could* be a path to more dignified options, and had been the option for *many* over the eons as a way to improve position, but without a sponsor, Taidc would have had to start at the bottom with other military cast-offs and those with no other options or qualifications beyond they were familiar with the concept of violence. And a Second Scion coming up through the muck would have dismantled House 8. There was a saying that the Mercenary Guild was where Houses started and where they died.

Keiron had been able to use his own education for hauling, Ahane had applied his towards the farm, Ohade had contracted the Plague, and Erkus had been born to their poverty. Taidc had had his entire life reduced to ash.

His emerald-scaled brother moved through the short, sharp motions of a basic routine, dodging the swings and attacks of the training dummy. Keiron

paused to observe. He hadn't seen that particular dummy program before—looked sophisticated and menacing and quite modern. Not things that came cheaply, if you could even find them to buy at all. Off-the-shelf training programs were common, and everyone had them. They were better than nothing, but easy to counter and everyone knew them.

The *exotic* ones were more difficult to source and highly prized. Often, money could buy the algorithms, but frequently, prestige and connections were what obtained them.

Taidc had always found a way to obtain new upgrades to keep his skills honed. Keiron hadn't pried into how. Perhaps his brother still had connections from his provisional military enlistment time. He trusted Taidc to not imperil the House. He also marveled at how Taidc managed to get their old systems to work with new programs. Ahane helped with a number of repairs and hand-fashioning replacement parts, but training courts were constantly upgraded as combat evolved.

The sunlight passed through Taidc's scales, casting them a glowing yellow-green that passed into deep shadows as his brother moved in perfect, brutal coordination. Taidc always managed to make the business of violence elegant, supremely efficient, and exquisitely effective. There was a certain level of elegance and refinement expected in how Second Scions resolved conflict.

Taidc understood violence in all its many forms.

Taidc spun neatly on one foot towards him. His tail lashed like an emerald whip as it looped once around him and crossed his chest, hooking behind his left shoulder with an audible *click* of the bladed tip clamping against his scales. "Brother."

"New routine?"

Taidc's scales shifted like sunlight coming through a leafy canopy. He swished his tail back into its regular position. "Yes."

"I am leaving."

"As expected. And as needed."

Indeed. He had been delaying leaving on account of Chess, but he could delay no longer. "Chess has to go to the Ward to give blood for Ohade. You will accompany her when it is time."

Another nod from his brother. "I'm sure she's not happy about that."

"Not because she objects to your company. She asserts she is fully capable of finding her own way there. It is not *her* finding her way that

concerns me. It is what might find *her*.” Although Chess finding her way around *was* a concern, he simply wasn’t going to share it with his brother. The translators were unreliable with Human English, and *they* already had numerous misunderstandings. She might inadvertently give offense or end up somewhere she didn’t wish to be if she was on her own. Or she might be accosted as an errant Human when she was a Gestalt citizen.

She could disappear. Be taken. And he’d never find her in the labyrinthine Gestalt bureaucracy. First, because it would be difficult, and second, taking a citizen into custody would be a debacle no one would want to admit to and they’d cover it up.

His hearts beat harder. His scales sharpened slightly.

Taidc’s own scales darkened with minor annoyance. “You worry too much, brother. She is a maddening creature and I will not tell you I am *pleased* she is the mate the cosmos chose as your *perfect* mate. But I can’t deny that a cosmos-perfect pairing will also preserve our scales, if nothing else, and the little Human has more courage than anything that size and softness has any right to have.”

“Meaning that she is not over-awed?” Keiron gestured to his brother.

He huffed. “Was she so bold with you?”

Keiron suppressed a chuckle. “She had little to lose by being persistent. Are you stating that because *she* is perfect for *me* that I am not worthy of being Prime?”

Taidc huffed again. “If she ultimately proves to be Ohade’s salvation, then she is perfect. I am also saying the road to perfection, like the road to redemption, is long and uncertain.”

Keiron suppressed another chuckle, but the amusement brushed over his scales in a light blue tinge that made Taidc glower. A diplomat his brother was not. But they both needed to be guarded about Ohade’s prospect of recovery, and what might come out of the treatment made from Chess’ antibodies. They also had no idea how long Chess would *have* usable antibodies in her system, or how taxing surrendering her blood regularly would be.

“Be mindful with her, Taidc. She hasn’t recovered completely. There are still lingering symptoms, even though she dismisses them.”

Taidc nodded. His scales didn’t betray what he was thinking, nor did his tail.

“And keep an eye on her in general,” Keiron added.

Now his brother's scales shifted with minor annoyance. "She will be fine. You certainly fret more over leaving her for a short time than binding within her and rending her insides."

"I am *very* careful with her," Keiron snapped, tail lashing along the ground and shifting to a bladed point.

"Are you? I see some guilt. I have warned you over and over, she is *small*. So take your concerns and go on your run, but perhaps you should be more worried about what your cock will do. Not what the *absence* of your cock will do."

Keiron snarled. He had restrained himself and it *hurt* to fight the urge to give her what she craved and wanted from him, and try to twist it into giving her his tail instead. She enjoyed his tail. She *wanted* his honey and his cock and his savagery. Like she wanted *coffee*, and food that didn't disgust her, and probably a proper pair of shoes instead of the sandals Ahane had woven for her from grass. And he could not give her any of those things for an assortment of reasons. His cock was the one thing he *could* give her, except it was dangerous, and she wouldn't allow him to tend to her exhausted, soaking wet body after it was over.

His tail corkscrewed into a knot, the end turning into a cluster of metallic spikes. "*Look after her.*"

He snarled it in High Dialect, in the old way that conveyed a charge to the Second Scion of immense responsibility... and there would be serious consequences. Taidc's scales swished malachite green tipped with darkness at both base and tip.

Keiron walked away before he said anything else he might regret.

CHESS

“No, not-cat, you stay here,” I told my not-cat as I headed for the front door. It mewed at me and gave the air a few adorable murder-paw swipes. “I’ll bring you next time. Maybe.”

Taidc snorted and held the front door for me, then closed it behind me, giving my not-cat a little nudge with his foot when it tried to dart after me. He told it something in High Dialect that sounded like *go kill a gift for her* followed by a string of skin-peeling profanity.

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach. Okay, more... angry hornets.

The constant breeze that blew off the mountains pulled at my hair and dress hem, sending the open fields covered in orange-yellow grasses into a swept-over arch. On my feet I had sandals woven from the same tough grass by Ahane, while Taidc was going with the ever-popular 25XA option of barefoot.

Taidc glanced down at my homemade sandals.

“I like them,” I told the shadow on his scales. I did not, actually, *like* the sandals. I liked them in principle. They were scratchy and left little raw spots on my feet, but they *were* cute, and my skin could just get over it and callus over.

The pod glided up and opened its doors. About ten other unenthusiastic commuters, all 25XAs, were in the various seats. The only two seats together were next to a female with orange scales and directly in front of a male with shiny pewter scales. Most 25XA seemed to be varying shades of pewter and oranges, tinged with greens, blues, and violets.

Everyone glanced up at us with open curiosity and some nervousness. Taidc dropped into the seat to my left, blocking me from the orange female.

He glared at the pewter male across from us. I folded my hands in my lap and stared out the window behind the pewter's head while the bus (which had no driver) glided to the next stop.

I wasn't a stranger to the weirdness of public transport, and a space-bus-pod wasn't exactly a novel experience beyond there was no driver. It wasn't even flawlessly clean. There was a layer of dirt and dust and crumbs. Just sit and chill as the miles rolled by.

Halfway to the city, the pewter waved at me to get my attention.

Taidc leaned forward slightly. I put a hand on his chest to stop him while giving the pewter my best *I'm right HERE, jerk* expression. That seemed lost on the pewter, while his scales flushed bewildered, stormy shades of silver. Not sure how the color silver could look lost, but it did, and one of us was lost, but it wasn't me.

Not yet, anyway.

Taidc's scales washed a dry shade of emerald, if emeralds could be dry, and very clearly communicated *idiot*.

The pewter turned a tablet/phone gizmo around and brandished it in the general area of my face, and pointed at the screen with his talon.

On it was some sort of official looking chat bubble.

>> *Is this the Human?*

Under it was a 3D render of my face.

Taidc's dry emerald turned stormy black, and I grabbed his tail as it snaked between the seats to smack the pewter's tablet into the next town over. Taidc's tail writhed like a pointy snake in my palm. The pewter stubbornly refused to reconsider his life choices.

Reading the tablet was surreal, because I felt the translator whispering into my brain, except I was processing it as being read. Talk about... uncomfortable.

The pewter took it back, contemplated my 3D face versus my real face, then tapped *YES, THAT IS THE HUMAN*. Which was a big purple button.

I continued to indulge in my best resting bitch face while the tablet indulged in PLEASE WAIT. Taidc snaked his tail across his lap and it twitched against his thigh in impatient taps, shifting into half a dozen metallic bladed bangles that rattled. Keiron's tail made a noise like space bells, while Taidc's sounded like gravel and glass crunching.

So this guy reported me to the Gestalt as a lost and errant Human. Nice to know I hadn't hit the tabloids or the news.

I leaned into his personal space so I could look over his shoulder at his tablet. His scales flushed a pewter-purple of terror and mortification and shock, and his entire dragon-esque body tensed while he clutched his own ankle with his tail.

“Oh, come on,” I said pleasantly, which seemed to terrify him more and everyone on the bus within earshot looked at me, “Humans aren’t that scary, are we?”

The tablet spit out its response:

That Human is Francesca, use-name “Chess”, mate of Twilight Scion Keiron of House 8. Originally from Earth via Grey abduction and subsequent escape. Full Gestalt citizen in good standing, no caveats.

Current residence: Planet 25XA, House 8.

Current status: Lady-Scion of House 8.

Current Endorsement: Temple.

There is no need for concern. Thank you for your report.

Hey, good standing. I’d take it. Being a Gestalt citizen had its perks. One of them being I wasn’t in the care of a Gestalt bigwig and kept as a mindless pet. Sure as heck beat *bad* standing. Or “caveats,” which probably meant I needed to be leashed in public. Or whatever an “endorsement” was. Maybe that was like my sponsor or whose authority had gotten me citizen status.

I smiled at the 25XA and slid back towards my seat to act completely chill, and brushed my finger along the trinket on my ear to show yep, had one. The 25XA’s stormy shift in his pewter scales conveyed his disdain at what a sad little bit it was.

Ass.

He also didn’t answer my question on if Humans were scary. We were probably scary *and* disappointing at the same time.

Taidc’s tail snaked behind me and smacked the pewter on the side of the head. The sound it made made me jump until I realized it was just Taidc’s gravel/glass sound, and not the pewter’s skull turning to chips and dip.

Everyone on the pod resumed ignoring everyone else.

Taidc bowed his head as if he was going to say something, glanced to each side, then said nothing at all. His scales churned with a malachite storm of smug, dark amusement. Along with exasperation and humiliation and a tinge of a violent desire.

I glanced up at him out of the corner of my eyes.

Riiiiight.

I put it out of my mind as the stress coiled around my stomach and squeezed, and the tick in blood pressure sent a throb through my still-puffy lymph nodes and started a vague ache of loneliness for Earth, and what my family would think of this. I could more or less see what my new family thought of this.

I had no way to get word to Earth. The Gestalt kiddie shows (the adult public access channel didn't cover something this basic) had explained the way the Gestalt communication network worked. There were eight tiers of service that required specific infrastructure on each member planetary body/station/outpost/ship/whatever, and depending on your tier, and the tier of who you wanted to talk to, *and* the distance between those points determined what kind of limitations any given communication had. And once you got into the higher (meaning, slower) tiers, like four or five, or got into the biggest distances, there was lag, and eventually limitations.

Earth wasn't even *on* the network. And while it *was* possible to broadcast to targets that had (for whatever reason) fallen off the network or were not part of the network, there was a massive communication delay. The example I'd watched had been between Planet 25XA and an off-grid, off-beacon mining operation. Keiron had finally sat down to calculate that Earth was *60,000 light years from 25XA* (although the Gestalt thought a "light year" was a stupid unit of measurement) and I'd used that nugget of information to do some napkin math based on the example from the show.

Yeah.

Any message I managed to smuggle-cast from 25XA wouldn't reach Earth for *thousands* of years. Even a specially equipped communication ship in orbit around Earth would still take *years* to receive a message from 25XA. For the purpose of deep-space excursions to off-grid or under-served areas, or you know, for *armed conflicts*, special ships formed a sort of galactic pony express to relay messages rather than simply beam them.

And I finally could appreciate—like *really* get my brain around—what Keiron had tried to do by even *attempting* to find a way to smuggle me to Earth. The sheer *scope* of the problem. Even in the Gestalt, the galaxy was an infinitely large, big fucking place that would happily devour your existence.

The pod entered the city and pulled into its little pod-station. Everyone stood and filed out, neat and orderly, onto the street. The plague ward was

just four blocks over.

Fuck. I felt tiny. 25XAs were not a little species, and even the females were taller than I was by several solid inches, and strong. The males towered over me. Taidc was especially tall. There were other species too, some smaller, some bigger, but there was something about the sheer threatening dragon-esque bulk of 25XAs that made me feel *tiny*. And everyone sort of glanced at me like *the fuck is that*, with their scales washing pale shades in surprise.

Taidc glared at all of them, which did not help the situation.

“This way.” He held out one massive arm to herd me in the appropriate direction.

Time to get off the street before someone tried to take me to the pound.

Fortunately, the ward had been expecting us. There were a few other 25XAs there, clearly there to see family, and they glanced at me in shock. The nurse who had helped before instantly came over to me, her pale pink-orange scales mostly covered by her uniform, and said, “Your brother will be glad to see you.”

“I doubt that,” Taidc said darkly, his scales matching. “Ohade doesn’t like visitors.”

The nurse flushed. “Most family doesn’t visit. Many patients get forgotten. It’s not good for them.”

“We have not forgotten,” Taidc growled. “But Ohade doesn’t like visitors.”

“I am certain you cannot know your brother’s mind on such things, given he can barely speak and has no scales.” The nurse deserved a medal for standing up to Taidc.

Before Taidc could unleash a green storm on this nurse (and frankly, I wasn’t sure who would have won that fight), I stepped between them and presented the nurse the small basket Ahane had prepared for Ohade. “We brought him a few things.”

There wasn’t much to go around, and Ohade’s mouth was so ulcerated from the plague he couldn’t eat. But Ahane had still made Ohade soft worm-goop cubes flavored with Ohade’s favorite herbs. They melted under 25XA body temperature and Ohade would neither need to chew nor swallow to enjoy them. Hopefully his mouth had healed enough that simply putting one between his gums and cheek would not cause him agony.

The misery and despair and hopelessness of the ward crushed down on

my senses. No one had any energy for anything else in here.

“This way.” The nurse guided us down the hallways to the same room where my blood had originally been taken. Then she looked up at Taidc, who now held the small basket. “And I will take you upstairs to see your brother.”

Taidc nodded gravely.

The Doctor came in shortly afterwards, and before he started the blood draw, made me go through a few tests on the table (which made my skin crawl as my brain tried to remember the memories of the Greys, but couldn't find the damn things) to verify I wasn't pregnant.

“I'm not, right?” That would be... bad. Probably. Really bad.

“No. It appears your reproductive system is not active at the moment either, although we are not experts on Human anatomy. In most taproot species—which Humanity appears to be—the plague shuts down ovarian and ovarian-analogous function for some time, even after recovery.”

“That's fine with me,” I said.

We exchanged a few more details, and he got to the blood draw, checking the initial draw to make sure I still had antibodies (yep), then doing another draw from the nodes along my spine and back of my head for more juicy immune cells. Then on to the big needle and the actual blood donation. He didn't tell me much about Ohade, except that it appeared the treatments were still effective, and Ohade's condition *seemed* to have continued a slow but steady improvement.

He was quite guarded telling me all that, his scales washed to a deep stormy pewter shade. His vibe didn't seem to be he was being deceptive or evasive, just dancing that fine line about how much to tell me before I declared all this a great success. Nope, I knew we were a *long* way from being able to declare this a success. This wasn't a success until Ohade no longer needed transfusions, healed enough to return home and enjoy life, *and* we could replicate it on other patients.

The doctor wasn't using my blood on any other patients. That would be a *huge* ethical breach that would contaminate any hope of the perks of a Great Discovery. The cat would be out of the bag and the diluted glory up for grabs. To the Gestalt, there was *no* reason to rush or take short cuts. When the time came to analyze if you got a Great Discovery merit badge, *everyone* would be looking to make sure you didn't get it (then they could swoop in and poach the glory), so you did it *right*.

Erkus was of the opinion that if Human antibodies proved to be a

“miracle” cure for the plague, or even if they could be used to develop a vaccine, that it wouldn’t just be a Great Discovery. It would be an *Ascendant* Discovery. The other brothers disagreed, since Ascendant Discoveries were apparently things that had changed the Gestalt forever. The Gestalt probably would not be permanently changed by the plague having a widely available and highly effective treatment. But the fact it was even something they argued about over the dinner table seemed pretty impressive. The last Ascendant Discovery had been back when Humanity had used twigs as toothbrushes.

Erkus had joked *so we’re due, is what you’re saying*.

The doctor asked me a bunch of questions while my blood poured down the tube. He seemed genuinely curious about Humanity, mostly fascinated by the ability for Humans to lose or gain weight, and wanted to know *all* about that. He was especially interested in my appendix. Apparently Gestalt humanoid (strangely translated as “taproot” for some reason) species didn’t have an appendix, and at first he had thought my appendix was a completely different organ that taproot species *did* have that prevented starvation. Ours was in the same place, but absolutely tiny by comparison. He had been very concerned that I had been starved by the Greys given the “depleted” state of an organ that should have been five or six times larger.

“They used to think it was vestigial,” I said, “but they discovered not long ago that it’s actually part of the immune system. It stores gut bacteria and immune cells. People have to have it taken out a lot. It gets infected and can rupture and kill you.”

“Fascinating,” he said. “What happens when it’s removed?”

“Nothing, really. I mean, it *is* part of the immune system, but they’re still studying how compromised you are if it gets removed.”

“Because my thinking is that it has been repurposed as an organ. What we use to ward off starvation has been re-purposed.”

“You mean Humans were bio-engineered?” Like the *Greys*?

His scales went dark with a stormy, thoughtful frown. “Yes, but that would take *many* generations. Clearly, Humanity is from the same general root as the rest of the Gestalt, but you diverged significantly a very long time ago. I am going to take some samples, if you don’t mind.”

“Go for it.”

He used a very long, slender probe-needle situation to spear some of the contents of my appendix. “It is also possible you simply evolved differently

to meet the conditions of Earth and its notoriously expansive biodiversity. The Gestalt has had many struggles with bio and genetic engineering, and it is, even now, an imperfect science that is very fragile, and history has shown us that the consequences, in the long term, are usually dire.”

“Exhibit A: the Greys.”

“Precisely. They were a marvel at first, but creation does not give up its secrets willingly. For Humanity to be an example of truly successful and highly sophisticated bio-engineering from the Gestalt’s antiquity would be shocking. You are not even something we could accomplish today. The Greys are the most successful—if we care to call it that—example in the Gestalt, and they are largely considered a warning that the consequences in thirty generations can be unforeseen and devastating.”

“Or regular old evolution,” I said. “Perhaps Earth was just some weird terrarium experiment.”

Now his scales turned an even more stormy shade, tinged with purple. “That would be more plausible, yet still astonishing and require much study. Earth is *very* far from any part of the Gestalt that was ever officially explored, or even rumored to have been explored.”

Translation: *skeptical*. I didn’t want him getting nervous while he had a needle in my belly. “I’m fine with focusing on the plague. All the rest is interesting but practical applications, right? We all want that sweet, sweet Great Discovery.”

His scales washed paler with relief that I wasn’t asking him to tell me about what the hell had been up with Humans. He just wanted to go about his plague-related business. And I was fine with that. Note to self: don’t strike up casual conversations about Humanity. Make Humanity seem like basic bio-putty with nothing particularly interesting about it beyond a few quirks of evolution.

I wasn’t fundamentally opposed to the idea that Humans had been genetically engineered by an ancient advanced alien civilization for some unknown purpose.

I also was not keen to let the Gestalt start doing research to figure out *which* ancient advanced alien civilization had done it and for what purpose.

Nope. We could all just agree that Humanity had been a happy accident. Just like my mom had often told me, *I* had been a happy accident.

Or a not so happy accident, depending on what sort of mood she’d been in.

The doctor took some more samples with the long probe-needle-gizmo while I studied the patterns in the polished ceiling and hummed to myself, because if I didn't keep my mind on something else, it tried to reconnect to the memories of being in the Grey ship. I didn't remember most of it, but according to Keiron, the memories were still there, the pathways had just been severed. My brain, apparently, wanted to do some renovations.

The doctor finished what he was doing, his scales making thoughtful patterns while he pondered the blood in the swirly machine. His assistant came and offered me a few jelly-like cubes of food that had the same consistency as chicken fat, and tasted like mulch. I managed to gulp one down without chewing, but couldn't stomach the rest. Between what got served at dinner, the herb garden, and clinic snacks, 25XA was not exactly serving up food to please Humans.

Taidc was waiting outside the little room when I was done. His scales swirled with beautiful green patterns, like sunlight through leaves. The little basket was nowhere to be seen.

"How is Ohade?" I asked immediately, sensing that he was full of cheery good news.

"He is... improved," Taidc said, like he didn't know how to say the word for *improved* and had forgotten what hope might sound like.

"Is he?" I whispered.

"He can eat," Taidc said, hushed. "And he is in a much better room. And..."

He fell silent and stared at me.

I smiled. "I am so glad."

Taidc's scales darkened with thought.

Time to go. Taidc wasn't on speaking terms with his softer emotions.

The wind had picked up and chased the nice warm autumn morning into a chilly autumn afternoon. A couple of 25XAs startled seeing me emerge from the clinic. We ignored them and wove our way down the street back towards the pod-stop for the pod-line that would take us out of the city and back to the farm.

I *briefly* debated getting on a random pod and using it to tour the city, since the pods were free, *buttttt* a stray Human wandering the Temple City was probably pretty dangerous. I was already getting *holy shit, the fuck* looks, and it wasn't my personal style getting the attention.

Plus Big Green Meanie there would probably drag me back to the farm

over his shoulder. And while *Keiron* doing that could be extremely entertaining, Taidc doing it would be no fun for anyone, up to and including the onlookers.

I glanced up at the *huge* sky. The sky on 25XA gave me the creeps, like deep in my spine, and every instinct begged me to look away. Strange, gray-green clouds swept up very high, oddly different from Earth clouds, twisting and writhing in the upper atmosphere like snakes. The sky was its usual shade, just dim because of the growing cloud-haze, although the bright spots of the Alignment remained visible, leading like a glowing pearl necklace into the heavens.

Nope.

I looked away, but not fast enough. The glowing pearls stabbed through my eyeballs and into my brain before I could break the contact. I stumbled backwards as everything spun (or was *I* spinning? I might have been spinning) and next thing I knew, I was on the concrete in a heap while my brain kept on spinning.

A dozen voices crammed into my head while the translator just beeped [UNABLE TO TRANSLATE. UNABLE. UNABLE.]

Taidc had caught me, so I hadn't face-planted onto the concrete (or whatever it was), but dropping into his grumpy green arms was not exactly fun for either of us.

The pearl necklace burned into my retinas like bright lights. But the stars weren't that bright. Were they?

My ears told me I was tilting and spinning while I looked at an assortment of feet and sidewalk and legs and Taidc's massive green claw around my left arm while he had me against his chest.

"I'm alright," I said, although I was woozy as hell and my brain felt scrambled, and there were too many damn *people* all around. I made the mistake of looking up, got a view of the sky with the alignment, and gasped as the line of stars seemed to plunge down right into my chest like a celestial javelin thrown by an angry god. I flopped around again before my brain stopped doing pirouettes and somehow I managed to get back to my feet, albeit with Taidc helping.

Well, this was embarrassing.

Taidc's tail whipped in the space between me and the onlookers, creating space. One arm hovered behind my back, the other—

Oh, the other had some poor bastard by the neck.

“You are not required,” Taidc told the blue-silver 25XA male that had gotten *way* too close. “Step. Back.”

The silver-blue pulled back, freeing himself from Taidc’s emerald grip.

The pod approached.

The escape car had arrived. Time to pour myself into it and let it cart me back to the farmhouse.

The chatter of voices continued while the translator whined at me about being unable to translate and the cacophony was not helping. I fought the urge to look back at the stars to figure out what it was about them, because clearly, whatever it was, it did not agree with me. Maybe it was just the act of tilting my head back, considering the nodes along the back of my neck and spine were still swollen, and it cut off blood flow or squished nerves or pushed on my ears.

Vertigo sucked.

I managed to remain upright until the pod approached and somehow got myself onto the pod and deposited myself into a seat without Taidc having to do it for me.

Ug. This was like being *very* drunk. That very drunk when you just want to lie down because everything was kind of spinning.

I propped myself up against the side of the pod in the classic college student fashion and tuned out for the long ride back to the farm. A private or express or even “semi-express” pod would have been zippy-quick, but not free. The outbound free pods served certain routes on certain time tables, trundling around their service area scooping up passengers until the AI determined it had reached maximum “efficient capacity” and calculated a route to get everyone to their destination. You could tell the AI where you were going (and if it determined it *wasn’t* going to go there, or there was a “more efficient” pod that would be along because all the pods were connected in a terrifying hive mind of pods, it’d tell you to get a different pod), or it would just assume you wanted to return to your origin point.

But at the end of the day, public transit was public transit. Be it bus, train, subway, ferry, rideshare, carpool, vanpool, or space-pod.

The weird woozy feeling improved mostly by the time the pod glided up to the farm, but the pressure of the sky and the strange sensation of *look at me* coupled with my lizard brain going *fuck you, no, I’m not* was exhausting.

Cat-kit waited faithfully just inside the gate and grunt-rasp-mewed at me.

“I’m okay,” I told it. “Let’s go lay down.”

My neck felt like there was a stick across it. Or maybe that was the sky glaring at me.

“Chess,” Taidc said.

“I really am,” I said. “I just need to lie down. I’m tired. And the doctor took a sample from my appendix.”

“Your *what*? Did you consent?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Please don’t, Taidc. You’re too big to get fussy.” Taidc’s angry worry and concern were too much to handle and felt like it smothered me.

Taidc escorted me to my room and observed (stiffly) while I flopped onto bed. Then he (stiffly) pulled a blanket around me. The not-cat was more than happy to take over nursing duties by offering some licks with his rough tongue, then settled down like a hot water bottle across my shoulders.

CHESSE/KEIRON

Taidc came to get me for dinner. I was not hungry and still out of sorts. Didn't even feel inclined to give him the usual poke in the scales, and I must have looked sort of like paste, because he didn't hassle me.

But there was... a *worm*... on my plate.

Technically, half a worm. Like cut right down the middle. A pasty-white-gray fleshy worm that had a finger-sized hole running through it because Ahane cored them like apples before cooking them. So it looked like I'd been served the most plain creamed-tuna-in-aspic jelly mould from some ninth level of vintage food hell, complete with tiny dark tunnel into the depths of said hell.

I managed to not gag, and instead sat down in my usual seat and picked up my fork. Taidc took his seat while Ahane finished serving worms. The other half of "my" worm remained on the serving tray.

I took a bite of root chunks to get started and tried to ignore the worm on my plate. But when I went to slice into the worm to take a bite, the way the fork slid through the flesh and the way it moved...

Nope.

I took a sip of my water to quiet the tickle trying to turn into a gag in the back of my throat and practiced the fine art of having my fork in the general vicinity of my food while not actually eating.

Taidc, however, noticed. "Perhaps this is a permutation of plague in Humans."

My aversion to worms pre-dated my infection by a goodly span. My brain felt dizzy as his scales shifted shades to tell me that while he was being a dick, he was also sort of concerned at the same time. So he was being a dick

to hide his concern. "It's not the plague."

"You don't know that."

Nope, I didn't. But neither did he, and if he was trying to bait me into asking someone to please puree my worms, it wouldn't work. "Maybe it's some weird permutation of Keiron's far away and I'm Human."

"That is probably more likely," Erkus said. "Or you are simply weak after having blood drawn. Or a combination of all of those things."

"What is this *appendix* the doctor took a sample from?" Taidc demanded.

"It's a Human organ they thought was vestigial but is part of our immune system. Humans survive just fine without one. It has to be removed a lot of the time anyway."

"Does *yours* need to be removed?" Ahane asked.

"No." My cat, sitting just by my feet, rolled over to show its belly like it sensed I needed something to look at.

"Are you sure?"

"They get infected and cause excruciating pain and have to be removed in emergency surgery. I do not plan on surviving the Greys just to die to appendicitis on another planet, so I'd definitely tell you guys if I thought it was my appendix."

"Perhaps your outing today was too much stress for you," Taidc said, like I was a fragile little creature.

"I can handle riding a space-bus," I said irritably.

"Apparently, it puts an immense strain on you."

Ahane set down the final plate and grumbled something in agreement with Taidc. Erkus made a mild *mmm* noise. "Perhaps Keiron being far away is more than a Human has evolved to endure. He's left the system, hasn't he?"

"Speaking of the system, what *is* that Alignment thing?" I rubbed my forehead and tried not to think about the celestial javelin. The mental image was speared into my brain and made my mind whirl around it like a maypole.

"An alignment of stars, obviously," Taidc said.

"Like does it *do* anything?"

"No, it's just a celestial phenomenon where the stars and planets align with the center of the galaxy."

Erkus sighed at his brother, and Ahane's scales turned a ruddy shade of sunset. Ahane told me, "That is, essentially, what it is. But it's also how all of the Gestalt agrees on time. Almost every planet that's now in the Gestalt can

see that Alignment, and it all had meaning. It's the *one* thing we agree on with time-keeping and how we calibrate all our clocks and calendars. So when it comes around, it's symbolic."

Taidc leaned on the table. "Exactly. It's *symbolic*."

"It's practical as well," Ahane retorted.

"It happens too many eons apart to have any *practical* value," Taidc said.

Erkus threw up his claws and his tail made a metallic sound as the tip splintered into a fan-shape. Ahane and Taidc both leaned back at the metallic *swish* noise it made. "Wars have been settled by the Alignment. The Alignment has *prevented* wars. It *has* practical value, [EXTREMELY VILE INSULT]."

Ahane turned the color of a Hawaiian sunset while the insult bounced off Taidc's scales.

Erkus went on with his fan-tipped tail swishing back and forth like an angry cobra. "The Gestalt's entire *system* of time is fundamentally based off the Alignment. It's precisely like Humans measuring time according to the motion of the planet and its host star."

"Never realized you were so passionate about cosmic time scales," Ahane said mildly.

Taidc pointed his fork-spoon at his aggravated youngest brother. "And the actual *Alignment* itself is a single moment that is *entirely* symbolic. Perhaps Keiron could explain it better, as the Higher Sciences are his concern."

"Both of you shut the [VILE INSULT] up," Ahane demanded.

I was losing track of what they were actually arguing about. My translator kept bleating in attempts at context to the various insults and pejoratives being flung around the table.

"It's his business to understand the motion and behavior of celestial bodies," Taidc said darkly. "It's not insulting to say the High Sciences are built on understanding established eons ago. He needs a fundamental understanding of that to do what he does. Perhaps *you* should not always take me for being a thorn in his flank."

"Perhaps you should not always *be* a thorn in his flank."

"That is just my charming personality." Taidc sipped his tea. His scales were dark, but the tips were a pale emerald shade—his feelings were a bit hurt that his brothers instantly thought he was being a jerk. I got it. I sometimes came off the wrong way too. His brothers didn't seem to notice.

Taidc's gaze slid my way. "Eat."

"I'm good." The food was too *I know what I'm eating*, and the smell of the sauce on their worms was a bit too reminiscent of that revolting cube they'd fed me at the clinic, as was the texture of the worm itself. My body threatened to go into full aggressive *NOPE* mode even thinking about the cube.

That had to be it. I had some sort of food poisoning or something.

The brothers didn't nag me to clear my plate, and they split the remaining portion of my worm-half between themselves. As for my untouched meal, Ahane just told me, "Feed it to your pet."

His scales were the color of an angry scab. He refused to even use the word *cat* around my pet.

I put my plate under the table.

My cat-kit was happy to devour it. Which involved melting back its lips and extending its jaw forward like an Earth shark to scarf up all the food in one terrifying bolt.

Ahane just rolled his eyes in disgust.

[*EXTREME PROFANITY*]

"Come on," I told my pet. I held out my arms to it. It went *mep!* and obediently leapt into my grasp, landing gently, because 25XA cats were not small or lightweight beasts. He was all muscle and murder claws. But he somehow could land feather-light. I snuggled my face into his velvety coat and my throat stopped trying to remember the taste of those awful cubes. "Let's go sleep off whatever those crummy cubes were. Because they are *not* sitting right."



Keiron stared at the endless black void.

There were worse things than boring runs that involved a nice, predictable transit between beacons and the ship flew itself and handled all the necessary frequency calls and communications.

Boring meant *safe* and *high probability of a good outcome*.

Normally, he brought some reading or something to occupy the time, but the boredom was sometimes too consuming.

And this seemed more boring than usual.

It took him some time to figure out why, but he attributed it to Chess' absence. She was like constant noise and motion, even when she was sitting perfectly still and quiet. She always seemed in motion. Tiny little motions, mostly confined to the constant movements of her eyes, but there was an energy to her as well. Her mind constantly processing shreds of information. He had not realized how much *noise* she made until the song wasn't there any longer.

He pondered the trinket on his ear.

Not that it was auditory noise. It was a different kind of noise that permeated his awareness. And made him very much aware of the beating of his hearts in a rather empty ship. How did such a small creature occupy so much *space*?

So was that the vibrations—the song—of having found his perfect cosmic mate, or that his mate was—as much as she claimed she was not—a powerful psy?

Or perhaps both?

He had never heard of mates being able to *hear* the song of the cosmos. But then again, he'd also never really looked into mates that existed in perfect resonance. Could she access that song? Did the cosmos respond to her psy abilities? Humans *clearly* had access to the cosmos in a way no other species in the galaxy did, while denying psy powers existed at all. Or, worse, they attributed psy abilities to “demons,” which sounded like transdimensional entities of some variety.

That thought was too horrifying to contemplate, and he had absolutely not included such information in his updates to the Gestalt files on Humanity. Earth having contact with transdimensional entities may have calamitous outcomes, even if that contact had been in their distant past. The system was already strictly off-limits. There was no reason to bring more trouble upon it. Although the Greys tampering might have calamitous results.

He *could* advise the Gestalt to keep the system under close observation. Transdimensional rifts—even small ones—could be detected if an area was being monitored. Such monitoring had not been done (to his knowledge) for an extremely long time, but the technology and ability did exist. A species attempting to open a rift large enough to be of any actual practical use would easily be discovered, and the entire collective fury of the Gestalt would descend upon them.

But even advising the Gestalt he had reason to request the system be

monitored would likely come at great peril, and he had no way to obfuscate his true reasons for requesting it. If he had still been in the Higher Sciences or military, yes, but his current circumstances would lead only to Chess.

Ancient Gestalt history warned *no* good could ever come from parting the curtain of the cosmos. Academic study of rifts wasn't forbidden. Anything outside of academia was an Escalated Zero+ Crime. Not even the Greys meddled with parting reality's membrane.

The Greys may or may not have been aware of Human psy abilities, but if they were, they had to have dismissed Humanity's abilities as lacking practical use. The idea that Humanity was extremely powerful latent pys unaware of their own abilities was more of an unconfirmed curiosity and overshadowed by their more obvious and impressive biological adaptations, like blood, tissue, and even organ interoperability.

It had taken him having a very specific conversation with Chess to even glean clues that triggered his concern at all. The Greys wouldn't be having those conversations, and Gestalt Enforcement mind-mapping procedures performed on recovered Humans had been focused on gathering criminal evidence and left the already compromised Humans with even more mangled neural pathways.

The Greys were cheap, but they weren't so cheap they'd knowingly have contact with a species that *may* have had transdimensional contact or, worse, actual interaction.

The Gestalt would mount an expedition to eradicate anything Human, be it trace DNA, the Greys, the species...

And Chess.

He may be the only person in the Gestalt with knowledge that the Greys may be, unknowingly, interacting with a system that had had transdimensional interactions.

Chess assured him that modern Humanity dismissed "demons" as stories to frighten children. Older accounts of Gestalt Humans firmly established *those* Humans believed demons were real, but no actual historical accounts had ever been recorded outside of religious texts. Many Gestalt species had similar stories of deities and their minions meddling in mortal lives, so those Humans had been dismissed as having the same type of superstitions. He would have done the same thing.

Except he knew two things: Humans denied psy abilities were real, and they were skeptical other dimensions even existed. And *those* two pieces of

data spun everything, because Humanity *had* a concept of dimensions *and* they knew every permutation of psy ability. Yet Humanity had not discovered other dimensions or psy abilities. So if they had not discovered these things, *how did they have such specific and prevalent concepts of them?*

One possible answer? Memories encoded into DNA, and collective ancestral memory. So if Humanity *had* had contact with transdimensional entities in the past, that could have been seared into their collective existence. Like the fundamental instinctual respect for the dangers of fire and deep water and dark places.

On the other hand, Humans *could* fall in love on their own. And while he had no doubt at all Humans were powerful pys, they also were clearly a unique variety of psy—which was why the Gestalt had likely labeled them as potentially a “proto” or “latent” psy. Not realizing (because they’d never dealt with a Human who wasn’t grossly damaged) that there was nothing prototypical or latent about Humanity’s highly sophisticated and evolved abilities.

Humanity may have evolved as an extremely unusual clairvoyant that naturally had access to primal universal knowledge at an instinctual level, and lacked the scientific advancement necessary to establish its existence and parameters. Considering it seemed as though much of Humanity was largely focused on finding their mates, and how much of their brain’s processing was devoted to parsing vast amounts of data to read social and environmental cues, and the apparent adversarial relationship many Humans had with other Humans, it was not a far leap to consider the species’ mental resources to devote to Higher Sciences were somewhat limited.

Had Earth been colonized, perhaps, by the early order that eventually became the Temple Priests?

Ping ping ping

He jarred out of his thoughts and scanned the controls.

[TAIDC]

Why is your Human not eating?

Why was his brother contacting him for something like *that*? He was out of system. Why the *hell* was Taidc spending money to exchange Tier 3 priority texts with him? He racked his brain. Chess wasn’t eating. Had the plague caused her to relapse?

[KEIRON]

Have you ASKED her?

The delay aggravated him, but he was compelled to wait twenty minutes. Taidc spending anything on even *this* level of exchange pissed him off further.

[TAIDC]

I am asking YOU first. I do not want to upset her with needless fussing if this is standard Human behavior.

Keiron wrung his tail in frustration and growled. Was something wrong with Chess? What was Taidc *actually* asking for? These messages were unencrypted, so Taidc wasn't going to reveal Chess having had the plague or that his mate was unwell.

[KEIRON]

Did you puree her worms?

[TAIDC]

She has teeth and a lower mandible. Her teeth are not very sharp, but they are sufficient to chew worms.

[KEIRON]

We discussed this.

[TAIDC]

You giving orders is not a discussion.

[KEIRON]

Stop being petty.

[TAIDC]

She also refused her other food. She is too thin and you need to stop humoring this. Unless you have become like a Human and prefer this spindle-waif look. Because if so, I will assist and inform her she is too fat. She assures me she can be much thinner than she is.

[KEIRON]

Puree her worms or I will tell her to say mean things to you. Remember what happened last time. You stared into the pond until I found you.

The next message was so delayed Keiron thought his brother had stormed out of the communication station, but an hour later, a response came through,

slightly lower priority, and cursed rather creatively in High Dialect at him.

Keiron reached across his console. Taidc wouldn't have contacted him with something that petty if there hadn't been something more serious going on. His brother being absurd about preparing Chess' food *was* absurd, but Taidc concealing extreme concern under the cloak of petty absurdity made much more sense than his brother simply wasting money to be petty.

Time to increase speed. The added fuel burn would consume almost all the profit in this run, but he was needed back home.

KEIRON

Taidc pulled him aside as he came into the house. Then he dragged him down the corridors and the stairs to the Second Scion's apartments.

Keiron shoved his face close to his brother's. "What's wrong?"

Taidc placed a hand over Keiron's chest. "Brother."

Keiron saw it in the forest/emerald swirl of his brother's scales. Only family concerns conjured that soft leafy shade of swirls. "It's Chess, isn't it. Did she relapse? You should have told me plainly that there was an emergency instead of playing games about worms! I would have not completed the run at all!"

He'd completed the run and delivered the cargo, albeit at a speed that robbed him of any profit, but had he not delivered it, it would have been a total loss and penalty for failure to deliver. Taidc hadn't said outright it was an emergency, but if his brother had chosen the wrong time to mince words...

"There was a strange incident when we went to see Ohade," Taidc said.

His scales thickened and sharpened. "What incident? I sent you with her to *prevent* incidents."

"Will you let me *finish*? She's fine *now*, I think. We were on our way back to the pod station when she looked up at the sky—the Alignment, specifically—got very dizzy and fainted. She thinks the food they gave her at the clinic did not agree with her. She did not eat well at all for some time. We were very concerned. The doctors also took samples of another one of her organs." Taidc's scales swirled with worry.

Keiron reined in his seething emotions until they were storms of blue. "The Alignment unnerves her, and she finds our food barely tolerable under

the best of circumstances. You should never have forced the issue!”

“I admit our fault in that,” Taidc said irritably. “We wanted to gauge how much coddling she actually required.”

“Coddling! She escaped the Greys and climbed through garbage to do it and infected herself with the plague and you think she exaggerates what she *needs*? You knew she was unwell and had just fainted and you took *that* time to test it?!”

“We *knew*? We did not know! Perhaps to you it’s obvious, but to us she is the same unemotional unchanging... fleshy... *sentient* at the table!” Taidc hissed back. “We only know what she tells us, and the rest we have to guess! She told us she was fine.”

“Chess always says that! She was *in the throes of the plague and told me she’d be fine!*”

Taidc switched to High Dialect so his meaning wouldn’t be lost. “And she was, ultimately, fine.”

“My mate is not a *malingerer!*” Keiron snarled. “The least you can do is puree her *fucking* worms! Unless you are telling me you think the clinic poisoned her? Harmed her? You *clearly* have little confidence at this point that she is ‘fine,’ although if she hasn’t been eating because of *you*, I’m not certain you aren’t here trying to make an excuse for her condition!”

“I am not making excuses for her condition or my actions. But we should make certain she’s not carrying young, which is a distinct risk *you* have imposed upon her multiple times. She can’t be donating blood or body parts to Ohade if she is.” Taidc did not mention the other obvious concern: that Chess may have had the plague while pregnant. The results could have been devastating for the little embryo, and it would only end in inevitable tragedy if she currently carried young.

Surely, the Doctors would have seen that in her bloodwork. Right?

Perhaps not.

He gathered himself as his scales washed pale. Humans were tough and adaptable, and the documentation he had from the Gestalt secret vaults on the matter demonstrated Human females ceased to be fertile in times of extreme stress. Chess had also not liked the Alignment for whatever reason, which he had found peculiar but of little regard in the moment. She seemed to avoid looking up at the sky, though. Did all Humans not like to look at the sky? Had they been conditioned to not look at stars? Was that why their technology had developed so slowly? Did it take great and immeasurable

courage and conditioning to contemplate the stars, like they instinctively found worms unacceptable foodstuffs?

All the worries about transdimensional rift exposure assaulted him. Taidc, in a rare moment of pity, said with unfamiliar kindness, “But perhaps we are worried over nothing and I am a fool.”

His brother was *not* a fool. Keiron grappled with himself. “What did they feed her at the clinic?”

“A typical cube. She said the texture and flavor were highly objectionable. Perhaps there was something in the flavoring that *was* slightly toxic to her system?”

Keiron lashed his tail. If so, he needed to know what the flavoring had been, so she never ate it again. “Did you start to puree her worms as I directed?”

“Yes. Or specifically, Ahane. But she still is not eating well. I believe she is even smaller.”

His anxiety washed even paler. *Smaller?*

“She sometimes fed her portions to her cat.” Taidc added. “We speculated that if she’s not pregnant, and she’s not poisoned, perhaps she cannot be separated from you. There are species that cannot endure the stress of long range separation, and perhaps Humans are even less tolerant. They never went farther than their singular moon, correct?”

She fed the *cat*? Chess barely got enough calories and nutrients as it was. She could not be feeding her unfinished portions to the *cat*. The cat could hunt its own meals. “No, and my understanding is even that was something they accomplished and did not do again.”

Taidc’s scales didn’t turn to their usual green, indicating his brother was deeply concerned. “Then perhaps Humanity has evolved such that their mate is always on the same planet, and she’s under immense strain when you’re out of system.”

It had been so quiet without her. He had sensed it. Had the quiet affected her as well? That would be *extremely* inconvenient for the family. Devastating, really. He could take her with him, of course, but that was no life for her. Becoming a professional gambler would draw a great deal of attention...

He left Taidc and went to find Chess.

It could simply be she had been stressed by going to the city without him as her escort. The strain of large groups, unfamiliar places, unfamiliar sights,

smells, expectations, anticipation of the blood draw, managing Taidc's less than charming company. Add into that the fact that Chess was either a latent psy or untrained psy with no way to consciously control her abilities. On Earth, this was likely not a problem, given all other Humans were presumably guarding their own thoughts and there was a fair amount of psychic restraint that came naturally. But on a planet like 25XA, the psychic noise would be overwhelming in a city full of non-psys with unguarded thoughts.

Chess herself still denied she had psy abilities at all, and her "psy powers" were simply Humanity's highly sophisticated, naturally-evolved ability to read subtle physical cues and "microexpressions."

But even if she was not psy, her mannerisms and expressions were so small, subtle, and slight that if *that* was what she was conditioned to, the Gestalt must still have been an overwhelming parade of color, motion, lights, and sound.

Or perhaps she had simply been depleted from giving blood, or additional samples, or what she had been fed had upset her Human system and been mildly toxic. Or some combination thereof.

No need for extreme concern. *Yet.*

He found Chess in her room, watching the video screens and working on her thrifting. Her cat lounged upside down in a basket, striped stomach exposed to the sunlight, clenching and unclenching its paws while it dozed.

Lazy beast.

"Keiron!"

Her voice wasn't the sweetest. It was rough and uneven and harsh the way she said his name, but his hearts swelled anyway.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, so she didn't have to get up. He clutched her face in his hands and spoke in High Dialect. "*Wonderful love, I am returned to you.*"

She was not very colorful, but her smile dazzled him, and the humming, buzzing, dazzling presence that she had.

He sighed as he gathered her close. Was she thinner? Perhaps, maybe. She always felt thin and frail to him, no matter how much she insisted she was substantial for a Human woman. She had certainly not regained her mass in the time he had been gone.

She snuggled into his embrace. "Did the run go well? You're back sooner than expected!"

So Taidc had not told Chess about their conversation. He opted to not tell her he had hurried and stripped all profit from the run. He would have to make it up soon, though. “It was without complications or difficulty.”

“No more Humans in the scrap?”

“Of course not!” He peered down at her. “You are teasing.”

She smiled. She was so *bright*. “Yep. Teasing.”

He kissed her lightly, resisting the temptation of her soft lips and the sweep of her tongue against his. His cock throbbed at a welcome so sweet he tasted it and smelled it on her salty, pure scent.

With effort, he drew away. “Did you miss me, *little love*?”

She shivered with pleasure at the High Dialect endearment. “Yes.”

“It was not too distressing without my presence?”

“I’ve got my not-cat to keep me company.” Her smile was mischievous.

“Then you have no need for me?”

“Well...” She glanced down at him, then back at him, and gave him a wicked smile.

He smoothed his claw along the back of her neck. The swellings there were still present, but seemed slightly smaller. Perhaps she would not recover completely from the plague, and this was what the second stage was for a human. “You are well? You haven’t been sick? Taidc told me about how you fainted.”

She pulled out of his grip, threw up her hands, and rolled her eyes while groaning. “It was stupid and I am fine. Why did he even mention it...”

“Your cat looks fatter. You look thinner.” Her cat *did* look like it had been eating very well. That striped belly looked fat as a milk-drunk kit-kit-kit.

“I’m *fine*. I feel fine. Can we not talk about it? I’m so embarrassed.”

“I would believe you if Taidc had told me you ate well in my absence.”

She glared at him. “Taidc’s a tattle.”

[*Tattle: to report on another’s wrongdoing or mischief, but to do so for petty and self-serving reasons, hoping to get the other party into some sort of difficulty.*]

“Taidc is not a tattle.” His brother had told him out of genuine worry, not to be petty. “You’ve had the plague. And I can still feel these nodes.” He caressed the swellings along her spine again with his claw. “Taidc was very worried. His concern is you conceived.”

She sighed. “I’m not pregnant, Keiron.”

“Humans know these things naturally?” Some species did know at the exact moment they conceived.

Something about her expression conveyed minor impatience. The way she held her lips, perhaps? “No, the Doctor at the Ward checks before I give blood. My ovaries are not doing a thing right now. No babies.”

The relief washed his scales back to their twilight hue and his tail unclenched from its knot. There was not very much information on the specifics of how much blood a Human could lose at a time without a deleterious effect, or how long it took to recover, or how frequent was dangerous. Everything was little more than an educated guess, and scraps of information Chess had been able to supply based on her own information from having donated blood back on Earth.

Apparently, healthy Humans could give up to one “pint” of blood roughly every two Earth months (Humans did not agree on the safest interval, and it was not clear what an Earth “month” was in Gestalt Standard Time Units). The Gestalt had no conversion for what a “pint” was, but Chess had known the average-sized Human adult body contained ten of these “pints” of blood. Which matched with the Gestalt information that a Human could remain reasonably functional with up to thirty percent blood volume loss, and could survive a complete blood volume loss, assuming transfusions were performed immediately.

Perhaps in her post-plague state she could not recover at the anticipated rate. Perhaps the calculations of how much a “pint” was were inaccurate, and the Doctor was unintentionally taking too much too frequently.

She sighed, pulling him out of his thoughts. “I’m pretty sure it was that jelly cube at the clinic...”

She went a shade of gray and looked away from him, putting her little hand to her lips for a minute.

Such a common quick food that was quite popular. No translation in her language, but *jelly cube* seemed appropriate. It was, in fact, jelly in the shape of a cube. “They are quite common.”

“Well, they were gross, and I think they didn’t sit well with me,” she said, still a distinct gray shade, just like Taidc had said. It was a different shade of gray than the pallor she’d had during the plague.

So she *could* achieve a different color than various ruddy shades! This gray-green shade was most certainly a distinct variation on her otherwise bland beige color. And it also must have meant that the cube had been

exceptionally revolting to get this level of reaction. Not even the worms had produced such a reaction.

Noted. He would need to try to find out what exactly had been on offer that day so it could be avoided and analyzed for what made it toxic to Humans.

There was *extremely* limited information on what Humans could (safely) eat, and the Humans that were in the Gestalt were in the care of very wealthy patrons who could afford to feed them a diet similar to Earth. Or those Humans were so mentally ruined from the various invasive procedures done on them they simply ate basic nutrient paste. He was not clear on which it was.

“Then why did you faint?” Keiron asked.

“Eh, Humans get dizzy and woozy when they get pukey.” She pointed at her ear. “Your stomach starts swirling and your ear kind of does too. It’s weird. We balance based off fluid in our ear.”

Humans had *that* primitive vestibular mechanism? It could be an explanation as to why she didn’t like to look up at the sky but had seemed fine looking at the starfield from his ship. With the planet’s stronger gravity, the physical act of tilting her head back to look up might move the fluid in ways her brain had not adapted to interpret, and it caused the disorientation and vertigo she experienced.

His scales washed twilight blue with relief. If she was already experiencing a slight bit of toxicity, combined with blood loss, and the stress of being in the city as an untrained latent psy around hundreds of unguarded minds... half a dozen small stressors easily overwhelmed her system.

She ran her hands over his chest, fingers dipping into the grooves of his scales, and a little smile took up residence on her features. “How long will you be back?”

“I’m not sure.” Circumstances had robbed the last run of any profit. He would need to leave again soon.

“Then I should enjoy you while you are here.”

“Enj—oh.” He gathered her close again.

“*One* of my appetites hasn’t been fed, and my hands just aren’t the same.” Something about her expression was warm with mischief and chased away his brooding worries.

The thought of her pleasuring herself thinking of him sent heat through his hide. “*Did* you pleasure yourself while I was gone?”

“Once or twice,” she said airily.

He had never contemplated she might entertain herself without him. Which was absurd, because he’d caught her pleasuring herself before on his ship from hunger for her mate.

And that hunger had been *for him*.

Had she been similarly hungry while he’d been gone?

“If you felt well enough for that,” he said huskily, “then you are certainly well enough to take my cock.”

She shivered and her skin prickled with little goose-pimples and her nipples perked. “Probably.”

He had not intended to fuck her, he wanted to be restrained, but his good sense evaporated, and she rewarded him by crawling on him, which resulted in all good sense promptly evaporating from his mind.

Her cat twisted its head and gave him a lazy blink-blink.

...the cat was watching.

He scooped her up and carried her to their bedroom.

The cat followed.

He shoved the cat away with his tail and kicked the door shut.

KEIRON

Keiron contemplated the options on the board. Nothing that would be a quick turnaround. So much for getting here early and hoping to beat the rush for the best assignments of hauling someone's prize kit-kit to a vacation home at a profitable rate. Those often went to Guild Members who gained access to new assignments first, and often such assignments had had a Member-only premium paid on them. Most of what became open to the Known Non-Members like himself was cheap cargo from cheap clients.

Hauling was always a profit calculation. The difficulty of where the cargo needed to go and when it had to arrive, versus the fuel and wear and tear on his ship, balanced against how dangerous the cargo was versus his ship's ability to handle the cargo. Most grind-haulers like himself were obligated to choose contracts that were one-way only, meaning securing additional legs to not lose money on the way back to base. Coordinating these legs had to be done at Guild Posts, meaning taking multiple contracts prior to departure. A detour to go to a Guild Post to try to find additional legs could make a trip a devastating financial proposition.

He selected an assignment that would take him to a remote, rural sector with minimal mapping, charts, and navigation. Some bulk cargo for a money-losing price that would be at the bottom of everyone's list. The sort of assignment a novice hauler had to take to build their reputation, and the people pitching those trips knew it.

However, if an experienced hauler with a capable ship and some hunger on his scales showed up, these assignments to more remote areas frequently led to additional work. The sort of work that was off the books and only vague inquiries about the cargo made. Cheap assignments were as much

about exploiting new haulers as a way to obtain the services of more skilled haulers with fewer scruples, all under the cover of legitimacy and plausible deniability.

Sometimes these were a bust for him, because the off-Guild cargo on the other side was too sketchy, and he had to walk away.

But this particular client he was familiar with. The illegitimate load was almost always salvage of questionable origin. Most inspector ships weren't going to come toss his ship looking to dig through a mountain of scrap and salvage for contraband. He'd been boarded several times and every time the inspectors had taken one look at the scrap and garbage in his hold and waved him through.

Most raiders and pirates had no interest in scrap, and no interest in his battered-looking vessel that plodded through the dark. At this point, the whisper-network in some sectors had put out word to leave him alone. His family couldn't pay a ransom and he was more useful to seek out in port if someone needed a minor repair or help with navigation charts. But he never permitted himself to feel safe. There was nothing safe about what he did.

If past was prologue, this run—while long—would pay enough to offset the loss of the previous run, and include a small profit.

It was all a calculated risk.

And he did not have any choices that did not involve risk.

The assignment was transferred to him, along with the necessary codes, specific directions, and everything else he'd need. Time to return home to pack and apologize to Chess that he would be gone for some time. And to hope, very much, that she *could* tolerate him being gone from the system. He would otherwise have to bring her with him.

She'd probably say she'd like to see the galaxy.

He returned back to the house to find Chess in the kitchen with Erkus, and the kitchen smelled of the herb she liked so much. He wrinkled his nose at the bitter, tart scent that clung to the back of his throat.

Erkus' scales were a churning turquoise of consideration and bewilderment as he watched Chess sniff a steaming teacup. She took a tiny sip, then smacked her lips while staring at the liquid. Off to the side, her cat observed in the manner of an alert guardian monitoring for potential hazards.

That *cat* was a potential hazard. Why couldn't it have been so motivated

to be a proper livestock guard?

“Not good?” Erkus asked.

“I think it has potential,” she told him, going back for another sip. “But it’s pretty weak.”

“*Weak?*” Erkus looked in astonishment at the large amount of leaves wrapped in a tea cloth and submerged into the kettle.

Chess raised her gaze to him and smiled. “You’re back!”

He came into the kitchen. She set the teacup aside to greet him, and immediately said, “What’s wrong? Did something happen in the city?”

He slid his hands along the tip of her waist, savoring the sensation of her body yielding to his touch and how she pressed close to him in response. “Nothing happened. I have to leave again. A new contract.”

“You were able to find something?”

“Yes. It will take me far, though. I will be gone for a while.” He was often gone for long spans of time as he hopped from one contract to another, eventually making his way back home. But sometimes the hauling kept him away for entire seasons on 25XA. This would *not* turn to that—unless the money was good enough. In which case, it would have to.

And the worst of it—aside from being apart—was he wouldn’t be able to send word to her. Even a short message would eat into his profits, and he needed every scrap. Their funds had been nearly depleted by the tax bill—which thankfully they’d been able to pay with the gambling winnings. The tax authorities would very much like for them to not be able to pay their tax bills. The farm and House would go up for auction.

His last run, due to having to return prematurely, had resulted in no profit for him. It had not been a net loss, but they were relying on the scraps of his tiny military pension. He *needed* to bring in more income. And that meant doing a deep haul, like before she had come to him.

She smiled at him, and the brightness washed over him with something like reassurance. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine.”

“I will worry about you.” He would *especially* worry if she proved unable to be separated from him.

“I’ll be fine. Keiron, it was just that horrible little cube. Ug. Even thinking about it.”

“We don’t know,” he said softly. “Humans may not be able to be separated from their mate for so long, over such a vast distance.”

“I am *not* that sort of clingy.” She dismissed this with a little flick of her

chin like he was being silly. “Don’t worry about us. Do what you need to do. We’ll be fine. I promise to stay away from the worm bins.”

Keiron caressed her neck with his talon. The tangle of sensations relayed she wasn’t yet fully well—but she had assured him numerous times Humans could take a long time to shake off a virus—and she didn’t want him to go, and she was worried, *very* worried. It wasn’t a psy ability. There were receptors in the talon that could sample endorphins and skin chemistry, like a combination of all his other senses and perceptions. He loved to touch her and experience her—especially when pleasing her in bed.

“You will be careful going to give blood for Ohade,” he stated.

“Of course.”

“And you will *stop* doing it if it makes you unwell.”

“It’s normal to be a little tired and weak after giving blood.”

“*Chess.*”

“*Keiron.* Please stop worrying. I know we can’t afford for me to get sick, and I definitely don’t want whatever ‘free’ medical care the Gestalt would be willing to give me. They’d find some excuse to perform experiments on me.”

There was a tension in her skin when she said that, and if he focused, he could see her pupils shift within their iris slightly. A flashback, perhaps, to her time with the Greys? The memories of what they did to her might not be things she could recall, but her mind still stored the shape of the trauma.

His instincts demanded he stay with her. Especially after the previous incident. Perhaps there was a way to transition to a career gambling without invoking too much risk...

“Keiron, you have to go.” Her voice intruded into his rumination. “The others will make sure I don’t toddle out into traffic.”

“You do know to not walk out in front of pods, yes?” Erkus asked with concern.

“Yes, Erkus, I know not to wander out into traffic. Did you know on Earth, *Humans* drive our pods? We don’t have self-driving pods.”

Erkus blinked and his scales washed paler with surprise. “You mean, you control them? Like a ship?”

“Nah, not even like a ship with autopilot and all. You’ve got to drive them yourself. There are a few cars that will *sort* of drive themselves, but it’s kind of debatable if you should let them. Our technology isn’t that good yet.”

“So... you allow people to operate vehicles at high speeds among *other* people operating *their* vehicles?”

“Sure do. In fact, we let Humans who aren’t technically adults drive them. And a lot of Humans don’t *want* self-driving tech—that’s what we call it. They want to keep driving their cars.”

“Do you need special training?” Keiron asked in shock.

“Some, but it’s pretty basic. Why, do you *need* a license to fly your ship?”

“Of course. Many people know something about how to operate the basics of a small, personal ship, but to actually operate them legally you need a license. Which are somewhat expensive to procure depending on the class of ship.”

“You’re legal, right?”

“I am licensed to fly everything, including a capital ship. Military service. Taidc is licensed to fly my ship as well, although he never does. Humans just... let anyone obtain a vehicle license?”

“For a car? We sure do. And it is just the sort of hot mess you’re thinking it is, plus probably twenty more you haven’t thought of.”

A *car*? That must have been some sort of ground vehicle. “You are licensed to operate a ground vehicle?”

“I am. Which means I also know not to play in traffic.” She winked at Erkus.

Driving ground-based vehicles with *no* automation was confined to military uses and unique industrial vehicles, and even then, having no AI assistance or automation was considered a failure mode to be specially trained for. Yet Humanity trusted itself to operate such vehicles? A new fear unlocked that she might attempt something...

She gave him a little tug that felt far too weak for comfort. “Keiron, don’t worry. I *like* the little space pods that drive me around.”

His scales swirled with worry anyway.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“Now.” He hated how these things demanded he disembark immediately, but once a contract was accepted, the expectation was the hauler would head out with minimal delay. It would always be this way. Until it wasn’t.

She seemed to dim, and the disappointment that laced her skin tasted bitter and brackish against his talon. She stretched up on her toes and kissed him lightly. “Go. We’ll be fine. Although I can’t promise I won’t get... lonely.”

Lo—*oh*. “You will have to tell me about it when I return.”

“Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t.”

He delivered this admonishment with a swat of his tail, and whisper in her ear. “I will expect that when I return, *mate*.”

She rewarded him with a shiver at the filthy word, and the promise it held.

And he was going to make good on that promise.

CHESS

“I do not believe anyone will attempt to harm you,” Taidc said, his gaze narrowing as he stared at my pet, “but you will get odd looks.”

“I already get odd looks, remember?” I replied. “Mostly from you.”

He huffed. Ahane laughed and gave Taidc a smack with his tail. “Come on, we’ve got to get these worms loaded and delivered. They’re already in the vessel.”

Taidc’s scales swirled as he focused on me. “You *can* go alone, yes?”

Ahane rolled his eyes as I sighed at my green brother-in-law. “Yes, Taidc, I can handle riding a bus to the big, scary city by myself. And it sounds like delivering these worms needs two people.”

“Technically, it requires three, but we will manage with two. I worry about what happened to you last time.”

“I worry about us losing the sale on these worms, and nothing’s going to happen because I’m not accepting any food from anyone this time.” My gut still did a full-body clench at the thought of those nasty little cubes. And I wasn’t going alone. I was taking my not-a-cat. Ahane had had some leather scraps out in the barn, and he and Erkus had been able to kludge them into a harness and leash. It looked like the leather had been made from worms (which, come to think of it, it might have been) and had various excessive buckles and metal studs, making me wonder what the hell its original purpose had been. But my not-a-cat didn’t seem to care, and apparently cats were trained as kittens to accept harnesses and boxes so they could be managed if they needed medical care or transport.

My not-a-cat, already buckled in, walked at my ankle while I followed the brothers out to the barn.

“Keep your distance,” Ahane warned me.

“Right, don’t have to tell me twice. Even though I’m mystified why shipping some worms is such a production.” The farther I stayed away from the worm vats, the happier I was. I stood on the stone walk while they disappeared into the barn structures, then returned toting a heavy metal containment vessel that contained three male worms.

The noises coming from inside the vessel were unsettling.

The worms jumped around inside it, angry at being disturbed, and bashed their teeth against the inside. And that was with them being kept under several atmospheres of pressure so that they were more “sedate.”

“Riiiiightttt,” I said, “and you just leave those things out in the open?”

“They only get angry when they’re removed from their bins,” Ahane said as Taidc leaned on the transport vessel and Ahane strapped it down to a small but robust looking wagon made of metal planks. As Taidc leaned on the vessel, it rattled and bounced and clanged while the worms inside got good and angry.

The entire arrangement looked like a mini atomic bomb, and I was not entirely certain that it was not, in fact, as dangerous.

“So they weren’t... *angry* when they attacked me?” I asked.

“They were just hungry. Now they’re angry. Very angry.”

“Now I have so many questions about how you get them out of the bin for dinner.” Didn’t realize Ahane did mortal combat on the daily to put food on the table.

The vessel gave an angry buck. Taidc didn’t budge, but Ahane fell back as the motion yanked the tie strap out of his claws. Ahane cursed [*NO TRANSLATION : EXTREME VULGARITY*] and continued cursing. He yanked the tie strap *hard*, kicked the buckle and clamp over with a precise motion, and deftly twirled a knob on the side of the vessel. *Hissssssss*.

The rattling in the vessel quieted. Somewhat.

“I don’t like having them under that much pressure,” Ahane muttered, “but I also don’t want them bouncing free on the trip.”

“Tell me they’re paying a delivery fee,” I said. Because this was *way* too much if the buyers weren’t paying well for this.

Taidc turned an annoyed shade of green. “Of course.”

“She’ll be fine,” Ahane grunted at Taidc.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” I told my red brother-in-law.

They finished strapping down the vessel, which continued to vibrate like

it contained space hornets instead of space worms, and wheeled it down the path to the road. A few moments later, a small private pod glided up. They hitched the wagon to the back of the pod and then boarded the pod. The pod began to blink with little orange lights.

“Warning: dangerous cargo?” I asked as I watched the pod glide away, towing the little rage-containment vessel behind it.

Mewrsp. Not-a-cat rubbed against my ankles.

“So I guess the collective rage of the cosmos physically manifests itself as worms,” I told it.

Mewsp. Then it flopped over and showed me its belly.

“Hah. Classic Earth cat trick. I know better.”

It blinked lazily at me.

“Come on,” I bid my not-a-cat. “We’ve got a pod to catch.”

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach. Okay, more... angry hornets.

“No looking at the sky. No taking food from strangers,” I muttered to myself. Ahane had gotten a last-minute request for worm delivery that required two warm bodies. Erkus was already out, and it was either lose the sale to follow me around town or let me wander around unattended. Obvious choice? I could handle riding public transportation like an adult.

The public pod arrived in short order, and I took one of the only empty seats squished between a stormy pewter and a pale peachy-beige 25XA, while across from me was a species that looked more Earth-parrot than humanoid, with a profusion of beautiful blue feathers tipped with bright red and speckled plumage on the crown of... *her...* head? Oh, and a wicked-looking beak. The same species as the news anchor I watched a lot of the time? Maybe.

We gawked at each other. At least it was mutual.

Not-cat sat down behind my ankles and watched everyone. It didn’t seem to mind the situation, just was going to chill under the seat. I silently pleaded with it to be a *good kitty*.

The passengers, on the other hand, stared at it like I’d walked onto the bus carrying a nest of angry wasps.

Lucky for them, my cat’s life ambitions did not include *worker bee* or *loyal drone*. It was highly motivated to achieve record levels of metabolic efficiency.

The pod carted us through the city. Most everyone stared out the windows, although a few leaned back and read from slender tablets. People

got on, people got off. We sloshed and shifted with the motions. At one point, the pod yanked to a halt, tried to proceed, stopped, and began to make high-frequency angry beeping noises at two other pods that all flashed red lights at each other in some brutal rave-esque AI version of road rage. A large panel on the pod's ceiling came to life and displayed a line of scrolling text cheerfully apologizing for the delay and assuring us we'd be back underway shortly, and a polite but [*EXTREMELY STERN*] reminder that pedestrians should obey all control devices, while playing the most maddeningly cheerful little bit of intergalactic elevator music ever recorded.

The pods resolved whatever argument they were having. Our pod made a cheerful noise of victory and glided away.

Walking a cat down the street attracted as many odd looks as if I'd been walking an actual cat down the street on Earth. I must have looked beyond strange, wearing clothing made from Gestalt fashions from a few generations earlier, swinging a covered basket in one hand and walking my cat with the other. But I was grateful to have not-cat with me—it made the press of everything seem a little less intimidating.

The nurse on the ward took the basket and looked at my companion. “Is that a...”

“I was told pets could come to the ward?” Perhaps that had just been the *patient's* pet. I didn't know Ohade well enough to visit him alone. When a 25XA lost their scales, only the closest family visited. The times I'd met Ohade before (if you could even call those encounters that), I'd been in Keiron's company. But in the culture of the 25XA, “closest” family were biological parents or a mate. If the parents were dead, siblings took that spot. Even spouses and children didn't count.

It would not have been expected nor appropriate for me to come to the ward to visit Ohade, absent Keiron's company or a specific invitation from Ohade. It was the custom for other family to show their compassion and concern by bringing small gifts.

Ergo: the basket.

The nurse warned me the cat couldn't cause problems, then he must have warned the Doctor, because the Doctor's scales only washed a pale shade of *holy shit, it really IS a cat* when he came into the room. But he quickly regrouped and started with the usual procedures while not-a-cat continued to set new laziness standards. Samples, blood, a little update about Ohade's continued, if slowing, improvement. He tried to play it off as guarded, but his

scales practically sparkled with excitement.

I declined the cube snacks offered and beat tracks before they insisted.

Since my not-a-cat seemed like it went to the city all the time, I decided to head south from the Ward into a small bit of commercial sprawl not far away, where a number of “beverage bars” and small tapas-like places were, clustered around what seemed to be the Gestalt equivalent of convenience stores.

Word had gotten around Temple City at this point I existed, so while I got my share of looks, nobody actually called law enforcement on me to report a Human At Large.

Time to focus on the mission: sniffing all the things.

While I technically had money in the sense I had a biokey on file attached to House 8’s bank accounts, and technically had access to what meager amounts of money House 8 had, I had exactly no money to spend on anything, so I wasn’t here to shop, or even browse. Gawking was free, as was sizing up the local fashion choices and smelling the scent of the various foods and drinks people had in their hands as they walked in and out of the little shops, or the scents coming from the little shops.

My goal was to find out if anything smelled like Earth tea, coffee, snacks, then to deduce the source of that scent. Maybe it would be a plant that we could add to the herb garden, or some other easy and cheap source of seasoning. At this point, I’d be happy for something like chicken bouillon to flavor my worm paste. Since the Temple City was a touristy spot, there were lots of different cuisines on offer, so wandering around sniffing the air seemed valid.

Supposedly, the translator could stimulate olfactory response in many species for common dishes to give you an idea if you might like a particular dish, but there were absolutely no translations for anything from Earth, and while I’d *tried* thinking about the smell of coffee, “reverse smell search” was not a service the Gestalt offered.

Lost opportunity, honestly.

The custom for anywhere serving something consumable was to offer a menu outside the establishment. Most of the places were very small, really little more than street food stalls, so you stood outside choosing your order before going inside to press little tablets to finalize your request. My translator silently impressed upon me [*no translation*] while I read multiple menus written in Gestalt Common and 25XA Utilitarian. There were no

descriptions of any items on the menus at all, just lists with prices, probably because everyone's own translators would be able to supply what any given item was on the fly.

But the translator had no English translations for any of the dish names, and could provide no context or clues for what any of them were, except for *[food item]* or *[beverage item]* and on about half the listings, it couldn't even clarify if an item qualified as what I'd understand to be a "food" or to be a "beverage."

A cup of noodles probably would have sent it for a loop. Or *burger bowl*.

Most of the foods and snacks passing by me either smelled like nothing at all (perhaps because my Human nose couldn't pick up those scents?) or smelled very strong and acrid. I caught a whiff that reminded me of the dreaded cube more than once, which established it was a pretty generic flavoring. I scrunched up my courage to ask a pale peachy-pink male 25XA with beautiful scales like abalone that indicated he was probably a somebody-somebody from a House with a number behind it. He snacked on a little woven grass cone of cubes that looked and smelled like what I'd had the first time through.

I (in as polite a Human fashion as I could manage) inquired what he was eating.

His scales washed a shocked shade of pink, then a tinged shade of shock that I was getting used to—25XA did not like Human voices—then a fumbling shade tinge of peach before he ultimately recovered in the span of five seconds to tell me what it was. As he moved, bending politely towards me from his significant height, an intricate trinket made of three cuffs clutching the upper and lower points of his tipped ear connected by engraved chains and dangling tiny bangles flicked in the light of the two suns. It didn't strike me as a mega extravagant trinket, but paired with his fancy color, it confirmed he was probably a primary member of another established first-tier House and I really should *not* be speaking with him like I mattered.

Still: he seemed polite and gracious and would forgive me for making a hell of a faux pas.

[NO TRANSLATION]

"Does the flavor have a name in High Dialect?" I asked. Because I was *not* going to remember the jumble of syllables he'd just told me for the flavor.

His peachy tinge intensified while he boggled I'd even asked. But he,

politely, supplied the name in High Dialect. When he spoke, his voice was full and rich and reminded me of an intense mountain sunset, each syllable dropping distinctly within my mind.

I echoed it to be certain I'd heard it right.

His pupils took on a more diamond shape as his scales fluttered with shades of peach and pink. But he nodded, the chains of his trinket sliding over the small scales by his neck. It made an interesting sound as it did so, very soft but quite distinct, like the sound of a little fountain.

Neat.

“Thank you,” I told the peachy-pink gentleman, trying to soften my tone to something he wouldn't find ear-scratching. He nodded equally politely, although still a perplexed shade of peach, and I got the vibe that I was the strangest and most unexpected encounter he'd had in a long time.

I repeated the flavor's name to myself, silently, a few more times. Because that was a flavor I did *not* want. The name didn't sound like anything else I'd heard, so I named it after my least-favorite Earth spice: lemon pepper.

It tasted like if filthy swamp water had been mixed with lemon pepper and white pepper.

Swampy Lemon Pepper.

I apologized in advance to any other Humans that might come to the Gestalt and get stuck with my translations of what any given flavor was. But if any of them happened to be lemon pepper, white pepper, or swamp water fans, they'd be in snack heaven. “Swampy Lemon Pepper” seemed to be the 25XA equivalent of ranch dressing or pumpkin spice.

I sniffed through the rest of the market area, but nothing smelled especially edible, and nothing comparable to common Earth teas or coffee. In fact, while I smelled a ton of permutations of meats, vegetables, dough, roasted things, baked things, deep fried things, and all mingled with sweetness, flower scents, spices, herbs, and even scents that smelled like various Earth trees, buttery, nutty, and cheesy seemed to be missing.

Granted, those could be extremely posh flavors that I wasn't in the right part of town for.

Bonk bonk bonk.

I looked down at my not-cat. It pawed at my shin and made a little chirping noise.

“Sigh. Sorry, buddy,” I told it. “You're right. Taidc and Ahane will think

we got lost. We can do extended sleuthing next time.”

Mewrsp. It blinked at me and swished its tail. The little ridge of fur along its spine was standing up. I crouched down to give it a reassuring pet behind the ears, but not-cat had had enough shopping. “Alright, we’ll head home. I’m sorry for keeping you out this long.”

Time to get the cat back home before it bit someone. I didn’t know what Gestalt legislation was on cat bites, but I knew I didn’t want to find out.

My not-a-cat was all business getting back to the pod station—it remembered the way exactly—with tail up and fanning back and forth like a rear wiper blade, which made everyone on the street duck around us.

Okay. Note to self: do *not* keep the cat out for this long. The cat was *over* it.

“Just about there,” I told the cat’s rotating ears.

It glanced back at me, then its face folded backwards, ears went flat, and its jaw extended and opened.

Oh FUCK—

Before I even processed the cat had lunged towards me, something else yanked me from behind.

I yelled, froze as my cat *lunged* upwards and right at me, face folded back into a murderous semi-feline, totally alien mask while its jaws opened wide enough to consume my head and it *screamed*. The yank from behind *pulled*, and I didn’t fight it, brain briefly clicking they were saving me from my cat.

Kitty’s front claws smashed into my collarbone. Its hind legs came under its body and impacted my collar next.

Oh FUCK.

Brain clicked back on as a wall of dread smashed into me and I yanked free of the person holding me. “Get off me!”

Kitty shoved off its hind legs and launched itself at my attacker with another scream.

I spun around, stumbled forward, something grabbed my ankle and I face-planted. Flopped over. A steel-colored tail snaked around my ankle. My cat had plastered itself to a red-orange 25XA’s face and had torn up hunks of scales already while the 25XA screamed (or tried to) as he collapsed, blood spurting everywhere.

People on the street scattered.

The steel 25XA that had me grabbed me with both claws and hauled me

upright.

“Fuck off, buddy!” I kicked, smashing the flat of his tail into the asphalt. I screamed, and that made him make a sound of pain and he dropped one of my shoulders.

My cat attached its jaws to the red-orange’s face and *clamped* down, yowling very bloody murder.

The steel cursed [*EXTREME PROFANITY, EXTREME PROFANITY*] while I scrambled to my feet. Kitty ripped the red-orange’s face off, spit it out, and sprang on the steel with another yowl, using me as a spring pad to do it.

“Back off, asshole!” I shouted at the steel, then I stomped on what was left of the red-orange’s face.

Squish.

Right between the toes too.

How was everything happening so fast *and* so slow?

The steel 25XA had ducked under my cat’s attack and my cat had latched onto the far more armored neck. The 25XA’s scales had hardened to steel plates that flashed and shone in the sunlight, and kitty was doing their best to work their way up to the exposed face while the 25XA tried to stab kitty with his tail and green blood from multiple claw wounds traced my cat’s body.

If *kitty* couldn’t get to the bastard’s eyes, *I* could.

I (in a moment of supreme stupidity) threw myself at the steel and went for the eyes, which were the only exposed part of him at this point, and shielded by heavy scale plates. The scales hurt like a bitch and cut through my clothing, and he flung me off him with one pathetic swipe. I smacked back into the road and the blood from the (I guess, dead) red-orange. The air got smacked out of my lungs.

Kitty reached around with one front leg and raked at the steel’s lips. Tore off some of the lips. More blood.

I inhaled with a crush of pain as my lungs re-inflated. I rolled upwards as a vehicle screeched up to the scene.

Oh, shit.

Kitty saw it before I did—it looked past me a split second before a third set of claws grabbed me. This was quickly followed by a tail lashing itself around my neck, high under my jaw.

I clawed at the tail and gasped, unable to breathe.

Whoever held me hefted me up as everything went dim. Kitty launched

off the steel 25XA, but the steel smacked my cat away, and the two males tossed me into the vehicle that had just arrived.

The last thing I perceived was my cat running after us.

CHESS

I woke up with a *pounding* headache and a pain in my arms that was a little too familiar. My *brain* hurt. Brains weren't supposed to hurt. Technically, brains couldn't hurt, but my brain *hurt*. Someone had shoved their fingers into my gray matter and dug around like I was the glove compartment of a carbage ride.

I tried to sit up. Found I couldn't.

My eyes refused to focus. I tried to move again, and I processed that I was restrained.

Oh shit.

I jerked against the restraints. Didn't do any good.

<< *Please be calm.* >>

The Grey's "voice" wasn't a voice at all. It was sensations and horrible creepy mental fingers that my brain desperately tried to rationalize into speech so it all made sense. 0/10, do not recommend.

"Fuck you," I snarled. I jerked against the restraints. The huge probe needles shoved back into my arms hurt like a bitch and they were even worse to look at.

<< *There is no need for vulgarity.* >>

There was the need for *all* the vulgarity. "Get out of my head!"

<< *We have no other way to communicate with you.* >>

A gray face from a place in my memories I would rather never have gone again, bent over me, blocking out the blinding white light that shone down from rows of lighting on the ceiling. The Grey looked like every other Grey: lightbulb head, pencil neck, giant black eyes, no hair, a tiny slit for a mouth with no lips, no nose but two finger-sized holes, some coils of putty-like flesh

around their four ears, and overall a body that looked equal parts like it had been left to dry out in Death Valley and was made of homemade putty. How something could look like it was clammy *and* made of dusty old bones at the same time, I had no idea, but it was all sorts of wrong.

“Guess you shouldn’t have bio-engineered yourselves into a corner with no vocal cords,” I spat, still wriggling against my bonds just because I could.

<< *You escaped last time. You must be restrained and monitored this time. You did this to yourself* >>

“Victim-blaming. *Nice.*” I almost kept rambling but decided to shut up, just in case these Grey losers didn’t know I had a Prime Scion who would lose his *shit* not to mention a very ambitious Doctor who wasn’t going to want his potential Great Discovery getting turned into a Grey broodmare.

The Grey cocked its head and its “fingers” flitted through my brain.

I screamed. I did *not* want this Grey to know about the Doctor or how my antibodies were a Plague treatment. These Grey assholes didn’t get to take food out of *my* family’s mouth.

I focused on mental pictures of Keiron fucking these guys up. And maybe Taidc too, because Taidc had some anger he’d probably like to vent. And *definitely* my cat. My cat would have eaten their eyeballs.

Where was my cat? Was kitty okay?

Focus.

I got *very* creative. *Very.* One fantasy involved Keiron shoving his tail into this particular Grey's little slit mouth and then wedging the Grey's skull apart while my cat nibbled its fingers. Being a connoisseur of horror movies, I had lots of excellent material to draw upon.

The Grey “fingers” removed themselves from my brain. The cat fantasies especially seemed to disturb it.

“Oh, come back,” I taunted it. “I’ve had a *lot* of time to think about it. Got all kinds of horrible Human things in my head. Just for you. And all your friends. And the more reproductive shit you pour into me, the nastier you’re going to make me.”

<< *Which is why you will remain restrained.* >>

It tried to sound confident, but the mind-voice sounded a little nervous, and eager to get the *fuck* away from my brain. Their little version of telepathy also came with a nice side of shared emotional experience, so I kept the violent Grey Gore MovieFest going. “He *is* going to come looking for me. And he *will* find me.”

The impression from the Grey—which was the mental equivalent of a person who stood too close while talking—was it didn't want to let on that it was a little unsettled by the idea of the Twilight Scion's relentless pursuit, and it was angry that it *was* unsettled, that all this could really go badly, and for a split second: that perhaps this wasn't a good idea at all.

Good. Not like I was dumb enough to think they'd drop me off at the nearest space-stop with a note around my neck reading *sorry 'bout that*, and these Greys were going to do what they were going to do, but I'd enjoy watching the cheapest species in the galaxy start sweating about just what sort of value-per-Human amount of trouble they'd just bought.

They'd just abducted the most well-known Human in the damn Gestalt (maybe the whole galaxy) because... *reasons?*

Whoa. Was I the most well-known human in the galaxy?

I might have been...

I turned up the radio in my brain fantasizing about returning to Earth on a float made of rare and exotic Gestalt ice cream flavors (the Gestalt *did* have ice cream and various other frozen dessert confections, none of which I had ever tasted or probably would for a hot minute because... *poverty...*) while Earth provided me with rare and exotic coffee beans thrown at my feet.

The Grey retreated out of my line of sight. No genitals, not even a slit or bump, and no ass either. Just a dinner plate strapped to spindly legs and a very strange gliding gait that looked like it was way more work than it needed to be.

Peak sentient performance right there.

I squirmed in my bindings just to prove to myself I could, then had to stare up at the perfectly smooth, featureless, might-have-been-ivory, might-have-been-silver ceiling. The bright lights and lack of noise except for an indistinct assortment of low-frequency hums burrowed into my brain. Somewhere in there were the not-entirely-severed memories of my first time. And my arms throbbed in pain to the low-frequency hum. I wriggled my fingers, and the small muscles of my wrist and forearm slid and rubbed against the massive needles.

Ow. Ow. Ow. Those had *just* healed.

I closed my eyes and amused myself naming every ice cream flavor I knew.

Keiron was coming.

All I had to do was survive until he found me.

KEIRON

Keiron seethed, his scales pulsing shades of twilight to magenta to blood-ruby red. Taidc had summoned him back from his run with a Tier 1 message, but he had been far afield, and even his best efforts had meant Chess had been gone for some time, and her trail had gone cold.

Not that the authorities had shown *any* interest in finding her. The authorities had also shown no interest in the dead body. The unlicensed, off-grid pod with false transponder information. The plethora of other crimes that had been committed, along with dozens of witnesses.

He stood in his old office, staring at the large, slender screen that had been the only thing he had not sold but should have. Now it glowed back to life, displaying a tangle of illuminated shapes that was the Gestalt celestial sphere.

He had not eaten. He had not bathed. He had stormed into the house from the dock and come right to this room.

Erkus, scales washed pale blue, said, “Keiron, we’re so sorry.”

Keiron held up a hand to silence him. “It’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault.”

His resources were extremely limited in every way. From financial to simply fuel for his ship to tracking Chess down.

But he had a place to start.

Taidc had gathered up what few facts there were (since there was not much in the way of witness statements). The cat had apparently been aware of the danger before the attack. There had been reports of an “angry cat” (that had been dismissed by the low level enforcement as absurd) at least some time before she had been taken. So she had been stalked.

The cat had killed one attacker and wounded a second, but had been unable to do mortal damage against a 25XA with cosmos-graced scales. The cat had gotten the drop on the first, but not the second. The names of the dead 25XA had been revealed, and instead of leading to a higher House, it pointed right back to the House that had attacked them coming back from gambling.

The cat, like all such animals, had emergency transponder chips implanted into it that could be triggered if it became “at large.” Taidc had activated the transponder, and the cat had spent hours prowling the docks on the southern side of the city. It had repeatedly circled back to one particular area. It had worked in a diligent, familiar grid pattern one would expect from a quality farm cat stalking a target. It had also defended its charge (in this case: Chess) with lethal force.

The transponder had lost power after a few hours, at which point Taidc had informed Animal Control of the cat’s movements, then requested all the dock and exit records for that slip during the time the cat had been present. If AC had actually picked it up, they’d be given a huge fine for its return. But now it was merely a cat at large in Temple City, which was cause for quite a bit of gossip. Gossip had the story correct: the cat had been in his mate’s company as her pet, had alerted to the danger, had defended her. Nobody had ever successfully trained a cat to be a personal protection animal, and there was a great deal of curiosity as to how Chess had managed to re-purpose and re-train a farm cat (which were generally held to be untrainable) for the job, and quite a bit of interest in how effective such a proposition would be if the results could be replicated.

Little did they know the cat was anything but a true cat.

The cat had not been spotted or attacked anyone else. It was likely attempting to make its way back to its home, although some reports indicated the cat had been injured. It was possible the cat had died of its wounds. Chess would be devastated to find out her faithful cat had been lost or killed.

But the cat prowling the dock without finding anything told him one thing: Chess was no longer on-planet. She had been abducted and immediately transported to the docks, given the cat’s pattern.

Lack of ransom demand? Immediate off-planet?

This had not been revenge for the incident at the gambling den. This was not petty squabbling.

The Greys were behind this.

He'd never heard of the Greys stealing back a Human. To his knowledge, it had never happened.

If the Greys got caught with a Human, they threw that ship and its crew to the worms. Claimed it was *unofficial, unsanctioned, rogue elements*, and so forth. Grey ships sent on an Earth transit were deliberately silo'd to feed into the official unsanctioned activities narrative.

Except the Greys didn't have rogue elements. The Greys had engineered "anti-collective" tendencies out of their genetic base generations before. They had disagreements, disputes, and factions. But they were literally incapable of endangering their species or society. To suggest that a crew of Greys in command of a ship capable of making the high-speed off-beacon core-skirting Earth transit would "go rogue" was absurd.

It almost seemed impossible that they'd come back to the scene of the crime to escalate the crime. Or that anyone connected to any House on 25XA would be desperate enough to take their putty-fingered credits and be within proximity of a charge of Sentient Trafficking.

The entire thing sounded ludicrous.

But that was what made it *not* ludicrous. 25XA—and Gestalt custom in general—held that when a mate from a powerful House had been taken, the House would get them back. That would be through political allies applying pressure to "locate the rogue elements" in order to facilitate the mate's return as a grand gesture before the application (or escalation) of legally sanctioned violence.

Many minor conflicts and wars were quietly waged (and ignored) over these matters.

No one would help the Twilight Scion or House Eight. He had no allies to call upon, no forces to marshal, no family to muster, no ships to launch, no funds for bounties.

His enemies would feast upon the final downfall of his House.

All while Chess was in the grip of the Greys being... *bred*. And quite possibly, her mind turned into holes and pockets while they wiped and adjusted her memories to ensure she told no tales.

The thought turned his scales nearly black.

"*I will find you,*" he growled to himself in High Dialect.

"Brother." Taidc came to the doorway as Keiron updated his work stations with the most recent Gestalt navigation charts and relevant updates and the last solar cycles' worth of departures and arrivals from all docks in

the system. The Greys always cloaked their movements in legitimacy. That masquerade of legitimacy was what kept more aggressive inquiry at bay.

Studying the trajectories of the various ships that had been on-beacon might give him a clue as to what direction to head in. Because she *had* been on one of those ships.

“You made excellent time home.” Taidc’s scales were a deep shade of malachite mingled with forest black and speckles of radioactive green. Ahane came in with him.

“I spared no expense nor the ship,” Keiron replied. The ship had held up, but he would need Ahane to assist him with some re-fits for when he left. “You did an excellent job with the cat. No word on it?”

“It is not here, nor has it been found. It is still out prowling, or may have died of its injuries. There is no news from the media, obviously, and the censors are suppressing discussion of this out of ‘respect’ for our ‘activities.’”

Keiron’s scales washed nearly black again. That was standard for these sorts of matters—the House would decide when and what to say. But it also cut both ways. It swept all of this into a dusty corner to not be spoken of.

Taidc cocked his head to the side. “The steel 25XA was mind-mapped.”

Keiron straightened. “How did you discover that fact?”

“I have a few tricks left,” Taidc said with feral amusement. “He is from the same House as those who assisted. From the branch that had previously been in control, hence his scales, but had fallen out of favor and influence. The payment for his involvement was quite high, but his mind did not contain any implicating information on the clients.”

“So he took a contract to abduct my mate to wage a coup to become Prime Scion. The payment being her skin and the buyer’s credits.”

“The payment wasn’t credits. It was trinket chits.”

“*Trinket* chits?” Anyone holding the physical item could go to the Temple and turn it in for a trinket. Except, because they were physical items that could not be authenticated except at the Temple that had created and issued them, nobody dealt in them. They were too easy to lose, costly to obtain, and whoever held the chit could redeem it, no questions asked. The cost was the price of a top-tier trinket, plus a massive premium on top.

They had been in more common use *eons* earlier, when the trinket technology had been far less developed, and advancements had been made regularly. The Temple had sold chits to raise funds to advance the research. A

chit could be redeemed later for a presumably far superior product, so it had become the convention of the time for families to pool resources to obtain chits for newborns. Instead of the family having to pay the current price for the best trinket when the child came of age, they had a voucher for such a trinket previously purchased at a far lower price.

The Temple still sold the vouchers, and some ultra-wealthy still purchased them as a hedge against some potential new development in the technology (or to give away in lotteries or other publicity stunts), but they served no practical purpose any longer.

Taidc nodded. “Yes. The physical chits have disappeared, of course. All Temples have denied they recently issued any unusual number of chits and their chit sales and redemptions fit established patterns.”

“Brother, I am impressed with your ability to obtain information.”

Taidc studied his claws while his scales turned a smug shade of speckled green. “The trail does not lead to the Greys. Which means, of course, it leads to the Greys. What are you doing in here?”

“The cat’s motions indicate what dock she was taken from. She is clearly off-planet, and every ship on the docks passes through the beacons. Trajectories and filed flight paths once past beacon change, but frequently, they do not change abruptly. You would not waste initial acceleration or risk a radical course change. So I am going to deduce which ship most likely has her, and where it is most likely heading. Then I am going after her.”

“Obviously. I will go with you.”

“No.”

“I am Second Scion. It is my duty,” Taidc growled.

“No, it is *my* duty. The Greys took Chess. Our enemies tried to take this House. The duty to the House falls to you until I return.”

“You going alone is a fool’s mission.”

“I am taking Ahane with me. I’ll need his skills.” Ahane was a practical mechanical genius, and he did not know where he was going, but he definitely would need Ahane’s varied set of skills.

Ahane nodded, his scales a bright red. “Of course. If I had been able to handle the worms alone—”

“I suspect it was all a rouse,” Keiron said darkly. “Trinket chits? A sudden order for *three* male worms while I was off-planet as well? Chess was put into the position of needing to go alone. But now we turn all their money back on them.”

Taidc's scales turned stormy green-black. "Can you even go there with the ship we have?"

"I will find a way."

Taidc growled, then said, "We could reveal her blood as treatment for the Plague."

His brother was exceptional at finding resources, but perhaps not politically sly. "Then the Greys would *never* give her up. They would start additional experiments. I will not play the one pathetic card we have left and ruin the Great Discovery for this House. If I do, it will be spread among the Gestalt glory-mongers. There is a reason the Doctor from the Ward has not tapped his own allies. It is because he knows that if we get Chess back under those circumstances, *everything* is still lost."

"She is your mate! Isn't having her enough?!" Taidc snapped.

His tail wrung with frustration and bitterness. "No. It's not. Not for her."

"How is not enough for *her*?"

"Remember why she volunteered to be infected at all. Remember how angry she was when she learned how I asked Ohade to forgo treatments to afford our trinket."

Taidc's scales rushed tumbles of bright, emotional green.

"She would never forgive me for the same sin." Keiron shook his head.

He turned his attention to his largest screen that took up the entire wall. He began to tap and pull through the charts and layers. The space around the Grey homeworld had very little information. The Greys had a small, three-planet system in a binary star system, with several small moons and asteroids, and then they claimed the conventional buffer zone to their stars' heliopauses. Nothing unusual beyond the Greys didn't permit tourism or casual visits to their system, and had never released navigation information. This, in and of itself, was also not unusual—the Greys had *always* been secretive, especially about their superior engine and propulsion technology, and were strict about not permitting outsiders to even glimpse their massive fabrication facilities and shipyards.

The lack of navigation information and more detailed cartography beyond what had been ascertained by Gestalt survey ships doing distant observations made his work considerably more difficult. It was not just a matter of sneaking into the highly monitored system that would be the issue, but doing so at all. And then getting *out* of the system. There were unknown navigation hazards to go along with every other potential hazard.

But picking through the docking and transit records—which were publicly available up to the outer beacons of the system—along with the ship information on those docking records, gave him a very good idea of where to go.

Plus, as Chess would say, *a hunch*.

Were his mate's psy abilities calling to him from across the void?

The plants on the walls rattled, signaling someone had arrived. Keiron growled. Scavengers, here for a story, perhaps?

"I'll deal with this." Taidc stalked out of his office.

Several moments later, Taidc returned, but not alone. He jerked his head towards the door. "Septus."

"*Septus?*" Keiron snapped while Taidc snarled.

"You said my name?"

Keiron growled as the 387b stepped around Ahane and into his office. Septus hadn't changed much—although considering Septus spent most of his time on screens reading news reports, it hadn't been long since Keiron had *seen* him. But Septus had dropped their friendship when House 8 had come to disgrace, and now the avian showed up to scavenge for a story?

Septus clacked his beak at him. "Don't want to hear my proposal?"

"I am certain it is self-serving," Keiron said shortly.

"Do you blame me for what I did back then?"

"I blame you for showing up in my darkest hour like a fucking scavenger."

"We were friends, Keiron. Our lives took different paths. You're right. I'm here for the story. I'm also prepared to do *more* than just the story to help you get her back."

"Shall I cook him for dinner?" Ahane asked..

"It's tempting."

"I assure you, I am quite gamey and inedible," Septus said dismissively. "Keiron, I have a ship prepared to go find her. A *well* prepared ship, with a well-prepared crew. You can handle the ship and mission. All I want is to be there as it happens. The Greys so overtly reclaiming a Human? They deny having them at all."

Keiron kicked aside his anger and disgust at being Septus' latest news story. Septus had brought him a ship, *and* a crew? He needed to divest himself of his pride. "What sort of ship? What sort of crew?"

Septus shook his feathered crest. "I pulled some strings and called in

some favors.”

“How official is this?” Taidc asked.

“As in military or officially sanctioned? Neither. Those channels don’t get involved in these sorts of things, Second Scion. I’d expect you to know that,” Septus said.

Taidc turned almost black with anger. Erkus actually turned a deep azure in annoyance.

Keiron smashed his tail into the ground. “Speak, *bird*. I’m not in the mood for your usual chirping.”

Septus, as usual, merely shifted his feathers. “You think I’d be dumb enough to go to Enforcement? This is a private matter. You’re all smart enough to understand what I’m saying and why I’m saying it, I hope? Well.” Septus looked at Taidc. “Maybe not *you*.”

Taidc’s scales swirled a dry, exasperated green. “I am still not as stupid as you hope I am, feather-bearer. What’s in it for you? Because you don’t owe Keiron any favors. And if you did, you’re just one of the half dozen or so favors it was made clear he would never collect.”

The tips of Septus’ feathers trembled in aggravation.

“What are you after?” Keiron dragged the tip of his tail across the floor between the two of them. The last time he had tried to “collect” on the favor Septus had owed him, Septus hadn’t even taken his call. When he’d gone to find the bird, Septus had avoided him.

He understood, of course. The bird’s debt to him was back before Septus had been anyone, and Keiron had been The Twilight Scion. Their fortunes had traded places, and the cost of repaying the debt was greater than the value of the original debt. At a certain point, the importance of servicing a debt had to be weighed against the cost of serving it. He, himself, had had to renege on debts and favors owed by both himself and the House. There were too many obligations he had not had the option to walk away from.

Not that that was any excuse whatsoever, but if begging Septus hadn’t worked, then there was no point in letting the debt start to cost bitterness.

Everyone had abandoned the 8th House. Septus was in good and plentiful company.

Septus’ feathers betrayed his aggravation at the entire situation, even though he tried to maintain composure. Not that his species was known for their composure or aloof reserve. They were more known to chat their enemies to death and twist them up neatly in a word puzzle and trick them

into betraying themselves.

Septus' attention flicked back and forth between the brothers before settling back on Keiron. "I want the Deed."

Erkus sighed. "Of course. Why did I think for an instant perhaps it would be otherwise?"

"Because you are a gentle soul," Taidc told their youngest brother.

Keiron's scales smoldered. "So you think there's a Minor Deed in this."

"I think the ship is the private and thoroughly untraceable property of certain *very* wealthy concerned Gestalt interests who want to send the Greys a message that they are not the unquestioned lords of traversal, but don't want that message to be heard by *anyone* else. I think I have a crew of Gestalt Special Enforcement who are sick of the Greys slipping away, and they're all looking to take a little recreational jaunt to regroup. And I think I have the abducted Lady Scion of House 8, taken under the double suns, while her pet *cat* killed one abductor, and her determined cosmos-ordained mate who, once again, will risk everything to save her."

Ahane said, dryly, "You are revolting."

"You can think what you want," Septus retorted. "And all I want is the credit. Discovering Greys abducted a *Human Gestalt Citizen* is Minor Deed worthy, don't you think?"

"Are you *sharing* the credit?" Keiron asked, disgusted, while his brothers glared at the bird.

"No. The ship's owners don't want it. The crew definitely doesn't want it. And *you* don't want it."

"We're eating him for dinner," Taidc told Ahane.

"I'll put on my apron."

Keiron held up a hand to stop them. Septus was certainly capable of spinning the words and singing the songs of his people. Actual direct conversation was not something Septus did most of the time, so it spoke volumes when he *did* choose to be forthcoming.

And Keiron cared nothing about a Minor Deed. He *should*, and Septus' spine was in a slight arch with his feathers fluffed—*slightly*—with the green and pink slightly shinier, communicating the bird knew damn well Keiron *should* want his share of the credit, but was gambling Keiron was desperate enough to get his mate back he wouldn't negotiate.

Taidc gave him a sideways look, his scales darkening to a deep forest hue. "*Keiron.*"

Keiron jerked his head to the side. He and Taidc stepped into the hallway, leaving Ahane and Erkus to make sure Septus didn't put his feathery ears to the door. He slammed the door shut with his tail.

"You *cannot* let him insult you like that," Taidc growled under his breath. "He swoops in here after all this time and is going to *use* you as a *step*? Brother, we are poor but—"

"He has brought the only real chance we have of getting my mate back," Keiron murmured, scales a deep storm shade.

"At what *price*?!"

"The price of her *life*?" Keiron snapped.

Taidc's scales shifted with the swirling, dark forest laced with speckles of bright yellow—the helpless rage he'd so often seen on his brother in recent years. His rage at once again being forced to endure a humiliation or insult or violation. It *was* the duty of the Second Scion to endure and suffer on behalf of the House, but *this* was not what anyone had in mind.

"Brother," Keiron softened his tone and lowered it, "I am not rolling over. I am thinking I do not want to attract attention. We have other, more important, matters looming. Larger prizes."

Taidc's rage paused, the yellow speckles ceasing their motion.

"I am inclined to let Septus have all the glory if it gets Chess back and he walks away thinking there is nothing else to be had here. I do not want the focus on us or this House or on Chess. Not right now. Not yet."

Taidc's tail snapped into a stiletto point. The yellow speckles evaporated off his scales.

Keiron's lips stretched over his teeth. "You agree? I do not intend to share *that* with Septus. Let him have all of this on his named terms. It doesn't hurt this House to look powerless and weak. Let Septus have the Minor Deed. For the same reasons that ship owner doesn't want to be named, I'd rather not draw attention to us. He is making it easy for us. It costs me nothing to pay his price."

Taidc nodded along, his scales reflecting Keiron's pattern.

Demanding Septus share in whatever Deed or Achievement came out of this might mean involving Septus in whatever came out of the experiments involving Chess' antibodies. Or it might lead to scrutiny that may lead to the revelation Chess had had the plague. The 25XA health authorities knew Chess had had the plague—all cases of plague had to be reported. But health information was private and privileged. So while there was no guarantee that

a Human recovering from the plague wouldn't become a rumor or even established fact, those who knew said facts would be very inclined to *not* reveal they knew. Drawing attention to Chess might cause rumors to swirl. Best not to draw attention to House 8, and to continue to let everyone think it was a useless, worthless house, and that Chess was just a convenient pretense.

"He can name his price and collect his payment," Keiron said softly. "All I want is Chess back, and after that, the future of this House, and everything we've endured so far to be rewarded."

Taidc grinned. His fangs extended and his scales deepened to a violent, bright green.

Keiron twisted his tail into a ball while he focused his thoughts on the memories of begging an absent Septus for help. The memories were still raw, even though they were old, and he had banished them from his thoughts long ago. His scales tinged with a slight greenish tinge of disgust. Good.

He stalked back into the room. "Fine. You can have the glory. I want my mate back, and a Minor Deed will not put food on this House's table."

"Brother." Ahane protested.

"We have no choice," Taidc said darkly. "It's the bird's offer or we abandon our House-sister to the *Greys*."

"So is this about your honor or her safety?" Erkus asked.

Taidc spun on the youngest, but Ahane shoved Taidc back and growled. Keiron snapped at all of them to shut up.

Keiron pointed his tail at Septus. "But I'm the key you need for that ship to go off-beacon, and I'm not taking orders from whoever you have as Captain. They're a glory-monger who knows nothing about traversal off-beacon or keeping the ship fueled or us alive. My rank will be respected if I take the ship, and I'm not taking orders from the end of his piss-stream. I served on a ship larger than whatever they are flying."

Septus shifted the feathers on his shoulders. "They want their own back. I get the story and glory. You get your mate back. We all have compatible desires. Egos are in play, but not conflict."

"How is *you* getting a news story keeping the crew from discipline?"

"What discipline? It's a privately owned ship manned by a crew that all happens to be taking a jaunt together. The fact the ship is heavily armed and kitted out for off-beacon leisure travel and defense...well, it's not their ship, they're just borrowing it."

“Who owns this ship?” Taidc growled.

Septus shrugged. “No one who is going to want to be *directly* involved.”

“*Implicated*,” Taidc told Keiron.

Septus clucked laughter. “I suggest we not get caught.”

Keiron turned back to his screens. “Tell the crew I’ve found her trail, and I’ll join you shortly.”

CHESS

This was *not* a good sign.

Two different Greys had come to “check” on me across some non-specific span of time. I had not been allowed off the table or out of my restraints. I had been injected through the needles with something that had sated hunger and thirst, then was examined with an assortment of gizmos, then my translator and trinket were removed and where they went, no idea. If there had been any doubt in my head about how much Human information the Greys had managed to keep from the Gestalt, it was that they had *definitely* verified all teeth were confined strictly to my jaw.

“Why did you come back for me?” I asked a third Grey. Seemed they were there for more than alien butt dentistry. It was impossible to tell them apart beyond I could sense they were all different from one another, and I’d seen a parade. They wore no uniforms or clothing, no marks of rank or insignias, brands, tattoos, implants, or anything else to suggest they had names, numbers, designations, or a hierarchy. Physically, they were all identical, or at least identical enough I couldn’t physically tell them apart. They lacked any natural facial expressions or body language of any kind. Not even nods or gestures.

You don’t realize how much communication is physical until you’re confronted with a Human-shaped species that has *no* body language whatsoever. It’s like being surrounded by a bunch of creepy dolls and then suddenly one moves or speaks and you get a constant jump scare, because your brain has processed *oh, it’s not alive* and then *OH SHIT IT JUST MOVED*.

Fortunately (I suppose...) the Greys did have a *mental* presence, it was

just when they suddenly went still to have some conversation between themselves and then they moved that was a jump scare. It was impossible for my brain to connect their un-animated selves to the hum in my head.

Not that getting into a conversation with them was better than *not* having a conversation with them. Those conversations went two ways: I could pick up on the thoughts underlying what they were telling me, and they could get scraps from my head. And I did not want them rummaging around in my brain for any knowledge I had of the plague or that I'd had the plague. However, if they'd detected I'd had it, they didn't seem to care.

This Grey was *way* more concerned with the scan of my uterus and ovaries, but did spare me an answer. << *We had begun the process with you and your body adjusted well, in addition to you meeting a number of other important criteria. You were selected for a reason.* >>

“But I am a Gestalt citizen now.”

<< *That is not the complication you seem to believe it is. The Gestalt will take the report. We will deny having taken you. They will not send anyone to our homeworld, but if they do, they will not find you, nor a trace of you. Your consort may be the Twilight Scion, but he does not have any friends or finances to mount a private rescue. He may find you, he may come, and it will not matter.* >>

The Grey sounded like it *mostly* believed all of it, and *that* was chilling. Because they weren't Evil Overlord deluded that they had it all on lock. They knew *exactly* what they were doing, the risks they were taking, the consequences they'd face. It also had the flavor of confidence born from experience. They'd done this before. They'd gotten away with it. They'd also been caught, but only a few times, and they'd learned from it, testing and refining their methods and contingencies.

Making off with a Human who *also* happened to be a Gestalt citizen was just the next level of difficulty, but not a complication they felt unprepared to undertake.

I swallowed. “What... *process*?”

The Grey leaned over me. It tried to stretch its slit-mouth in a smile, which mostly just made it open like a rubber coin purse. << *Impregnation.* >>

“What if I don't want to be *impregnated*?”

<< *That is unfortunate.* >>

“Has anyone ever actually said *yay, please fill me up, Space Daddy*?” I

asked.

<< *Yes. There are occasional females who are quite pleased to leave Earth behind, and consider bearing offspring a fair trade or even desirable.*
>>

The flavor of its “words” told me that they *had* picked up Human women who had been all about getting on the spaceship and leaving Earth in the rear view. Which was fine with me, if everyone had agreed to the arrangement.

The Grey must have sensed my contemplation of the possibility life as a Grey BroodSlave might be nice. << *It is unfortunate that now your time with us will be adversarial and that you found a mate, making it impossible for you to find happiness in any other setting. If you had contemplated the possibility you may have enjoyed a life with us, this could have been avoided.*
>>

“You really should have a brochure or something. And why not just pick Human women who *want* to go with you?”

<< *The Human women capable of surviving off Earth as well as being biologically appropriate for our goals are quite rare. When we added “willingness” to the matrix, the Hunt became impossible.*>>

The *Hunt*? Despite how uncomfortably tactile a Grey conversation was, it was also eerily mechanical, like having a conversation with a slightly-too-sentient chatbot. The emotions had mild and bland flavors, with a detached, vague, disinterested air, like it was an attempt at emulating emotions and desires rather than they actually experienced any organically.

Conveying the *Hunt* came with a shock of something old, deep, and *grotesquely* primal that threw into terrifying contrast how bland the usual topics were. The *Hunt* was something they hadn’t bred out of themselves... deliberately. Something that still gave this putty-souled species a twinge of pride.

My lizard brain shuddered and sent pulses of panic through my body.

The Grey watched me with huge, dark eyes shoved into its lightbulb-shaped head.

“I thought you just hunted Human women because we’re cheap bio-putty that can’t fight back,” I spat. “Not exactly *sport* for your Hunt.”

<< *Do not speak of the Hunt* >>

The “words” tasted like carrion and scabs.

The Grey realized the same time I did this conversation had gotten into a whole not-okay area and neither of us wanted to continue it.

Which meant I was *totally* going to continue it.

“Yeah, the Hunt?” I pictured a bunch of Greys digging through a neighborhood yard sale full of cat-piss soaked rugs and broken toys. “Must be that bargain-basement extreme-couponing sort of hunting. You going to want to speak to the manager about your expired coupons too?”

I called up a memory about one time I’d seen a woman go Nuclear Karen on some poor fast food employee because her 25-cent off coupon had expired six months earlier, but *the customer is always right!*

The Grey dug its mind-fingers into the gray matter right behind my eyes. It felt around, trying to squish my offending thoughts like ants. << *Do not speak of the Hunt* >>

“Who... cares... if you’ve got a lifetime supply of lima beans you’ll never eat, you got a bargain, right?” It squished one memory, and I gasped at the shock of pain that sparked across my optic nerve as a memory disappeared.

<< *Do not speak of the Hunt.* >>

“So make me forget you ever mentioned it!” I jerked my head to try to bite at the fingers, but of course there weren’t any fingers. Asshole erasing my memory pathways, so I’d still *have* the memory, but it’d be floating around in my brain like a bone chip?

Time to show him a memory of a slime-squishing video I’d seen involving a hydraulic press.

The Grey withdrew its mental probes with a lingering sensation of it wanted me to shut up about the Hunt, and forcing me to forget about the Hunt was an obvious solution, but erasing the Hunt now that I knew about the Hunt would be incredibly wrong because the Hunt was **the Hunt**. And it despised me for putting it into the logic loop. Well, it despised me in so much as a Grey was capable of emotions, because they’d mostly bio-engineered emotions out of themselves too.

I’d just given the Grey the equivalent of one of those *want to know how to keep an idiot entertained for hours? Turn over cards*.

This was not the sort of mental warfare that I’d ever expected to engage in. I’d expected to fence and spar with other attorneys over the implications of commas, semicolons, definitions, and death by a thousand clever lexemes.

The Grey finished what it was doing scanning my hips and consulting a screen I couldn’t see. It pushed the screen away and moved out of my field of view. Then it left.

Being in a room that is a too-bright, all-white-and-metallic sensory deprivation tank grates on your brain after a while. Your brain starts trying to process the too-brightness (which is never-ending and un-changing) as darkness, but it's *not* darkness, and a strange battle breaks out in your lizard brain. Then your brain starts to tune out the never-ending, never-changing low hums, but that leaves no sound at all, and another strange battle breaks out in your lizard brain because brains don't like total silence. The pulsing pain in your body from laying in one position for hours on end becomes a dull, numb ache as your brain tries to tune it out, which starts yet *another* battle in your lizard brain, because now you're not feeling anything, and brains don't like that either.

And the result of your brain rejecting what stimuli there is because said stimuli isn't all that stimulating, *then* freaking out because there's no stimuli, makes for a very fucked up set of hallucinations and delusions. I had delusions that Keiron was there, but he had scales made of worms. I had delusions my not-cat was licking my shins. I thought I heard my mother calling, telling me to come home.

I tried all kinds of things to give my brain something to do. I tried to count my heartbeat. I wriggled my toes to *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. I sang a *Hundred Bottles of Beer On The Wall*. I tried to do the Hokey Pokey, name every video game I knew, every TV show, remember the lines to various movies, remember the name of that one kid in third grade that would make himself puke for a dollar.

I also started to crave the visits from the Greys just because their gray skin was something interesting to look at, and the voice in my addled head was something to process, and the pain and symptoms inflicted by the procedures was different and a jolt of pleasure endorphins shot through my body along with the searing pain sometimes like *oh fuck yes, SENSATION* and it was getting really, really, *really* fucked up.

They sometimes felt around in my brain, like the first time, like they were sensing how squishy my brain was. They erased memories, but I couldn't tell you what I no longer knew. I recited nursery rhymes in my head, like *Three Billy Goats Gruff* and contemplated *Box Duck Noodle : All My Clues are One* because no matter what:

they couldn't find out my immune system could be used for plague

treatments.

I didn't know how many Humans the Greys had, but from the snippets I got while they prodded my head, they had more than the Gestalt realized. And I wasn't going to give the Greys the bright idea to start their own little side hustle of Putty Faced Miracle Plague Cure.

Finally—it might have been one day, it might have been many days—half a dozen Greys strapped restraints to my ankles, neck, and wrists, then unbolted me from the table, and slowly rotated the table forward so I was upright.

My ears sloshed as my vestibular system wriggled and tried to reboot after being flat.

I hadn't realized how tall the Greys were. They were not my height but also not the shriveled little three-foot-tall evil third graders everyone said they were.

Everything in my body tried to adjust to being upright. Even my eyes felt like they had to adjust. And so fucking much was happening with all these Greys everywhere as they unbuckled me from the table and strapped my wrists tight together and put a bar restraint between my ankles so I would have to shuffle to wherever we were going. There was a sharp, stabbing pain in my very lower gut. A weird kind of tenderness that hurt if I breathed too much.

Tears poured out of my eyes with relief and happiness at seeing and feeling *anything* else.

<< *Do not attempt to escape* >> a Grey warned me as other Greys picked up my leads.

“I'm a prisoner, that's my job,” I mumbled.

<< *The ship has arrived at our destination.* >> “Destination” conveyed a dark rocky moon or asteroid and a complex on it, along with how futile any attempt at escape would be.

So they *hadn't* brought me to their homeworld. I was at some dark site facility.

<< *This way, please.* >>

I shuffled after them, reeling and focused on staying upright. The bed they'd had me on must have been a magical space bed because I didn't have bed sores or what-not, but they'd been doing *something* to me. Probably getting me ready for *impregnation*.

“So what does... *impregnation* entail?” I asked.

One of the Greys seemed surprised. Not that they showed any *physical* reaction beyond acknowledging I had spoken and mechanically turning their head towards my voice, but it was the vibe.

“I mean, you guys don’t have any genitals so... internal gonads? Frozen left overs from before you bio-engineered your testicles off?”

<< *Your questions may be answered in the future if required.* >> The flavor of that thought carried something that reminded me of a smorgasbord and they hadn’t decided what to put on the plate.

I summoned memories of the grossest buffet I’d ever been to. The Greys recoiled their mental fingers.

Never thought I’d be grateful for that really, really vivid memory of that particular buffet that had left me scarred, but it was like Grey-garlic.

They took me out some doors, through a network of familiar-looking corridors, then through another door until we passed through a clear tube that spanned a night-dark exterior area to another massive structure.

I had to stop and take it all in. Above me? Nothing but dark space. Below me? Grey, porous-looking rock. Behind me? A space ship shaped like an elongated teardrop made of a metal that was so slick my eye had a hard time focusing on it. Ahead of me? A large, dark building of indeterminate shape, illuminated by narrow windows and nothing else.

My handlers let me take it all in so I would grasp the impossibility of my situation and the futility of any continued resistance.

CHESS

Fine. *I* wasn't escaping or looking for the nearest exterior door, but Keiron *would* come.

My Grey handlers were fully aware of my thoughts—their minds were the mental equivalent of leaning against a door—and thoroughly unimpressed, yet quite pleased with my stubborn defiance.

<< *This way, please.* >>

I shuffled down shiny passageways that bent, snaked, twisted, and forked, with no discernible visual differences. As Greys approached, panels along the wall flashed with patterns to indicate location, but my handlers impressed upon me my Human DNA would not trigger these patterns, and (if I was feeling clever, savage, or a bit of both) neither would disembodied limbs.

“Oh, I don't know,” I mumbled. “I might try it for kicks.”

<< *Punishment would be necessary.* >>

I shivered at the matter-of-fact information that had, below it, some dispassionate agonized dance party of what “punishment” would be. The Greys had made a careful study of punishment. Punishment was not necessary in *their* society, but they were experts on the matter all the same.

<< *Excellent that you have learned to pay attention. Such adaptability and cleverness is difficult to acquire when coupled with defiant tendencies and intellectual capacity.* >>

“Flattery isn't getting you *anywhere*. Fuck your *hunting* matrix.”

That earned me a glimpse of “punishment,” which was basically a non-specific psychic nightmare that lasted .00001 seconds and was gone before I had even consciously processed it, but it was still long enough my exhausted adrenal system kicked into *holy fuck, IMMINENT DANGER* mode, sending

crushes of chemicals through my wracked body. My brain tried desperately to grasp the shred of memory, but it didn't exist and instead tortured me.

<< *Such punishment is precisely timed to excite your primitive brain centers to cause a reaction, but before your higher order functions can process it.* >> The Grey informed me, dispassionate. << *We find that the startle reaction with no memory attached to it causes sufficient adverse affects that there is almost never a need to have it last long enough for your higher brain functions to process and catalog the experience.* >>

But they definitely *could* let me see what specially-cultivated hellscape they'd created if I wanted to play a mental game of chicken.

I tried to get together some thoughts to torture them, but my brain was too rattled.

<< *There is no point in attempting to order your thoughts. When the—as Humans call it—fight/flight/freeze reflex is triggered, your lower survival instincts are activated. Your Human brain, to reserve resources necessary for survival, cuts off higher levels of logic, reasoning, and puzzle-solving, leaving you reliant on instinct and rehearsed behaviors that will have no application in this scenario or setting. Please be calm. Stress is not conducive to the **process**. Please do not compel us to trigger these extreme responses.* >>

So this level of stress would keep me from getting pregnant? Sure thing, Captain.

I abandoned hope of trying to poke them back, so I paid attention to my surroundings. Which didn't help much.

The passages had been carefully designed to be as identical and nondescript to non-Greys as possible.

<< *We have learned Humans will attempt escape even when escape leads them to a door to the outside* >> one handler told me blandly. << *But such token resistance is exhausting for the Human and can imperil our objectives or endanger young being incubated.* >>

A door manifested out of the wall to my right. As in... there was no door, and now there was a door.

Box Duck Noodle or just really good industrial design?

Smooth space-hallway, then the hallway parted into a larger room. I stared at the hallway for a stupid second, trying to spot the grooves or depressions to indicate the doorframe, or some sort of markings with a room number, but... nothing.

<< *Specially designed.* >> If a Grey could sound smug, that Grey sounded smug.

I shuffled in and smells instantly hit my nose. Not bad ones, but *Human*. The scent of a room that had people in it. And the vibe of a room that had been lived in.

<< *Stay still.* >>

The room was a large room with an odd, irregular shape. But there were eight beds that looked like something out of a creepy abandoned hospital, each with a thin mattress and eerily-Earth-like white sheets and pillows. On the footboard of each bed were hooks on which various indistinct fabric—all in the same gray/white shade—hung. There were three large screens on three different walls, and in front of each screen were pillow-like chairs and a rug. There was a central table with two long benches. The screens played shows from Earth.

And there were six other Human women. Three clustered in the pillow-chairs in front of a single screen, one curled up on a bed, one sitting at a blank screen, and one sitting in a corner.

Lucky number seven?

The Greys unfastened my restraints and ducked out of the door without another word.

I stared at the strange, surreal scene, completely naked and barefoot.

The women who had been in front of the screens—four of them—unfolded themselves and slowly made their way over to where I stood. Two of them seemed a little out of it. All of them had the same terrible probe-injuries I did. The two who seemed more out of it had bruises on top of bruises. They all wore short little shifts like hospital gowns and were about my age, with hair of varying shades and lengths, but haircare was not a Grey priority.

“Get up,” one woman told the one on the bed, giving her a gentle shake. “Someone new is here.”

The woman on the bed rolled over and upright. She seemed out of it as well. Not in the drugged way, but in the broken way.

“You speak English?” the second woman, who seemed most coherent, asked me.

I nodded. I felt along my ear. No translator. No trinket. And the few words of High Dialect I spoke wouldn’t get me far.

“I’m Marlowe,” she told me. She pointed to one of the beds. “We figured

they were bringing someone new. Guess that's for you, if you want to wear clothes. We don't really care. It doesn't matter."

Dead-souled laughter from the woman still sitting on her bed.

I'd start with clothes. Clothes seemed to be the tone. I moved to my bed. Ran my hand over the footboard. They must have lifted the design from Earth to make us feel more "at home." I shrugged on one of the little gray gowns. The fabric was slinky and eerie, like wearing Grey skin.

Gross.

But it made me aware of how damn cold the facility was, and the dress was warm. My feet, however, were not. I turned around to face the little group again. "I'm Francesca, but everyone calls me Chess."

Introductions went around. The dead-souled woman on the bed stood and the source of her sadness was evident: she had a slight swell under her gown.

I think I went the same shade as my gown.

I shouldn't have been *surprised*. The Greys had been pretty clear on what the goal was. They hadn't taken us from Earth to do the usual trap & release. They'd brought us here to do the actual incubation.

Marlowe looked at the last woman, who sat tucked into a corner and stared at nothing. "She got her news too. Have they done you yet?"

"I... I don't know." I had no idea what the Greys had actually done. Any of those procedures could have been impregnation. Or insemination. Or pollination. Or whatever the hell it was they did. My mind reeled and everything got dim, except it didn't, because everything was so bloody polished. I dropped myself down onto my bed. "I've been in sensory deprivation."

"Oh, you've been *baaad*," one of the glass-eyed ones intoned.

"Yeah, I escaped the first time. I'm a flight risk," I said.

"You *escaped*?" Marlowe asked while the dead-souled Eirlys looked at me.

"I managed it." I opted to not reveal Keiron just yet. It might put them in danger if I started telling them all about life beyond this place, or they might get the wrong idea that the calvary was coming. Because it was probably just one 25XA on a trashbarge. "But they got me back, and so here I am. What's with the Earth programming? Do they have the world's best satellite dish?"

Half-laughter from Seren. "It's all shitty reruns of shows and news broadcasts my parents watched. There's a lot of it, but it's all old crap they must have stolen."

“Who’d have thought the Greys raided the VHS boxes at the local flea market,” I said.

“I swear that’s what they did. There are even commercials, which are the best part.”

“I like the news broadcasts best,” Solenne whispered.

“There’s a lot of it, at least,” Marlowe said, annoyed.

“They don’t want us *miserable*,” Eirlys said, her voice hollow. “We die that way.”

Nobody said anything to that, and I tasted something really awful in the air. I had so many questions, like who had been here the longest. What have they told you? Have they told you they think Humans are psys? Have they mentioned the Plague? The Gestalt at all? Do they just not tell you anything about anything? Had they met other Humans? Did they know what happened with the offspring? Did they all refuse to go to the Grey homeworld too, and got stuck here?

None of the women had translators—why would they need them? And everyone was from North America. Four from the US, two from Canada, we all spoke English.

The group wasn’t silent, but there was an unspoken *talking is pointless* air to the room. Nobody told me who they’d been on Earth, or where they were from, when they’d been taken, how, where, why, what they’d left behind. Nobody asked me anything. Nobody pried into the particulars of my escape. Eirlys rolled back over and curled up on her bed. The two glass-eyed ones wandered back to the screen.

Marlowe and Seren wandered after them.

They all had deep probe wounds up the back of their calves. Seren had them in the back of her thighs.

There was no *despair*. It was past active despair. It was long-suffering futility.

I went over to Eirlys’ bed. She stared at nothing, curled into a fetal position. “Do you want a blanket?”

It was kind of cold in here.

She didn’t answer.

I touched her upper arm. The jolt of Human skin contact hit me—so different from 25XA. A charge of grief and homesickness shot through my brain. She jerked away like it hurt, and I withdrew to head over to the screen.

Old fast-food commercials and some terrible movie of the week about a

hijacked nuclear-powered luxury cruise ship it was, then.
I know you're coming, Keiron.

CHESS

Food, actually, was an improvement over 25XA and the best thing I'd had to eat since my little pre-abduction pizza party. Breakfast was something that was a credible imitation of vegetarian sausage, fake eggs, and bread. It wasn't like *sliced* bread, but more sort of like the questionable union of zucchini bread with cornbread. There were even little roasted potatoes—and I was *damn* sure they were Earth potatoes, as well as buckets of steamed leafy greens, which were not exactly a breakfast food, but they had to make sure we got our veg somehow. And there was no coffee, but there *was* a sort of imitation green tea situation, and for condiments we had a paste flavored with the multiberry herb I recognized from Erkus' garden *and* a vegan cream cheese/butter combo.

"Bastard Greys, feeding me good food." I slathered my bread with the multiberry paste before I shoveled it in my face, grateful to taste *anything* that wasn't worm paste.

Marlowe poked her fake eggs. "It's gross."

"What are you talking about? This is amazing." There wasn't a lot of variety, but there was plenty to go around. I was not proud and shoveled sausage—which was salty *and* savory with a bit of sweet, even if it had that vegetarian texture to it—into my face and tears went down my cheeks.

"Are you fucking high? This is worse than what they serve in cattle class on a plane," she said while Fairen stared at her plate and Brynn choked down bits of egg and the rest all just scowled at their food.

"No, I've been eating what passes for food on the outside." The Greys had *clearly* gone through a *lot* of effort to engineer (or even outright import from Earth) food depressed Humans might at least take some bites of. And

there wasn't a chance this stuff was being grown at this facility. It was getting shipped in, presumably from their home system. Which meant Keiron might be able to track down shipments.

Marlowe picked up some of the rubbery fake eggs and dropped them onto her plate. They made a sound like vodka-engorged marshmallow chicks made. "If you think this is good eating, what the fuck do they serve on the outside?"

"Worms, mostly," I said.

"*Worms?*" Seren perked up.

"Primary protein source. Doesn't taste like anything. Flavoring comes from spices and marinades, but the profiles would choke an Earth goat, and the textures are disgusting." I inhaled some of the berry jelly/paste to block out the damn memory of that cube at the clinic. Still haunting me.

They all looked at their plates.

"Fuck," Marlowe whispered to herself.

An uneasy prickle moved along my shoulders. No guarantee we'd be getting out of here, but I doubted they wanted to hear about how the food was good. Something seemed to edge a bit closer to breaking in all of them. I guess you need to believe that your captors are throwing you bread crusts and water from the bottom of a portapotty, because finding out that all that awaited you on the other side was swampy lemon pepper and worm paste was pretty disheartening.

Note to self: keep stories of the outside to an absolute minimum. No one had asked me about the outside. Even when I'd been first picked up by Keiron, I hadn't cared about *oh, what's out on this side of the galaxy*. I'd just wanted to go home and forget this had ever happened. I'd sat in the cockpit with him and looked at the endless black and not processed any of it. For *most* of my initial time on 25XA, I hadn't processed any of it. It'd happened, it'd been interesting. *Check, please.*

I hadn't wanted anyone to try to hype me up on my circumstances, either.

I privately pondered how well fed the Humans on the Grey homeworld were. Maybe extremely well. Fuck. Maybe they even had proper tea. *Or coffee.*

Maybe the Greys smuggled back huge amounts of coffee, or even coffee *plants* (because these were Earth potatoes, I was sure of it), to please pet Humans. The Greys had gone to huge efforts to feed *us*—the Humans who'd bite their faces off—something we'd find at least tolerable. And me? I got a

full on dopamine high off it.

Marlowe turned her eggs over. “What did you do on Earth?”

I jolted out of my caffeine-laced fantasies while Seren gave her a shut up look and everyone else scowled. I answered, “Attorney. Well, almost. They got me before I sat for the Bar. You?”

“Who cares,” Seren muttered.

“I do,” Marlowe snapped, “I’m trying to figure out their type. They clearly like us smart. I was a staff accountant working on my CPA. Seren was a 1st year medical resident, Fairen was a programmer, and—”

“Shut up, please,” Seren said.

Marlowe scowled.

I finished Marlowe’s eggs. “They also like us feisty. They’re fine with draining the fight out of us, they just want the genetic predisposition. They’ve bio-engineered all the fucks right out of themselves.”

Fairen, the one from the corner, cringed so hard I felt it in my teeth.

“I told you to *shut up*,” Seren snapped at Marlowe.

Fairen composed herself, pale as a ghost, and said, “I’m fine.”

Seren snorted, looked at Fairen, then Marlowe, and said. “We all get handled differently, or used. Take your pick. Does it matter if we’re all smart and obnoxious? It’s not going to get us out of here, and we’re on an asteroid.”

Jesus fuck, I needed off this ride. Time to change the subject. “Did they offer any of you a trade? Life on the Homeworld in return for willing participation?”

Marlowe twirled hair around one finger. “Standing offer for all of us. Why, you like the food that much?”

“Hah. I didn’t get that offer. I’ve been a bad, bad, naughty girl.”

“Surprising. I’d think they’d be into that kind of defiance. They do like it when we fight, as you’ve noticed. I think they like it the longer we can hold out. Genetic predisposition, like you said.”

The Hunt. That was why.

Fuck. Were the Greys trying to bio-engineer *predatory drive* back into themselves? They were generally regarded as fucking cowards and general douchebags who melted like cheap wax in sunlight, but if they were picking strong-willed, intelligent Earth women with the natural inclination to resist and be combative...

Well. That was some Grade A Nightmare fuel. Perhaps the Greys weren’t just in it for the free bio-putty.

“They tell you anything else useful?” Because if they were, and if I *did* escape from this, I was *totally* tattling. I was going to go on every Gestalt talk show and spill all the gray beans like the battiest alien-reptilian-deep-state-adrenochrome-spouting nutter on Earth.

Marlowe shrugged. “They try not to tell us anything at all, but you know how it is when they talk. You pick up things.”

“Yep. Works both ways, you know. I like to think about squishing their heads in hydraulic presses. Or getting torn apart by angry cats. They *really* don’t like that.”

“You’ll be punished,” Eirlys advised me.

“Already have been. If I’m not escaping, I’m going down in flames.”

“They’ll punish *us* if you’re incorrigible,” Fairen said, tone hollow.

Everyone except me turned the same color as our clothes. Marlowe tried to be defiant, but it was pretty obvious there had been an *unlucky* number seven before me who was currently no longer in residence.

“Then let’s see how far I can push them before they turn whatever pathetic imitation of anger they’ve got on you.” I almost said *we aren’t escaping, so who cares? Live free or die trying* or whatever other rah-rah USA-centric bullshit came to mind. But I didn’t get to vote for the group. If they’d decided they didn’t want to die on this particular dark hill, I didn’t have the right to imperil their lives.

My defiance just earned me a bunch of vacant stares.

“We know what they do when they get angry,” Marlowe said. “They’ve made examples before. And it isn’t *you* they’ll make an example of. So don’t be a hero, please.”

“So who’s taken the homeworld offer?” I asked.

“At least two since I’ve been here,” Fairen said softly. “And I heard about others, and other places.”

So at least two Humans on their homeworld. Nobody elaborated further. If you’d been to one Grey dark site, you’d probably been to them all, and of course the Greys would have more than one. “Fine. I’ll behave. But what if I told you someone might come looking for us? It’s a long shot, but someone knows I’m missing.”

“Your parents aren’t coming for you.”

“Yeah, I know that. But the first time I escaped, where do you think I escaped *to*? Where do you think the Greys stole me *from*?”

This got a bunch of attention. Even from Fairen and Eirlys. It just wasn’t

the attention I was expecting, because the tension suddenly ratcheted up hot enough to melt salt. Marlowe said flatly, “No one cares. No one is looking for us. Drop it.”

“I—”

“I know you’re an attorney and your job is to argue, that’s your *entire reason for living*, but knock it off. Even if someone is looking for you, they’re *one person against this*.”

Well, she might be right about that. I pursed my lips, took a breath, then nodded, hiding how her accusations bruised. Growing up, I’d always been told I didn’t know when to let things go, or always had to have the last word, or “badgered” or was like a “rat terrier.” I preferred *persistent* and *determined* and worked to try to be more *knows what she wants* and less *rat terrier bitch*. If I stayed here long enough, all my hope would probably drain away too, and it’d hurt to even contemplate the possibility one day there’d be something more.

The only future they probably saw is what Fairen was enduring right now, and their choice was whatever they found on the Grey homeworld versus... this.

I finished my hot tea just as the doors parted and three Greys arrived.

CHESS

Human hope is so persistent. >>

I cringed at the Grey's contemplation of this. As always, their emotions weren't anything anyone with feelings would actually call a *feeling*. There was an artifice to all of it, except when they had twinges of a primal hunger that really made my soul want to vomit. Their admiration of "hope" (which was more *sheer stubborn refusal to accept the futility of their situation*) was different, and something they wanted. Our survival instinct.

"He'll come," I whispered, just to piss them off. "He's on his way now."

<< *Yes, this is likely true. And it will not matter.* >>

There was a swirl of something in the Greys' minds as they exchanged the equivalent of a meaningful look. I yanked against my restraints. "What are you lot planning?"

<< *Calm, please.* >>

"Fuck you and your *calm*," I snapped, bucking and the restraints bit into my skin to punish me.

The Greys did not answer and withdrew their mental contact, but before they did so, I caught glimpses and understanding of what they had planned for Keiron.

My throat surged and my stomach clenched. A third Grey swiftly appeared to shove a tube down my throat as I vomited. My esophagus felt like it was going to rupture as it clenched around the perfectly-sized leave-no-risk-of-aspiration tube.

Tears squeezed out of my eyes and ran down my cheeks. They didn't bother to wipe those away.

Fuck the Greys.

<< *Calm, please* >> was the mind-whispered command.

I couldn't retort anything because I still had the tube down my throat, and they'd slammed the mental door on me. But I'd caught a glimpse, and that had left me reeling in utter horror. *If* Keiron showed up, they weren't going to kill him. They intended to capture him. A 25XA with scales like his (the result of many generations of prime-trinket cosmos-blessed breeding) available to breed with his ideal cosmos-ordained mate was an opportunity. They hadn't decided exactly how to leverage the opportunity, but they had decided that the swirl of possibilities demanded contemplation before killing Keiron.

Just when I thought it really couldn't get any grosser... the Greys said *hold my puke tube*.

The swirl of Grey contemplation left my brain addled. The Greys *hadn't* decided what to do, so they were pondering all the possibilities, and some of them were sadistic, made worse by their emotional detachment, while other possibilities were laced with that vestigial predatory desire still inside them, and they pondered if they might enjoy performing certain procedures or seeing certain outcomes. The glimpses were like walking through a terrifying avenue in Hell and only seeing things through windows or in shadow as you ran through said avenue, trying to find your way out.

I barely remained aware of what they were doing (it just added to the hellscape) except that it hurt and the tube in my throat made me gag. Finally, they unharnessed me from everything and rotated the table back up.

My legs refused to stand after whatever they'd done, and I ended up in a heap at their feet.

Mental murmurs resulted in new Greys arriving, and when I looked up, I was pretty sure I *had* entered Hell's back alley. Because these Greys were...

There were two of them. They were bigger and well... more... *Human...* than the standard issue Grey, with smaller heads, smaller eyes, with flat but well-defined muscles that shoved against their putty-like skin as they moved. And as they looked at me, there was something *flat* about those eyes. The two were naked, like other Greys, but unlike other Greys, they had some proto-genitalia that looked like a horned rhino beetle peeking out of a kangaroo's pouch.

My brain went *nope, I'm going for a break*.

These two Greys hefted me to my feet and half-carried, half-dragged me down the hallway, accompanied by the other Greys. The mental walls

remained up on all of them, although the standard Greys minded the show like there was a possibility the big Greys might get rowdy.

<< *If you were more docile* >> the Grey to my left told me while I tried not to gibber to myself << *we would not have to resort to Silence.* >>

“I don’t do docile,” I managed to bite around my lizard brain begging me to be docile. If the Greys kept those damn walls up, I didn’t know *anything*. They were unreadable physically. Granted, those mental walls seemed taxing for them to keep up, and I felt them shimmer and move as I clawed at them, but I felt like I was stumbling around in the dark while being attached to a tilt-a-whirl. “So guess you’re going to have to keep up the Silence.”

The Greys seemed aggravated by this and discomfited I could sense the “Silence.” *And* that they had to work at it.

They deposited me back into the main room and closed the door.

Marlowe and Seren rushed over to where I just lay on the floor, catching my breath and waiting for my brain to stop spinning.

“It’s over now,” Marlowe told me gently while Seren pet my hair. “It’s over.”

I willed myself to *not* sob. I was not going to cry. Keiron was coming, and the Greys *weren’t* going to make off with him and use us to infuse high-quality cosmic-laced Human/25XA “perfect combo” DNA into their genetic putty. It *wasn’t* going to happen.

Grey “excitement” at the possibilities of being able to use a 25XA like Keiron made me want to puke and scream into the void that Keiron needed to forget all about me.

I focused on Keiron, and my memories of him, and him leading me through the herb garden. Him getting upset about “ballpit” or “stuffed”. The sound of his voice when he spoke High Dialect. The taste of him, and the sensation of his tail gently holding my ankle. The memory of his colorful scales was the brightest thing about this dumpster fire, and I clung to it.

Marlowe looked at the now-closed door, expression really grim. But whatever she was going to ask, she didn’t ask it.

I made myself speak, so I didn’t throw up or just start screaming. Brain-bleach needed to be invented. “I hate talking to them.”

“Their heads are like rat nests.” Marlowe shuddered.

Seren peered at me. “They *talk* to you? Like more than their just *calm, please* or whatever they tell us about how excited we should be?”

“Sometimes. But you can’t overhear the other conversations they’re

having?”

“Sort of.” Marlowe seemed pale. “Like overhearing something in the boss’ office. That’s what it’s like when they talk to you. They say one thing, and they mean it, but then there’s this other shady stuff under it. Try not to talk to them. It doesn’t make a difference.”

“They’re so gross,” Brynn said from her bed, voice small but carrying in the strange-shaped room.

“If you piss them off enough, they block you out. They call it Silence,” I said. “I’m not sure that’s better. It’s like being helpless.”

“They can make it worse.” Brynn’s dead-voice whisper carried through the room.

“Why haven’t you gone to their homeworld?” I asked. If they honestly believed there was no escape, why suffer? “If the outcome’s going to be the same, why not be a pampered pet?”

“You sound like you want the option,” Marlowe said.

“Fuck them. The only option I want is to keep giving them a hard time.”

“I want to go back home,” Marlowe said. “If you don’t *want* to go to Homeworld, they won’t take you.”

“Have they told you they’ll take you back to Earth when they’re done with you?” I asked.

“They’ve sort of alluded to it,” Marlowe said. “They said we can’t be useful forever. You know, menopause is a thing.”

Seren added, softly, “They’re wrecking our bodies. They haven’t told us that, but I’ve caught it in their under-thoughts. They’re going to use us up. They didn’t allude to you going home when they’re done?”

“No.” I bit my tongue, adding *and that’s because I know they’re full of shit and you’re never going back to Earth*. I clung to hope Keiron was going to save me, which to any onlooker was just as futile as their hope the Greys would return them to Earth.

I hugged myself and rubbed my arms. I needed some damn soap *under* my skin. The pure grossness of what they wanted to do to Keiron haunted me, and I tried to tell myself it didn’t matter, because it wasn’t going to happen. The Greys could have whatever fucked-up fantasies they wanted. Keiron was going to turn their heads into Christmas lights. I reached to touch my trinket before my fingers met my unadorned ear and I cursed to myself. Damn Greys, taking my sparklies.

There was no mutual sharing of *what shitty procedure did you undergo*

today. There wasn't the energy from anyone to hear about anyone else's bad game of doctor, so we all sat in front of the screens and watched old local television broadcasts and didn't speak at all, and just marinated in a collective misery soup.

The Greys greatly limited how much information we could glean from our surroundings. For obvious reasons: *if* the Gestalt discovered the site, mind-mapping would provide Gestalt Enforcement with very little. *Officially*, there was only *one* Grey type, and the entire Grey genetic engineering program was a wild success with no problems whatsoever, and every species should try it. Totally great. Their search for biological material was to *improve* upon perfection, and not because they were wandering around some shitty genetic cul-de-sac.

Which begged the question... at what point, and in what manner, were the Greys going to reveal their Newly Revitalized Human-Enhanced Greyness?

That was two questions. And I didn't really want the answer to either.

KEIRON

Keiron watched the myriad of screens at his station as the ship glided onto approach for the small, bitter moon that a tiny planet clung to with all of its miserable gravitational might. This insignificant dot on navigation charts was little more than a stopping point for the most distant grind-haulers, being in an area of the Gestalt that existed only to, seemingly, extend the travel time and fuel consumption of anyone obligated to traverse it on their way to somewhere more interesting. The planets here were insignificant, their stars dim, not even asteroids and comets trundled through here.

The people who made their homes here were some combination of poor, disgruntled, overly optimistic, antisocial, or doing things away from curious onlookers. Like fraudulent cat breeding, plant hybridization, questionable biological research, weapons development. Although given the vulnerability of anyone in this sector, and how much a large or fancy facility would stand out, it was exclusively low-grade in-the-barn development from hobbyists who didn't recognize their own limitations. The Gestalt turned a blind eye to what happened out this way. If it didn't shine brightly enough for anyone to know it existed, it didn't exist.

The standard approach path was not the one on the charts—the one on the charts was the one that people who didn't know better took. The first-timers, the outsiders, the prying eyes.

“*Stop*,” he snapped at the telemetry officer about to run a scan. The High Dialect bit into the other members of crew.

“A scan is standard procedure,” the Captain told him tersely.

“A scan is *not* standard procedure for *our* purposes,” Keiron growled.

The Captain stepped up to him, scales a shade of aggravated dawn. “What

are we doing here? I've brought the ship here—"

"You've brought the ship here because *I* said to, and that was the arrangement. You want Greys? I will find you Greys. Don't question how I do it, and I won't question what you do to them when you find them." Keiron shrugged on his surcoat and bandoliers, fingers flicking through his gear with practice and purpose. "Dock the ship. *I* will disembark, and you will pay the bill. That is *all* you will do. No sensors, no scans, no comms. Nothing."

Septus fluffed his feathers.

"You stay here as well," Keiron told the bird. "There's no story for you here."

"The story is we're here at all," Septus protested.

"Your heroism is touching." Keiron snapped his tail against the ground and stalked off the bridge before his temper broke. They were all here to scavenge something from his mate's suffering. They would exploit him, and he'd permit it—until they imperiled her. "Make no mistake: if *anything* any of you do imperils *my* mission, our deal is off. I'll find a ride back to 25XA, and you lot can find your own way home and manage your own engines."

They'd find their way home... eventually. After the ship's owner had had plenty of time to get angry about their missing ship, and then their ship returning worse for wear and needing an overhaul.

The ship came into dock and pinged with the usual warning that docking was not free (especially not to fancy ships) and charges would accrue after ten standard marks. The Captain glared at Septus. Septus huffed, but then provided his biokey for the bill.

This particular moon's atmosphere barely existed, obligating him to use a breather. The moon's temperature was frigid, but not beyond his ability to tolerate. The airlock hissed behind him, then the exterior door opened, and he disembarked. The dock, constructed of salvaged metal, cables, and high-strength fabrics, swayed in the moon's limited gravity. He stabbed his tail between the various links and holds and hung on until the magnetic charge kicked in and the studs in his boots could anchor him somewhat firmly to the surface.

Not a very strong grip, though. Worse than last time.

Three battered ships clung to other slips.

He made his way down the dock, using his tail to grip the various hold points along the way just in case the magnets decided to give way or the moon shifted and tossed him off the surface. His scales thickened in response

to the cold, extending over his face and head and down his spine to ward off the cold as his hearts pumped more blood to keep his core warm. Light was provided by a couple of dim, flickering stand lamps over his head, leaving large pockets of darkness.

Despite the barely livable conditions, he sensed movement in the dark pockets. His scales extended into sharp-edged plates and he hardened his extended claws in anticipation. In the non-atmosphere, all sound was deadened and from far away, if it came at all. He strained his senses and caught the haze-shimmer of something in the darkness.

He shifted his tail into a multi-pronged blade and dragged it along the metal grate. The shattering sound pierced the thin atmosphere.

The haze-shimmer shuffled further into the shadows.

He stopped and stared after it, slowly dragging his tail across the metal in a pattern of smaller and smaller concentric circles. The sound cut across the small moon.

He proceeded on his way, swishing his tail behind him every few steps.

There was a small cafe/shop/trash heap at the far end of the dock, the only meaningful structure on this bitter moon. He pushed open the outer door, waited through the hissing, then opened the second and entered the shop. The scent of food hit him, seeming foreign and far-away.

Half a dozen other grind-haulers and locals sat belly-up to the miserable, pitted bar that, like everything else here, was built out of scrap and garbage. In the back, something hissed and sizzled. In the front, a male 384B rippled the half-dozen antenna that rose out of his sloped shoulders, while half a dozen matching, dark eyes watched from their place in the straight line of sockets across his oblong head. Two more eyes positioned on the side of his head watched his surroundings.

A predator's head, for all Dalzovar tried to convince his patrons he was nothing but a food-slinger. Dalzovar had a long history of doing things to certain individuals at the behest of certain *other* individuals, and such knowledge would have been very much of interest to yet other individuals. Keiron collected little scraps of information, pieced it together with the left over scraps from his better days and other professions, and it all made for a very interesting collection of dark currency.

He approached the bar but did not sit. "If I have to ask, I will *insist*."

Dalzovar's antennas played over each other while his six forward-facing eyes blinked in a wave pattern. "You are not in a position to insist on much,

Keiron.”

Keiron swept his tail across the floor, lightly. The tormented bell sound made one of the other patrons scuttle out the airlock.

Dalzovar’s antennas shot forward and sharpened with poisoned hooks at the tips. “You brought GSE here. Go insist to *them*.”

The remaining patrons made no noise, but shifted various body parts to communicate their agreement that he was in the wrong place, talking to the wrong people.

Keiron looked out the warped windows towards where the ship sat, sleek and silvery-pink in the miserable lighting. Then he looked back at Dalzovar. “GSE? That’s not GSE. Those are some of my close friends, and a ship loaned to us by some friends of friends. Merely a vacation jaunt. You never saw them, me, or that ship.”

“Fuck you, you don’t have friends.”

Keiron’s scales washed bright cosmic blue streaked with magenta veins. “My skills make me very popular. I am going to make your life *needlessly* difficult if I find out you don’t like to rat out Grey bastards. Unless you do like them. Good business?”

Dalzovar launched a poisoned stinger at him. Keiron dodged, and it lodged into the wall behind them. The magenta veining Keiron’s scales spread as Dalzovar snapped, “Fuck you. Nobody deals with those cheap gray fucks, and you know it.”

“I know that there are people who are desperate enough to find the Grey’s payscale perfectly adequate.” Keiron reached across the table and dug his claws into the thick profusion of exoskeleton plates at the male’s throat. He yanked him halfway across the table. “So tell me what else I should know. I’ll start with you, and then I’ll start asking everyone else—”

Everyone got up.

“Sit *down*,” Keiron snarled in High Dialect and smashed his tail against the side of the chair leg. Then he swung his attention back to the male. “You start telling me what I want to know, or I will sabotage every beacon in this area and Gestalt Public Works will be crawling all over this sector re-harnessing it.”

Dalzovar tried to jerk free. Keiron smashed him into the table. His carapace cracked and his side-facing eyes bulged in their sockets, momentarily sucking outwards before the optic nerves yanked them back in. Keiron clenched his claws, twisting the nearest three antenna like string in his

grip.

Dalzovar resisted as his carapace cracked.

Keiron smashed his tail against the ground again. The sound put cracks through the thick windows and cracked Dalzovar's carapace further.

Dalzovar pawed at his wrist. Keiron brushed his talon along the male's face and sensed the fight leaving his body.

Keiron released him and stood back, tail tapping a pattern on the ground.

Dalzovar scrunched up his face-plates and pawed at his abused antenna with the little appendages that were neither forelegs, arms, or antenna on his shoulders. "I didn't see it myself. Don't *know* anything for sure. But some ripples got detected. Usually means a Grey transit, high speed non-normal transport. Here, this is the data."

He tapped on his personal device to send over the information. "It's off-beacon and not headed towards home. And they," he pointed his antenna at one of the patrons, "know another grind-hauler that makes a weekly run between an inner moon of this system and 374D-minora. There's usually another transport waiting to take the cargo out on a similar path."

"Why is this relevant?" Keiron asked. "Where does the cargo from 374D-minor originate from?"

"Comes from all over, probably. But rumor has it it's lump-worm crumbles. Dehydrated, but fresh. Sometimes ships in with some odd chemicals."

Keiron swirled his tail on the floor. The translator said *lump-worm*, but he recognized the word Dalzovar had used—a particular variety of meal worm. A very popular worm, despite its unfortunate translated name into Utilitarian, particularly prized for its excellent nutrient content and way that it transformed flavors and textures depending on how it was cooked and prepared. It was exceptionally popular at elite dinner tables for how the most small portions could be satisfying, and there was a reoccurring fashion trend of tiny portions artfully served and a "three bite meal" of exquisite beauty.

His family had raised lump-worms in better times. They'd sold all their breeding stock and just retained genetic imprints to rebuild.

Processing the worms into crumbles was common to use it as food for cats and kit-kits and other prized animals that justified the exceptional cost of such a diet. But dehydrating it was *only* done if it was going on a deep-range transit, otherwise dehydration damaged it and was considered a waste. "What kind of chemicals?"

Dalzovar waved his antennae. “Don’t know. We all just figured someone’s breeding freakish cat hybrids.”

“That would be an expensive hobby for this area,” Keiron said.

Dalzovar’s antennae continued to wave. “There are weirdos with money out this way.”

“Exactly.” Keiron pointed his tail at the patron Dalzovar had indicated. “You. *Talk.*”

The patron shrugged. “I don’t do the haul, but I know who does. They make a weekly run. There’s another transport that meets them. Always the same ship, but not always the same pilot.”

“And why is this noteworthy to your friend, aside from the haul and location?”

“The ship they use doesn’t look like anything that can do more than go back and forth between system moons, but they’re using it to haul fairly expensive cargo and it’s not staying in system.”

Keiron pocketed the data.

“Don’t fucking come back,” Dalzovar told his back.

Keiron ignored him. Dalzovar would take his money. Dalzovar *always* took the money.

He loaded up the data into the ship’s systems. The Captain watched from his perch, but said nothing and didn’t ask questions.

Keiron studied the trajectories, then mulled over the scraps of information he’d obtained.

“Those are Grey transit signatures,” the Captain finally commented, leaning down over the edge of his perch. “Exactly the sort of thing GSE looks for. High speed non-commercial transit from the looks of it.”

“That’s what we’re looking for,” someone else said. “The time signatures match as well. They brought her through here.”

“They might have, but those ships are capable of quick course changes at speed. They deliberately take non-standard transits to prevent trajectory estimations. They are excellent at evasion,” the Captain informed him. Then his scales darkened. “Until now.”

Keiron called up the moon and system mentioned by the patron. He overlaid the various potential paths and estimations. The Grey ship’s trajectory didn’t match the trajectory the small ship had taken. But the small

ship had headed out *farther* off beacon, based on the trajectories from what known tracking there had been before it had disappeared beyond view.

There were three sectors that the small ship presumably could have reached, five if he allowed for re-fueling and a skilled pilot.

But one sector called to him. One set of stars.

“There,” he said, indicating their destination. “She’s there.”

“How can you be sure?” the Captain asked while the rest of the crew on the bridge seemed inclined to disagree.

Because Chess was a psy, and she was, somehow, calling to him across the void. He knew like he knew he loved her. That she was his mate. A powerful trained psy could sometimes reach across spans of cosmos, but not this distance.

But Chess was Human, and her psy abilities were completely different from anything the Gestalt seemed to know or understand. Chess heard the song of the cosmos itself, and *those* rules cared nothing for time or distance.

It was easy to lie to the Captain, and his scales betrayed nothing. Keeping Chess’ secrets was as easy as telling the truth, it seemed. “Did you bring me on this pleasure jaunt for my opinion or my expertise?”

Silence.

The Captain bent over the podium. “Transponders off. Adjust the veil to twilight. Armory, break out the kit.”

The ship sped into the darkness.

CHESS

Being an incorrigible bitch, I was now (once again) singing *One Hundred Grey Corpses On The Wall*.

And being a determined bitch, I had gotten to forty-six before losing count after they jabbed me with a couple of very thick needles at once.

<< *This sort of resistance is unnecessary.* >>

“It’s the principle of the thing,” I rasped. “You also didn’t need to use all those needles at the same time.”

The Grey who had spoken bent over me. Their lightbulb-shaped head blotted out the light. << *We wish to demonstrate to you that the discomfort you experience from these procedures is directly proportional to your behavior.* >>

“I’ll keep being a bitch, thanks. I know it gets you guys off. The *Hunt* and all.”

<< *Do not speak of the Hunt.* >>

That earned me at least four mental fingers in my brain, stabbing at my memories of the Hunt and trying to erase it. Their strange version of anger made me writhe as I mentally ran and hid in my own head while I summoned visions of popping Grey heads like balloons during weird balloon fetish porn. *Oh, I love bouncing on your head, Spindly Space Daddy, fill me up with your empty vaporous seed...*

One of them smacked my brain with a mental hand.

I couldn’t breathe, my heart didn’t beat, I felt everything and nothing at once, I heard sounds but didn’t process them, I saw things but didn’t understand them. I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t think.

My brain had just blue-screened.

The Greys, Silent, observed.

My brain re-booted in the singularly most horrible, tactile, sensation-by-sensation, system-by-system experience I ever had.

As soon as the necessary systems came back online, I shook violently and panic coursed through my system like an injection pouring through my bloodstream. I jerked against my restraints, thoughts consumed with *run, escape* and then pure, absolute panic.

The Greys continued to observe in Silence.

Finally, enough of my brain came back to be able to grab the panic and kick it into a corner, but I couldn't stop the shaking or breathing or my heart racing or the cold-sweat terror.

<< *We tolerate your poor behavior* >> one Grey finally said, breaking the Silence. Beyond the wall of speech was the un-expressed threat that they *would* do that again. And that one blue-screen smack was usually all it took to teach a Human where the line was. Usually.

And if it *didn't* make me tractable, there was always "punishment."

They'd prefer not to break me or cause such extreme trauma.

Normally, I'd tell them *fuck you, traumatize me*, but even the suggestion that they'd mentally smack me or "punish" me again sent my psyche cowering into the lightless realm of eternal nope.

The reality of my situation finally crushed through my skull like pasta through an extruder.

<< *Excellent. You have shown ideal survival adaptations.* >> Beyond that, the under-conversation was they'd be reporting the newest version of their hunting matrix was yielding *exceptional* results.

I spit out the proverbial mental blood. I *wasn't* going to encourage their Hunting matrix. Time to do something *really* stupid. "Let's see who gives in first."

I conjured my balloon popping fetish scene back up in my head and added me stepping on plastic toy building bricks and falling onto the lightbulb/balloon heads.

They hesitated and argued amongst themselves if they should hit me again.

Then the conversation stopped.

And something *else* started.

Waves and waves of *oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.*

The white-washed lights pulsed orange-yellow.

There was no audible alarm, but a mental cacophony of collective Grey chaos assaulted my mind. It hit me like I was in the middle of rush hour traffic and getting spun around, but I managed to pick up *breech* and *abandon* and *erasure*.

Somewhere something made the entire complex sort of rattle.

My handlers, just like the first time, ran for it, leaving me on the table, but this time in full restraints.

“Assholes!” I shouted after their disappearing not-butts.

They didn’t come back.

I really, really wanted to believe it was Keiron. But a single 25XA flying a garbage-barge wasn’t going to make the Greys panic. Gestalt Special Enforcement wasn’t going to come looking for me. So that meant that someone had left a potato in the microwave and this place was about to explode or spiral off into the abyss.

With that in mind: I wasn’t about to lie here and wait to die.

I squirmed against my restraints. Tried to lift my head, but couldn’t see around my boobs to figure out *what* I was fighting against. Clamps of some sort? They flexed and moved, but not enough to let me loose.

“Have to get out of here,” I muttered to myself as the silent screaming of the Greys increased. They were getting the *fuck* off this rock and blowing it to smithereens. And that meant *I* had to get free, get the other Humans, and find some escape pod or something.

There were escape pods, right?

Only one way to find out. But first, had to wriggle free.

I *yanked* my left hand against the restraint. Broken thumb? Small price to pay.

I yelped as the restraint *clamped* down hard and smashed my wrist and hand into the metal table and *dug* into my skin hard enough my fingers went numb.

“Fucker!” I shouted at it. “Let me go, you fucking space seatbelt!”

I kept squirming, and the bed kept squeezing. Maybe if I kept squirming, I’d run down the bed’s battery or it’d run out of power. Things seemed to be going to shit real fast. The Greys’ collective *oh shit oh shit oh shit* scramble dance was punctuated with occasional screams, and underlying it were massive periodic booms that rattled my teeth but did not rattle the bed enough for me to get free.

“Come... on... you... damn... thing...I’m the... tug-of-war...champion!

Undefeated!” I *pulled* until my muscles burned.

Did the bed start to squeeze a little less? Or was I just numb?

Might have been numb.

The mental screaming was really distracting. The Greys were *loud* screamers. Total screamers.

...didn't need to think of that.

The door opened. Well, it more like... *tore* open and exploded inwards, and then someone ripped the remainder of it open like it was cheap foil.

Holy fucking ballpits and stuffed baskets—it was *Keiron!*

Garbage-barge rescue squad had *arrived*.

He tore the door the rest of the way off its hinges (or whatever they used), practically *glowing* like the center of the galaxy, sporting claws that were as long as my fingers and solid chunks of gemstone, his body covered in scale plates and horns and sharp edges. Right behind him was a burning, smoldering red 25XA with thick, fiery scales and black obsidian talons—it was Ahane!—and a 25XA I didn't know, who had intense peach-orange scales tipped with burning bright pink.

Keiron tore the restraints off me and flung them away. I grabbed at him the instant I was free and he scooped me up and squished me against his scales. Which were sharp. And I didn't care.

“You came.” I sobbed like a stupid baby. “You came, you came.”

He said something in High Dialect that was the voice of an angry angel who gave no shits about whatever god he had just defied. I sobbed as relief crashed through whatever dams my brain had erected while he assured me (I think) that of course he had come, nothing would have kept him away.

He grabbed my face in his hands and kissed me, hard and dizzying and hungry, his hands running over my hair and face, infinitely gentle because his scales and claws were out. His tail moved along my spine and his talons under my jaw and down my neck.

Okay. Time to pull it together. Had to pull it together. Shit was exploding around me and we were about as far from “safe” as we'd ever been.

Which, for me, was a fucking *record*.

I pulled back. “Keiron—”

Keiron's grip tightened, and he growled one of the few words in High Dialect I knew. “*No.*”

It conveyed he would *not* be putting me down, because he had been too long without touching me, and a cocktail of protectiveness and ferocity that

under other circumstances would have made me swoon, but survival was survival and Keiron didn't know the whole situation. Unless he did, in which case, we would be arguing in short order.

"Put me down." I squirmed to prove my point.

Reluctantly, he obeyed. My knees and feet shot through with pain and weakness from being on that fucking table, and he caught me and steadied me. I immediately turned attention to my ruby-scaled brother-in-law, who was looking equal parts relieved and saturated with emotions. "Ahane, you came too?"

He said something in Utilitarian I didn't understand. Right. Fuck. No translator again. *Damnit*. I guessed based on his tone and scales that it meant *of course*. Like in the mildly affronted way.

"Hey, *Taidc* would have left me to die," I told him.

He turned practically burgundy at the suggestion *Taidc* would have left me to die.

"Okay, he wouldn't have left me to die, but he'd have made me *wish* he had the way he'd have been put out. Anyway—"

The guy with the pretty peach cobbler and strawberry lemonade scales regarded me with the usual polite *holy shit, this is a Human way*. I smiled at him. "Thanks too, whoever you are."

He gave me the 25XA equivalent of a polite *get me away from this situation* look.

But it was the bird-dude with Keiron that got my most *holy fuck* stare.

Not because I was shocked by the presence of a bird-alien. I'd seen *way* weirder by my Human-centric view of things on Gestalt public access. But because *I recognized* him. Even though he was dusty and strapped down with gear and definitely not dressed to impress except in the mercenary-for-hire manner, it was Septus, the news anchor I'd seen on all the news feeds. He was one of the Gestalt's top news presenters.

Was I going to be on Prime Time? Some horrible Gestalt reality rescue show?

He cocked his handsome (he was a fucking fine looking bird-guy, in my opinion) head to the side and gave me the most smug avian smirk I had ever seen, which, considering he didn't have lips, was an accomplishment. He had a proper beak that probably could have bitten my arm off. But something about him smirked. He said something to me. It probably was *I get that a lot*.

"I imagine you do, peacock," I retorted to Mr. Smug Bird.

He twitched, then cocked his head one way and the other. He said something to Keiron in what must have been his native language, but I missed it.

No time for this language shell game. Keiron could understand me. Me not being able to understand him wasn't as important. I tugged at his bandoliers. "Keiron, they took my translator and trinket. I can't understand a word you say, and as much as I'd love to know who your buddies are—especially this fluffy one so I can piss him off—there are more Humans and we can't leave without them!"

Keiron focused on me. He brushed his fingers behind my ear to confirm I couldn't understand much.

Septus tried to imitate "*fluffy*." And failed.

The very tips of Keiron's scales darkened a hair, but it was Peach Cobbler who leaned forward and said something in Utilitarian that was probably, "*More Humans?*"

And the way he said it basically coded as *oh shit, you never saw this, we will never speak of this*.

I tugged again. "Keiron, there are *more Humans*. We can't leave them!"

Keiron and Septus exchanged looks. Keiron turned a pale shade of cosmic twilight while Septus fluffed to about twice his size, which was already kind of big and he probably could have brooded a small sedan like that.

Keiron said something to me. I shook my head. "High Dialect! I can at least understand that sort of."

The peach cobbler guy looked thoroughly confused.

Keiron tried again, his voice bells and stars and it actually made my bones go weak. I slumped against his chest as tingles raced over my skin and everything flickered. He caught me in both hands, his extended claws raking my skin, as his scale plates jabbed into my skin. He was not very huggable like this. But he'd said something like *Where? How many?*

Ahane looked equally shocked.

Keiron spoke quickly to Ahane, and I couldn't catch any of it. Ahane nodded, but the Peach Cobbler guy interjected, and an argument commenced which resulted in Ahane nodding once and Keiron telling Peach Cobbler something short, which Peach Cobbler agreed with while Smug Bird nodded *true, good point*, and then Peach Cobbler, Septus, and Keiron all started to argue again while Ahane booked it presumably back the way they'd come

and I wanted to smack them all with a trout except I lacked a trout.

Peach Cobbler and Keiron got into a heated argument. Heated enough I took a step back near Septus while the two 25XA shouted and brandished their tails at each other and the Greys continued to maintain a level of *Oh Shit, Oh Shit, Oh Shit* in the background.

Whatever got negotiated, or who won the argument, or even what they were arguing over, I couldn't say. But I recognized when there was a break in the hostilities, grabbed Keiron by the tail, and hauled him towards the barracks. "There are six more Humans. This way, come on!"

He grabbed my wrist before I darted back down the tangle of hallways. I turned to him. "You'll never find them without me. We have to hurry!"

Wait.

"Fuck, Keiron!" I snapped as he hauled me back the way Ahane had gone. "We don't have time for this!"

The only physical clue that the Greys were about to do something *bad* was the lighting that pulsed orange-white in thin strips all along the sides of the corridor and above our heads. But there was also a general *OH SHIT, DIVE DIVE DIVE* ambiance as the Greys collectively engaged whatever self-destruct protocols were in place and ran around doing the equivalent of screaming in silent, psychic panic. Everything was so insulated that whatever *physical* noise was getting made as the Gestalt stormed the facility, I couldn't hear, but there were some odd vibrations under my feet and I definitely heard the Greys in full mental panic.

"They're going to blow this entire asteroid up!" I tried to tell him while they took me in the exact opposite direction I wanted to go.

Keiron paused. He spoke, and it sounded like a lot of words for what was probably *how do you know that?*

"You can't *hear their screaming?*" The Greys could speak to anyone they wanted to, psy or not. Surely *everyone* within a hundred space-miles or whatever could hear the screaming. Because this place was wave upon wave of *oh holy fucking SHIT.*

Septus cocked his head, somehow, in two directions at once. One at a *what the fuck are you about Human* and one at Keiron as *the fuck is she talking about.*

Peach Cobbler shook his head.

"You... can't hear that?" I asked Keiron while the wild thrashing chaos in my head continued, creating a strange and disorienting reality.

“No,” Keiron said in English.

Never ask a question you don't know the answer to. Right. Stupid me. I'd process that later.

Keiron resumed pulling me down the hallway while Septus matched him stride for stride, and they spoke, or mostly, Septus made angry chicken noises at him while Keiron's scales swirled with too many emotions to process and Peach Cobbler's scales said *I'm not saying anything, but I'm going to in the near future.*

A Big Grey sprang from some corridor as we passed, wielding some sort of gun-sword-energy blade. Keiron swung me around him as the blade glanced off his scales, throwing sparks and making a noise that screamed against our ears. His tail lashed out, but the Grey shot backwards before the bladed tip could make contact.

Septus clicked as he re-holstered a space-gun shaped like a math compass had a baby with a protractor and several miles of irradiated high tensile wire. He told Keiron something. It might have been *just kill it, don't play with it.*

Keiron grinned, showing sapphire and pearl fangs as his scales rushed with a shade of magenta best described as *contained primal violence.*

Peach Cobbler kicked over the corpse and gave a quick look at it, radiating concern as he crouched down to take it in with two quick up and down glances.

“Huh,” I said. This was a *different* Big Grey. It was a *Bigger* Grey, except it was a very weird Grey—it had clearly defined muscle around the lower hips and groin, like someone had transplanted a very attractive male Human torso into an otherwise typical Grey body. The genitals were different from the Big Grey too: a small but horrifying penis that looked like a rhino beetle crossed with a fleshy worm strapped to a very large, egg-filled wet paper bag.

Peach Cobbler picked up the edge of the well... scrotum, I guess, and then dropped it. It made a sloppy wet floppy sound as it hit the ground and the eggs jiggled like an aspic jelly nightmare. He uttered something that clearly translated to *what the ever loving fuck is this thing.*

Something told me that that penis was very functional.

I almost threw up.

Keiron pulled me away.

We didn't have to go much farther down the halls until we met up with a squad of a dozen assorted hardcore military types that were not in uniform but were strapped with enough tactical gear to take over a small country.

Mostly 25XA, but a mix of other species as well. All armed to the teeth and splattered with bits of dead Grey. The one in the front had two of the Grey swords around his neck like trophies, and they reported to Peach Cobbler.

So Peach Cobbler was *Captain* Peach Cobbler. Noted.

Peach Cobbler told them something, and Keiron shoved his way into the fray, singled out one crew member, and spoke with a voice cold and matter of fact.

The crew resisted, scales going mortified, shocked, and under it: spooked. Keiron switched to High Dialect and issued the order again, but I couldn't catch it beyond *comply*. Peach Cobbler didn't argue.

The crew member reached up behind their ear and surrendered their translator to Keiron.

Keiron brought it back to me, pushed it behind my ear, and I winced while it lashed into my brain. It was different from my other one—*louder*. More intense. My left eye pulsed, and I had to cover it with my palm. Right. Some military grade hardware just tapped into my gray matter.

“Please don't shout,” Captain Peach Cobbler told me. “Human voices are... *distinctive*.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” I said, wincing around the “prongs” feeling around in my brain.

“There are other Humans?” Keiron prompted.

“Six, and the Greys are going to blow this place to the abyss.” The rattling under my feet felt a little stronger, and the screaming in my head hadn't abated.

“How do you know that?” Septus asked.

“I *know*. I can hear the Greys screaming. They're in a panic and cleaning up,” I snapped.

“The Greys are not screaming.”

“I'm a fucking Human, you damned peacock.”

Septus also paused while his translator attempted *peacock*. “Did you just call me a male sex organ in a redundant fashion?”

I silently queried my own translator.

[*Pee-cock: unknown. Pee: slang for urine. Cock: slang for the male sex organ common in taproot species*]

“Your insults are as unremarkable as your voice is grating,” Septus told me in his own melodic series of clicks and chirps.

“*Peacock*. Glorious. I love these translators.”

“What is a... *peacock*?” Keiron inquired carefully while Septus tried not to look annoyed.

“*Peacock*. A *peacock* is a male peafowl. *Pea* is a legume that we eat and ___”

“You have named a species of bird for a *vegetable*?”

“Quite. They’re known for their great beauty and horrible screams, and not much else. They’re symbols of vanity and self-importance.”

Now Septus fluffed his feathers and huffed, all rattled. Captain Peach Cobbler and his team found this *highly* entertaining, which only pissed Septus off more.

“Yep, suits you,” I told Septus while various other sentients present snickered at him. He was an insufferable sot, and I’d only known him five minutes.

Keiron glanced at Captain Peach Cobbler. “We round up the Humans. Agreed?”

“Not a chance. We’ll leave them here for official Gestalt Enforcement to recover.”

“They’ll die!” I snapped. “The Greys are going to blow this place up! There’s not going to be anything to recover!”

“We are *not* here in an official capacity and I am not asking my crew to catch a charge of Sentient Trafficking if we onboard Humans. Now, Lady Scion, we should leave. Ahane has already gone to throw the magnetic locks that are securing the ship, and I do not want to tell the ship’s owner why we delayed long enough their ship is now on a remote asteroid off-beacon.” the Captain informed me with the pained politeness of the most asshole-ish of assholes.

“We aren’t leaving them,” I replied in kind.

“Lady Scion,” the commander said with strained civility, “*you* are a Gestalt citizen.”

“They’re *victims*! One of them is pregnant with a Grey brat. Maybe two. Fuck, *I* could be! You want evidence? We’ll have plenty of evidence to take with us!”

Keiron’s tail lashed around my wrist and his scales went murderously dark. “They attempted to impregnate you?”

“I don’t know, maybe! They did all kinds of shit to me and I have no idea what any of it was, but they told me what their goals were!” My voice cracked. “We *can’t* leave them here to die.”

Captain Peach Cobbler's tail swished back and forth. Septus looked mildly concerned. This had gotten a lot more complicated than they'd bargained for. And I did not care.

I yanked against Keiron's tail. "I am *not* leaving without them."

"We could just carry you out," Peach Cobbler said. Nods from the rest of the crew.

I could *not* comprehend how they fucking *did not care*. What the fuck kind of monsters were they? Humans got *no* choice in coming here and they were just going to leave them to *die*?

Keiron's scales washed a softer shade of cosmic death. "*I know, my love, I know. We won't leave them.*"

Septus started to say something. Keiron snarled, "The deal is the deal."

The Captain's scales turned murderously hot pink. "The deal did not involve Sentient Trafficking. We came for the party, not the Deed."

An affirmative chirp from Septus. "The deal was I got the Deed, the Captain got his party, the ship's owner sent a message, and you got your mate, Keiron. It did *not* involve six Human women."

Keiron whirled on the Captain while smacked Septus across the beak with his tail. "And that means we all share the risks and the consequences. This was the risk, and these are the consequences."

"Captain—" one of the crew said.

He jerked his hand up to silence him. "Follow orders. We'll discuss what to do with the Humans once we're off this asteroid."

"Keiron, this isn't a Minor Deed at this point, it's sheer wanton stupidity," Septus told my mate.

"There is only one thing to do with Humans," a crew member said.

The Captain snapped his tail against the ground. "*Silence*. That's an order."

Keiron tugged my wrist and rumbled. "Can you lead us to the others?"

"This place is specifically designed to screw with your sense of space," I said. "But I can find my way back. Gut instinct."

I had to try. Dubious psy powers activate, hopefully?

The Captain checked a watch-like device on his wrist. "We have limited time, assuming your brother is able to blow the magnetic locks."

"He will," Keiron growled.

"What locks?" I asked.

"To land, we had to anchor the main ship using magnetic locks, which

have been clamped down,” Keiron explained. “Ahane will free the ship by disabling the lock mechanism, then use one of the escape pods. We will pick up the pod.”

“How do you know this place has escape pods?”

“We saw the ejection tubes,” the Captain said. “It’ll be cramped for him, but he’ll survive. Might have to cut him out of it, though. Again. Time is limited before we *have* to leave, Humans or no Humans. I am not going to get that ship damaged or my crew killed and leave their Houses to suffer the consequences for the losses. Fair, Lady-Scion?”

“Fair,” I grumbled.

“*My love.*” Keiron prompted.

“Right! Ladies are *this way.*” I jogged off down the hallway. Everything sort of hurt from whatever the Greys had been doing to me, but adrenaline was a hell of a drug. “Let’s get out of here before they blow this place up.”

“They are not blowing up an entire research facility,” the Captain said.

I stopped my jog and looked at him. Talking to 25XAs was like talking to rocks sometimes. “I’ve been in Grey heads, Captain. They’re blowing this place to bits. This isn’t about them bio-engineering themselves out of a corner and stealing Humans because they’re too cheap to buy genetic material on the open market. That’s just what they let everyone think. I don’t know what the actual goal is, but I know it’s a *lot* worse than what everyone thinks they’re doing. And that’s bad enough.”

The Captain’s scales rushed a violent shade of orange, if orange could be violent. “Then we’re not letting them do any of it.”

I hurried down the hallways, sort of snaking around and running my hands over the surfaces as I went. Not sure how I found my way, when the Greys had assured me that was impossible, but I managed it. The door to the barracks wasn’t locked and *did* respond to my bio-signature. The Greys didn’t lock us in. They knew there was nowhere for us to go.

Along the way, we got attacked by the regular Big Greys. The Adonis-Hip Big Grey seemed to be a one off. The Captain’s crew gleefully ripped the Big Greys and any other Greys that flung themselves at us into bits. They’d just come for the “entertainment.” They also were not entertained by the prospect of rescuing Humans, and I wasn’t entirely sure we weren’t all going to end up double-crossed and deposited at the nearest asteroid, but...

The women inside clustered together like frightened lambs, with Marlowe and Seren in the front.

I ran up to Marlowe and grabbed her wrist. She instinctively yanked away and all of them stared at Keiron, then Septus, then the other 25XA. “Come on, calvary has arrived. Time to ditch this space rock.”

“Who the fuck are *they*?” Marlowe demanded, voice shaking as she craned her neck back to look up at Keiron and the other 25XAs.

“That’s the guy I said was going to come looking for me. Didn’t know he had friends, though.”

Keiron said something in High Dialect to the effect of *neither did I*, while Septus fluffed his feathers, and I glared at them. “Wait a second, are we going to make the news?”

Septus said something. Keiron gave me a *don’t listen to his lies* look.

“His name is Keiron,” I told the women. “The bird is a famous podcaster, and I have no idea who the peach cobbler guy is. Doesn’t matter. We *really* can’t stay here.

“They’re going to blow this place up. They’re all screaming about it.” Seren said, voice shaking. She shoved Marlowe. “Let’s go. Come on.”

Captain Peach Cobbler looked at some of his crew, scales shimmering with *they can hear it too*? Even Septus seemed bewildered, his sharp avian gaze darting around looking for clues to who knew what about what.

“Go *where*?” Brynn asked.

“Anywhere but here works, right?” I grabbed her and Fairen and hauled them towards the rescue committee.

“You sure about that?” Marlowe demanded.

“Well, this asteroid is about to blow up. You want to stay and become space dust, your choice.”

She actually hesitated, along with the others, and they all seemed to *glare* at me, like I was lying to them. Which I kind of was—I knew that their Gestalt prospects were grim. Assuming the Captain and Septus didn’t vote them off the ship and tossed the Humans out of the airlock.

But none of these women had been chosen by the Grey matrix because they lacked survival drive and instincts, so for better or worse, they came with us... but they didn’t like it.

Keiron’s scales washed a horrified shade of blue when he saw Fairen. Septus chirped and the other 25XA gasped.

I hauled ass out the door with two Humans in tow. “Yeah, yeah, you

never seen a pregnant Human before?”

“No,” Captain Peach Cobbler said, scales washing a *oh shit* shade of yellow-orange, but under that, a neon-pink speckle of predatory excitement. The ship’s owner was going to *love* having hard evidence. Not that the Greys had ever denied that certain *rogue elements* were doing exactly this. But you get enough scraps of evidence and you have enough to sew a quilt.

CHESS

One of the crew had scrawled pink lines on the hallways so we were easily able to find our way back to the breach point where they'd blown open a couple of heavy doors. The Human women were too weak to keep up with sprinting high-end mercenaries out for a pleasure jaunt, so they got carried.

Keiron had to carry me when I started to fall behind.

The heavy doors opened up onto a glass tube like the one I'd traversed when leaving the ship that had brought me here, and beyond it, instead of the sleek, silvery Grey ship, was a large 25XA-style ship with a shimmering hull that was washed pinks and oranges and yellows. It was sleek and beautiful, and it had very large guns and pointy objects strapped to it.

So... festive rave battle yacht.

Whoever owned it was my kind of 25XA.

Outside the glass tube, massive columns of steam erupted out of the asteroid's surface, and large, deep, molten cracks had appeared across the surface, and there was a haze that coated everything. The rumbling had increased and more cracks snaked across the surface in time to it as I watched, and every ten seconds or so, another column erupted.

This place was coming apart.

A column erupted under the facility, and in the distance, part of the facility disintegrated. The shining bits of metal fluttered in the limited gravity, the roar of it silent, as debris and air escaped.

"[*EXTREME PROFANITY*]," the Captain snarled, swearing for the first time. "That could be us next time. *Move*. Keiron, to the bridge, no delay."

"Understood." Keiron scooped me up.

Everything was a blur as we stumbled into the ship, which at first glance,

seemed like some weird lobby of an old hotel, but I didn't have time to process it. Keiron didn't set me down and ran with the Captain through weird twisting hallways, until we burst out of the strange hotel-like hallways into a massive, multi-tier bridge that looked more like what I was expecting.

Keiron set me down and stepped towards a podium in the center of the massive bridge. He pulled down a screen and bits of light floated under his claws as Septus took up position close to me. He leaned over and said, "I stay out of the way in moments like this."

"Do this often?" I asked.

"Often enough," he said.

"And here I thought you just read your script."

"I also write the scripts on occasion."

The ship lurched one way. Septus caught me before I face-planted into the metal. Keiron was doing *something* with all those lights, and on the massive wall ahead of us, it seemed like a window right out into oblivion.

The entire ship shuddered. Septus grabbed me as I nearly hit the ground. I grabbed a handful of Septus' feathers as the intensity in the bridge took on a definite *oh shit, what the fuck* vibe.

The Captain braced himself, and one of the crew said something that translated as one of those steam jets had just opened up behind the ship, and a huge crevice had opened up *under* the ship. The dock under us was crumbling.

There was a cracking and shuddering noise.

"Bridge just crumbled," another member of crew reported. Meaning the bridge we had just crossed.

"Time to leave," the Captain said with focused calm. "Twilight Scion, pick the trajectory."

Keiron snapped around, and his voice was a sapphire cudgel. "We *wait*."

The Captain leaned over the railing of his perch. "There *is* no waiting."

Another shudder. The most violent yet. It was also oddly silent, except for the ship's noises.

Keiron's scales turned a shade of angry magenta and miserable twilight I'd never seen before, but it reminded me of the galactic core, or a deep galaxy. The Captain seemed to shrink back and whatever he was about to bark, he thought better of it, and a hush fell over the bridge.

Keiron looked at me, his expression horrible. The bridge became quiet. Pin-quiet. Then he turned around and his clawed hands moved over the

screen, moving through calculations and diagrams. He nodded to one of the crew.

The ship shivered and shifted and I became aware we were moving, even though I didn't feel the acceleration as we lifted away from the surface. The massive screen on the farthest wall switched to an exterior view overlaid with two dozen transparent panels scrolling with illuminated information in orange and green text. Septus held me respectfully close in his fluff, steadying me as I swayed under the ship's strange motion. We both watched as the view turned to utter darkness overlaid with that transparent mist from the surface. Then that lifted and cleared, and the ship pivoted around, giving us a view of the asteroid, which was now spewing gases from dozens of holes and criss-crossed with seething red and yellow lines that visibly extended, and where they joined, another hole punched through the surface. The facility clung to the surface like a tangled silver scar, and the gas-spears blasted through it, punching the fragments and everything that had been *inside* to the outside.

The tension on the bridge heightened. The ship did not move. From his position above me, the Captain leaned forward on the railing, entire body tensing and scales sharp and gleaming. He looked at me with an unmistakable *you deal with this look, don't make me do it*.

Do what?

Then it dawned on me. I moved away from Septus two steps and asked Keiron's strong back the obvious question like the Captain wanted. "Are we waiting for Ahane?"

"Yes," Keiron answered.

More steam jets blasted through the facility. The entire thing split in half a dozen spots, venting atmosphere and...debris... into the nothing. I saw shadows that were probably bodies. The exterior lights flickered, and it went completely dark except for the web of angry molten cracks through the surface.

The Captain's claws tinked and scraped the railing and he bit out, "There's no indication he's coming, or that he got out of the facility."

Keiron snarled, "The locks were released. He's on his way to an escape pod now. He will *be here*."

The darkness in front of us abruptly adjusted to a raw molten gouge across the asteroid as a huge chunk of surface got ejected. The ship swayed as it moved out of range of the debris. Then there was a thudding like hail on a roof as the debris hit us.

“No additional vessels or pods have left the surface,” someone reported to the Captain. “There was an original wave of escape pods before the fissures began, but there haven’t been any additional.”

Keiron left his post and strode over to me. He grasped my arms in both his hands. His claws were extended, and his scales were sheets and plates of sapphire, his fangs affecting his speech. “*Is he coming?* You’re a Human. *You tell me* if he’s on his way!”

“I—I don’t know!” I tried to pull out of his grip.

“*Is he coming!*”

“I don’t know!” I shouted back, anguished. I tried again to yank myself out of his grip, but I was only strong enough to flop against him.

Another explosion rocked the ship, the hardest one yet, and the screen showed a huge chunk of exposed molten asteroid like the galaxy’s worst filled chocolate candy.

“We *have* to get out of range,” one of the crew told the Captain. “That facility is full of [*no translation available*]. It will take us with it when it goes if we don’t get out of range.”

“Agreed. *Keiron.*”

Keiron held me. “*Chess. Is he coming? Is he out there?!*”

I sobbed again, just once. “I don’t know, I don’t know! I’m not what you think I am! I don’t *know!*”

Keiron clutched me against his hard, scale-plated body.

“It doesn’t matter if he is still alive!” the Captain shouted at Keiron, then he descended into High Dialect, raking Keiron over the coals and I didn’t need the translation, because it basically was *you’re going to kill all of us, get over here!* And the Captain’s scales had rushed to a smoldering lava-flow hue.

Then the Captain snarled, “Don’t make me *order* you to do the right thing.”

Keiron’s scales washed galaxy-anguished. He released me, trailing his claws over my skin gently, the turmoil in his soul somehow leaving burning, hot-metal traces in my own skin.

Without a word, he spun around and headed back to the console he’d been at before. I put my hands over my mouth and managed to not scream as everything inside me tried to push my organs out of the way to make room for the wretchedness of what had to happen next.

Keiron’s hands moved over the console, and the little glowing dots and

bars and lines on the immense screen in front of him moved and aligned and wriggled, circles filled and shifted. Tears streamed down my face as anguish poured through me. Keiron spoke to the Captain, then to the crew. *[NO TRANSLATION, NO TRANSLATION]* and things happened, and the ship began to move, slowly at first, while everything around us shifted with bands of light and sensation.

Space peeled back in a thousand layers of light for a split-second, then returned to normal, yet there was the vague sense of moving forward.

The view on the immense screen shifted from space to complex charts and models.

“There,” Septus pointed to one of the models that spun faster and faster like a wobbling top, “that’s the asteroid.”

The glowing-yellow wireframe model of the lumpy asteroid, its rotation increased, and the colors shifted and brightened. More little points of light spun around it, an increasing map of dusty mesh, but none of the little points of light moved differently from any other, to indicate one was a ship and Ahane had escaped.

The lumpy asteroid exploded in a shower of pixel sparks.

The pixel spark debris spread outwards in six concentric circles emanating across the screen.

The Captain said something in High Dialect. *[NO TRANSLATION]* But I could infer what he meant, a somber: *holy shit, those fuckers really did it.*

Keiron leaned forward and braced himself on the console. His scales retreated from their shining plates, his tail shifting from its barbed hammer to its usual shape, while his scales rushed a terrible, swampy shade of smoggy sky.

Grief soaked into all of me. I inhaled. Shuddered on lungs that couldn’t expand. Grief held me in its claws and *squeezed.*

I broke from my spot by Septus, darted around a junior officer who tried to stop me, and flung myself at Keiron. He caught me and held me tight.

Ahane couldn’t have died.

He *couldn’t* have.

Keiron just held me, his scales washing that awful shade of galactic grief, and he rumbled something *[NO TRANSLATION]* but I understood it as him telling me there was no way his brother could have survived that, it was hopeless, and Ahane was dead.

He shuddered and gripped me with arms and tail and his entire body, and

I realized he was sobbing silently into my shoulder.

KEIRON

The quarters he'd been issued were far more luxurious than anything he'd ever had before. Not even his parents had had a ship like this one. This was a ship of the type that House 8 had had generations earlier.

Guilt and grief and anguish tangled in magenta knots across his scales as he brought Chess to the quarters. They were nothing like he would ever be able to provide her.

He hadn't even been able to save his brother.

The only comfort he had at the joy of having his mate back, balanced against his failure to keep his brother safe, was knowing that he would have given his own life to save Ahane's mate, if the situation had been reversed.

But *he* was the Prime Scion. The oldest brother. It wasn't his place to die for the House, but it *was* his place to make sure it never came to that.

And now his little brother was lost.

He pushed the grief aside to focus on Chess. He could not let her sense his rumination, lest she think she was to blame for Ahane's death.

She looked around their accommodations. Her pale face betrayed little—it was so hard to read her in the best of times, and now, she just seemed to be gaunt and pale and staring, with deep shadows under her bloodshot eyes, and her skin mottled with layers of color that shouldn't be there. She had on a long shift of some grey fabric that covered most of her body, but he could easily see the deep probe wounds on her arms, and there was bruising around her throat and wrists and ankles, and her voice didn't sound right—it sounded scratchy and hoarse, like when she'd had the plague. Had she relapsed?

He headed to the washroom. There was a tub—large enough for a 25XA, so more than sufficient for a Human to drown in. He turned on the water,

brushing his claws under the stream, and remembered that she preferred her bathing water unreasonably warm.

He went to fetch her. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the probe wounds on her forearms.

She didn't protest as he removed the Grey dress from her and threw it to the side.

His hearts clenched and his scales washed dark blue. She had bruises all over her lower body—little purple puncture wounds from where they'd impaled her with thick needles. How many marks were there? He stopped counting at eight. She had more bruises around her hips, each thigh, across her breasts, above her breasts—she'd been strapped to the table for a long time. And she'd fought her restraints the entire time.

The way she looked at him told him that the restraints had been the least of the things she'd endured.

He gathered her up in his arms and carried her to the bath. He tested the water with his tail before he set her down on the edge of the tub. She shifted—slowly—her legs over the edge. She slipped into the water with him supporting her between her shoulders, and stared at the wall opposite her, which was adorned with an intricate carving shaped from tree roots and flowering vines.

He picked up a sponge and began to wash her. She shivered as he did so, but did not protest, and allowed him to gently sponge her while she sat in the deep tub that was far too large for a Human. He gently washed the swollen, raw probe wounds that made her flinch when the sponge grazed them, and tended to the similar wounds on her calves, and felt the bruises, the small indignities over her lower belly.

She gave him a haunted look as he touched there. There were bruises too on the inside of her thighs.

They had *restrained* her.

Deep, dark fury bloomed in his soul. But he set it aside. It would have to wait. Her gaze traveled over the dark dots that formed on his scales.

He caressed her cheek with the tip of his tail to reassure her, then gently coaxed her to lie back so he could wash her hair.

He cradled her as he bent her back into the water, using a small shell-shaped dish to scoop water over the lather in her dark hair. It floated and swirled on the surface of the water. Her gaze was far away, distant like the stars, directed to some nebulous point above her.

Then she shifted her line of sight to him.

His hearts skipped a half-beat each. He slid his tail into the water and gently wrapped it around her ankle, mindful of the bruises. Then he gathered her and lifted her out of the tub. Water ran off her. He pulled her close, not caring about the water, and cradled her as he carried her back into the main cabin.

She surrendered in his arms, her body becoming like a reed, pliant and accepting.

He dried her with towels, twisting the dark rope of her hair through his hands to squeeze out the moisture. Then he wrapped her in the robe she'd thrifted, glad he'd had the presence of mind to bring her a few articles of clothing before he'd left 25XA.

She brushed her fingertips under his chin, where a two large scales covered the soft spot of his mandible. On a Human, this place was exposed. He froze at her featherlight touch and the rake of her harmless nails against his scales.

He captured her hand and kissed the softness of her wrist. She brushed her fingernails along his lower jaw now, and the slight pressure beckoned him forward. He hesitated, torn like old silk, then dared to move forward.

Her lips met his. Her other hand gently brushed his other cheek, fingers moving over the fine scales of his jaw and temple. Her little tongue brushed his lips, soft, hesitant.

She had nothing to hesitate over. He pulled her wrist towards him, and slid his tail over her back to draw her closer, drinking in the taste of her, the delicate sensation of her lips against his. She still tasted of salt and fresh air, bright and clear and unclouded.

He gently laid her down on the bed and moved over her, kissing the hollow of her throat, mindful of the bruises staining it. Then he kissed the line of her collar, hating how the bones were more exposed and the skin dipped above and below to create a hollow that led to the bruises above her breasts. She breathed as he gathered one nipple with his tongue, then shifted to the other, running his hand along her side with a feather-light touch, then caressed her thighs, behind her knees, the groove of her calf, swirling his talon behind her thigh to excite the nerve that ran its length.

She moaned softly, just a little breathy moan, so soft he almost didn't hear it.

He kissed her lips, lightly, to drink in that soft moan. To feel it against his

skin and scales.

She pushed him back very gently. He retreated, confused, until it became clear she was pushing *him* onto *his* back.

Amusing Human. He went along with it. She bent over him now, her wet hair falling in ropes against his chest as she kissed him. Then one of her little hands slid over his thigh and found his rigid cock. He inhaled sharply as her grip closed over his shaft, down at the base, smoothing his first honey as her finger slipping into alignment with all the ridges and grooves *just so* that shocks of pleasure shot through his hips and balls. His cock offered her a spurt, and his balls churned. She stroked him, fingers exploring his shape, then she ducked and wrapped her lips around the tip.

He groaned.

She cradled his balls with one hand while pressing her fingers to the base of his shaft as her mouth worked the tip, lapping up his honey.

His mate still wanted him. Enjoyed him.

He groaned again and tried to slid his tail between her thighs to tease her pussy, but she made a small *no* noise accompanied by a twitch of her hips, then adjusted her angle to give him a better view of her backside and the pussy he wasn't allowed to touch. Her lips were flushed and damp and slightly parted.

His cock surged with more blood.

He shifted away from her. She released his cock and almost moved, then held still as he knelt behind her. Her back was damp, and her breathing soft pants, and her scent salty and clean. He moved close, his cock slipping between her thighs and along her wet body. He groaned and grasped her hips to tug her firmly back against him while his cock grazed her clit. She moaned softly and squirmed on him.

He moved her forward with gentle pressure on her hips, sliding her forward on his shaft, then drew her back. Her pussy lips moved over the ridges and lines of his cock and he groaned as his cock offered more honey, smearing it along her body where it mingled with her own slickness.

She reached between them and her palm pressed into his shaft and pushed him *hard* up against her body. She whimpered and slid along his secured length. His grip tightened, and he shifted her again, this time against the pressure of her hand securing him up against her. Somehow her fingers found *exactly* the right place to hold him.

He shifted her again, more roughly, and she moaned, squirming on him

and rocking into his grip and pinning his cock up against her. He pushed her ass forward, and her hand pulled at his cock while his cock raked her slit. She threw her head back and dropped her spine and moaned. He moved her faster and her hand twisted along his length as she also held him firmly, using his cock to please herself.

She arched again and cried out to the ceiling as her entire body trembled with an orgasm. He fought the instinct to grip her hips tighter and forced himself to hold still while she shifted her palm against his shaft to touch herself and milk the pleasure.

His balls ached and the way she was handling him...her little fingers pushing into the nodes and ridges and nerve bundles—

His honey splattered against her belly and he groaned as his balls emptied in long waves that blanked his mind and washed his scales to pale azure.

She dropped her hand to brace herself and panted. Her body twitched with aftershocks.

He caught his breath and looped his tail around her chest, under her breasts. He moved over her and gently pulled her over onto her side so that his body cradled hers. He tucked himself around her.

She placed one of her little hands over his wrist and held tight, snuggling back into his embrace. He caressed over her heart with his talon, tasting a complex cocktail of grief, anguish, guilt, confusion, love, endorphins.

She smiled and closed her eyes.

He tucked his face into her neck and curled around her.

No one was ever taking another piece of his family or her happiness.

CHESS

The ship was not a Grey ship, and not as fast nor equipped to be “off beacon” as a Grey ship, but it was better than Keiron’s garbage barge, and we ended up back at 25XA in short order.

The view of the approach was amazing through the massive front screen that fed angles all across the ship in addition to the primary view of the approach into 25XA. A dozen members of crew attended various stations while the Captain stood on a small podium overseeing everything like a conductor. Keiron stood at one station surrounded by a crescent of screens, his attention on that, but his scales washed a grieving shade of blue. A pale cosmic blue tinged with dark blue-black splotches like bruises.

He had crushed down his initial rush of guilt-riddled grief. It was still in there, staining his scales, but as he had told me: it had to wait.

And if we all ended up busted for Sentient Trafficking...

Whatever plan Septus had, he’d been pretty sly about it. My opinion? Septus’s plan now was to keep his beak shut, disavow everything, forgo his “Deed”, and rely on the ship’s owner to bail him and the crew out while dumping the blame on Keiron. Scapegoating seemed a time-honored tradition in the Gestalt, and House 8 was an easy sacrifice.

The view of 25XA from this angle was amazing: an autumn planet mottled with blue oceans, with the light of two sons indicating it was early afternoon. The oceans were an intense, bright blue pocked with incredible bright green and maroon patches throughout, with other ships moving through the sky in swift, neat order as life zipped about.

Nothing to make you feel soft and small and squishy and totally insignificant like a view of a planet that gave zero fucks about you.

There was plenty of chatter on the bridge—half of it about the business of landing the ship, the other half the business of *what the fuck do we do now*. The Captain hadn't decided what to do about the Humans on board and left it all very cryptic at he'd already sent the "necessary communications."

"How long do I have?" I asked no one in particular.

Keiron looked up from his screens, back straight and shoulders tilted, while his scales shifted and moved with green mottling. He looked so handsome and *right* standing on this glossy bridge handling this fancy-smancy loaner ship, but the grief collected in his scales like pools and washed over me. He spoke in High Dialect, a sad chorus of celestial bells and tones. "*A measure of time.*"

I understood that to mean about an hour and a half. "I'm going to go prepare them for this."

"You haven't done that already?" the Captain inquired from his perch.

"They don't want to talk to me," I retorted. "So I've been trying to limit the trauma and bad news."

The Captain peered down at me. "Why don't they want to talk to you?"

"Because I'm a lawyer and nobody ever wants to talk to an attorney? Now I get to tell them Gestalt law is going to victimize them again."

The Captain leaned over a half degree more. "Humans *are* forbidden, Lady-Scion. You knew what you were bringing them to."

"Because *certain death* is such a great alternative."

I left the bridge without further comment and headed through the shiny, sleek corridors. The interior of the ship wasn't just built for brutal, functional efficiency, but had been carefully shaped and decorated to be a beautiful instrument of menace. Geometric patterns intermingled with ornate scrollwork lined every corridor. Every door was engraved with all-over patterns inlaid with beautiful materials in a coordinating bath of color. Plants lined the corridors, keeping the air smelling fresh, green, and vaguely like a rose garden mingled with evergreen forest in winter. Shaped and trained tree-branch-like arms gripped weapons and armor framed by more greenery and metalwork.

The *bridge* was stark, but the ship interiors were haunted fairytale castle battleship meets steampunk murder mystery train.

The other Human women had been put into a barracks/staff quarters which were still well-appointed and a definite upgrade from the Grey quarters. Minus the VHS tape entertainment and edible food. Worm paste for

all.

The double doors to the barracks looked like woven wood tendrils mixed with flowering vines and they folded like wardrobe screens.

The vibe in the barracks was about the same as back on the darksite. Grim. Resigned. Waiting. Fairen huddled on her bed. Seren glared at me from over her knees.

“Look who’s here,” Marlowe said dryly.

“Pretty Princess,” Brynn muttered.

“Did you *want* to stay with the Greys?” I retorted.

“You didn’t give us a choice of leaving,” she snapped. “You dragged us onto this ship. How are you any better than the Greys?”

“Well, the Gestalt won’t forcefully impregnate you and tell you you should be enjoying it. What was I supposed to do? Leave you to *die*?”

Six pairs of eyes stared back at me like *yeah, maybe, maybe* you should have.

Maybe I’d have felt the same way if the position had been reversed. Time to start talking until I figured out a solution to how the hell I was going to prevent the Gestalt from treating them like lab rats. Lawyers thought on their feet. Well, I was on my feet. Time to get with the thinking. “We’re approaching Planet 25XA. About an hour out. We need to have the conversation we’ve all been avoiding.”

“What, that the Gestalt’s a bunch of assholes too?” Marlowe asked matter-of-factly.

“My brother-in-law didn’t *die* so you could be salty about surviving.”

“The Greys told us the Gestalt would rip our minds apart and that they’re afraid of Humans,” Seren said.

“You know every good mindfuck is built on truth, right?”

She laughed without any humor. “So we’re screwed, is what I’m hearing.”

“Look, the Greys weren’t lying. Being caught with a Human in the Gestalt is called a Zero crime. It’s like a felony on steroids. The Earth system is *strictly* off limits. What the Greys omitted is that they’re members of the Gestalt too.”

This made them exchange looks.

“They are?” Marlowe asked.

“They are. Occasionally, Gestalt Special Enforcement catches a trafficking ship and impounds the ship, but the Grey bosses always just

disavow the ship as ‘rogue elements.’”

Seren asked, “So why does anyone put up with the Greys?”

“Why does anyone put up with a pariah state sitting on technology or rare Earth minerals? They’ve got the best ship and propulsion technology in the Gestalt. It’s not like a science fiction movie out here. Space travel is dangerous, expensive, resource-intensive and time consuming. The Greys have the best tech, and they have it because they built it to sneak to Earth.”

“Deals with devils.” Marlowe snorted.

“Exactly. Politics and bullshit aren’t really any different out here. The only thing different about it is the politics aren’t motivated by greed. There’s always another asteroid or planet to plunder, so nobody’s dicking over one. What everyone *really* wants is to make a ‘Great Discovery.’ Or even a ‘minor’ Discovery or a Deed. The bird guy? He’s just here for the news story and a Minor Deed. They won’t fight over money because they’ve all hit maximum money, but they’ll fight over clout.”

Seren half-laughed. “Wait. The Gestalt is a bunch of wanna-be influencers?”

I burst out laughing. “Fuck. That’s it *exactly*. But make no mistake. The tax man cometh too. Tax agents crossed with desperate, wanna-be influencers.”

“Ug.” Brynn grimaced. “Ug.”

Marlowe was not going to be distracted, and she chased me like a forensic accountant chasing two cents. “So how did *you* get legal?”

“I’m Keiron’s cosmos-ordained mate, and it basically came down to the Temple flexing saying mortal law can’t trump cosmic law. *Officially*, the Gestalt hasn’t codified the ‘true love’ exception into the rulebook yet.”

“Wait. They’re religious nuts too?”

“No, it’s science. They’ve literally figured out how to find true love. Nobody falls in love in the Gestalt without using a trinket to awaken the possibility. Humanity is the *only* species in the entire galaxy that can fall in love on our own. You can thank me for introducing that still highly classified fact to the Gestalt.”

Even Fairen raised her head to look at me like I’d lost my mind somewhere between here and the asteroid.

I gestured with both hands. “When it gets explained to you, *don’t* say it sounds like wishing. Because I’m pretty sure it’s wishing, but they get *really* offended if you call it that. Anyway, the only reason Keiron was able to even

get this ship was because of Septus and—”

Wait.

Septus!

My brain coughed up an idea like a cat coughing up a hairball.

Time to exploit that sweet, sweet Gestalt lust for influencer clout. And I was going to pay him with *exposure*.

What a lucky space-grackle.

“Chess?” Marlowe asked.

“Gotta go do something,” I said quickly. “I figured it out. Gotta go do it before I lose my train of thought.”

“Chess.”

I paused and put my hand on the door before I buzzed myself out. “Look. I can’t promise you aren’t going to be in protective custody. And to be honest, you probably want to be. But...”

“Chess?” She stood. “What the fuck is going to happen to us? Are we going to be in a zoo or something?”

I ducked out of the room and headed off for Septus. Keiron and I didn’t have the clout, no one would listen to us, and we’d risk Ohade and the plague research if we tried, we might become too radioactive for Keiron to haul scrap. And the crew of this ship? They didn’t care. They’d bring the Humans to their patrons like cats bringing a half-dead bird and get some points for that. That *they* rescued a bunch of Humans from a “rogue” research facility, because the Gestalt likely wouldn’t announce it was a Grey facility (because diplomacy), and the Humans had been put into the care of patrons.

The Gestalt would never ask what happened to those Humans, or what had been done to them. They’d just assume the Humans had been mind-rotted from being in Grey care for so long. Whatever the Gestalt did or didn’t do to them was of no concern to anyone.

But *Septus* was in a position to speak up without it being political. Nobody would have to comment if Septus did all the talking. Talking was literally his job.

Septus was on the bridge. He didn’t miss anything. Keiron was there as well, conversing quietly with his friend while the autopilot did the remainder of the work.

I shoved myself into the conversation. “I need to talk to you, pee-cock.”

Septus flinched and cocked his feathery head and winced. “Your voice, Human, is—”

“Don’t make me raise it and say mean things to you,” I told him shortly. “Because I assure you, Taidc doesn’t pick a fight with me, you shouldn’t either.”

Keiron’s scales flickered a paler twilight shade as he straightened. His tail coiled around my wrist in a gentle, soft grip. “*My love, he is a friend.*”

He said this in High Dialect, the voice of a sapphire-throated angel.

“Exactly.”

“You have a strange idea of friendship,” Septus said, still twitching his head.

“Oh come on, Septus, we both know you didn’t pull all this together out of the goodness of your heart to help an old friend. You did it for the story. Now it’s time to pay up,” I said.

“Of course I did it for the story, and it’s a story I am no longer interested in telling,” Septus said while Keiron gave him a *she’s got you* look. Apparently, they’d been arguing about this prior to my arrival. “Your mate is attempting to convince me to write an extra chapter, as it were, but the story ends here.”

“Damn right it is. My Human sisters aren’t your Minor Achievement—”

“Deed. This would be a Deed.”

“Someone is going to have to tell the story, Septus. There are going to be questions. The ship’s owner isn’t going to want to answer them, and will find a way not to. The crew won’t talk. Do you *really* think anyone in the Gestalt is going to believe House 8 pulled the strings to get this sort of favor? Hell no. It’s going to come *right back to you.*”

Septus fluffed and huffed.

He’d already figured that part out. And he’d been planning on scapegoating House 8 for it—which Keiron had also figured out, from his scales.

“On Earth, we would call rescuing prisoners *basic Human decency*. Unless you’re telling me, you can’t meet bare minimum *Human* standards of civility.” I *loved* beating Gestalt snobbery over the head with, *well, if HUMANS can do it, why can’t YOU?*

Now his feathered crest stood up on end like an angry cockatiel wearing peacock feathers. Keiron shrugged. “Humans are vicious creatures, Septus, and extremely difficult to kill. Or reason with at times.”

“There is a saying on Earth,” I told Septus, “that is *Hell hath no wrath like a woman scorned*. Don’t think I won’t be *full of wrath* if you throw us to

the worms.”

The translator translated *scorned* as “wronged” and “offended”, but it understood very well what “Hell” was. The Gestalt had a concept of Hell. I was just going to repurpose that obnoxious saying for my own benefit out here in the greater galaxy.

“And as I was telling your Prime Scion, the Gestalt censors will silence me within thirty seconds, which is twenty-five seconds longer than any other news anchor would get. I do not have enough strings to pull to overcome *that* limitation. I am not successful because I do not understand the parameters of the game.”

Fucking lazy selfish stingy influencer bastard. “You told me you wrote the script and not just read them like a good little parrot.”

[*Parrot: an Earth bird that can be trained to repeat phrases. “To parrot” is to repeat what has been said without understanding the meaning of what is being said.]*

That pissed him off. All his feathers floofed up in a magnificent display of dazzling shades of black. “I am not a *parrot*. There are *limits*. Do Humans not understand limits?”

Keiron bit out his words. “And you do not *want* to overcome them. You *can* find a way to say enough within that time frame to make an impact, and you can figure something to say that’s going to prevent Gestalt Special Enforcement from ripping them off this ship into the nearest research lab. Instead, you will just save yourself and protect the owner of this ship, content to let some plain brother from a disgraced House know more about nobility than you.”

Keiron wrapped his tail around my wrist, but it wasn’t to restrain me. His ache for his brother moved through my bones, and the tinges of grief discolored the tips of his scales into a blue-black.

“And I am hoping that by quietly turning them over to the Gestalt, we can slip away,” Septus hissed back. “There are powerful people in the Gestalt who did not sign on for this! As in, the people *who own this ship* and do not want this level of complication.”

Keiron snarled at his old friend. “We did not abandon helpless Humans who are nothing but victims, and my *brother gave his life to that without question or hesitation*. And now you’re questioning giving up your *fame?!*”

“My freedom is my greater concern.”

“And if this does turn into a Deed, somehow, because I am confident you

will manage to twist the situation,” Keiron snarled, “it will be so *hollow* in the end. And you can live with that, while all of us know the truth.”

That hit like a bullet right through a duck’s neck.

Keiron watched, tail slowly swishing, but he said nothing as he observed, his scales racing like clouds across a winter sky.

Septus threw up his feathery wing-arms, chirp-growled at me, and stalked away.

Keiron watched him go.

“What did you tell him?” I asked as the Captain slowly slid back into his seat and the crew seemed to emotionally retreat.

“That Septus would still find a way to turn this into a Minor Deed, because he will. But the Deed will be Hollow, because it was accomplished only through Ahane’s sacrifice, and his unwillingness to make a similar one. No one wants to be attached to a Deed that Rings Hollow.” Keiron glanced up at the Captain. “No one.”

Instead, Keiron’s face shifted with a sad, warm smile. He slid his tail around my waist.

A strong shiver rattled its way from brain down to the tip of my spine, sending a painful pulse through all my nerves as the endorphin dump hit. Attempting to boss around a raptor-alien could have ended with me not having a face any longer.

Keiron gently gripped my scratched up wrist and lifted my palm to his lips. He kissed my palm while brushing his talon along the soft underside of my wrist.

“Did I go too far?” I asked.

“You provoked. I struck. Now he will do his part. Septus, for all he covets his fame, and wishes to acquire it as cheaply as possible while guarding it as fiercely as possible, does not deal in Hollow things.”

“You’re sure.” I looked up at him.

“I’m certain.” Keiron caressed the probe-wound with his talon while breathing into my palm. Anguish moved over his scales. Then he caressed my unadorned ear with his other talon, and his scales turned to a deep, smoldering twilight-magenta. “They will take nothing else from us, my love. *Nothing.*”

CHESS

Whatever Septus was going to do, I hoped he'd gone and done it. Or intended to do it.

Because we'd just docked.

Keiron wrapped his tail around my wrist. I tugged, but he squeezed tighter and told me in High Dialect "No."

There was a finality to that word in that dialect. Like it was the gavel of Heaven brought down on whatever hopes and dreams someone might have clung to.

His scales swirled with the terrible shades of anguish I had become all too familiar with. "I've lost Ahane. I won't lose you too."

I drew my palm along his cheek. His scales were partially out from the strain and formality, like beautiful sapphire wafers and crystal spears. "You won't lose me, Keiron."

"The cosmos gave you to me," Keiron said as his scales swirled to a galactic darkness, "and it seems determine to take you back. *My love*, understand that Gestalt law demanded we leave those Humans behind. There are still *no* exceptions. We have a duty to our House. Ahane gave his life for them, but we can't waste his sacrifice demanding the impossible. Please remember that when speaking."

I watched his scales swirl with the galactic storm in each one, mottled with green misery, and I didn't have the heart to fight with him. All of this made me sick, and my soul screamed about how fucking unfair and stupid and shitty this was. "I'll mind myself as long as Septus does his part. Otherwise, I'm going to say mean things to him."

"He will choose his moment for maximum dramatic effect." His scales

swirled with a paler shade of twilight. His tail loosened, and he caressed my cheek again with his talon.

I leaned into his talon. “If we’ve got to be accused of a Zero Crime, this is how I want to go down. Showing up with half a dozen Humans in a private battle-yacht with a self-appointed space posse after locating and destroying a secret Grey black site. We’ve got a saying on Earth: *go big, or go home.*”

“My goal is we will ‘go big’ *and* ‘go home.’”

“Ambition. A man with goals is sexy.” I kissed him quickly before I rocked back on my heels and shook myself from head to toe in preparation for facing the Gestalt. *Again.*

Septus fussed in, brushing some sort of dust over his feathers that gave them an exceptional luster and brought out the grackle-like highlights. He brought out a soft bristle brush and swirled it into his feathers, starting with his shoulders and paying particular attention to the plumage on his chest and the long, silky feathers that splayed around his shoulders like an Earth emperor’s gold torque. Keiron glowered at him. Septus huffed. “If I have to be taken into custody, I am going to look the part. And if I am *not* taken into custody, I have to be ready for work.”

The other Humans clustered together in their little scraps of clothing they’d taken from the Greys. They’d refused to wear the clothing that had been offered from within the ship’s stores. I’d warned them about 25XA’s gravity, but it was still a lot for them. I hated that I had to herd them out with us, but Captain Peach Cobbler (none of the ship’s crew had been introduced to me, apparently to limit what information I could give on any of them and keeping our interactions strictly formal. I was Lady-Scion. He was Captain.) had made it clear that was *not* negotiable: the Humans had to be off the ship. Period.

We walked down to what was basically the ship’s foyer, because what was a battle-yacht without a fold-down red carpet so you could make your grand exit or entrance?

The massive bay doors opened, and a shining ramp slowly extended. The weight of 25XA’s gravity hit me and the blood rushed towards my feet before my heart remembered how to beat hard enough to shift it around. The autumn-tinged sunlight assaulted my retinas, blanking my vision for a few seconds.

The Captain and a few of his crew herded the unwilling Human women down the ramp to the dock. I would have turned around to snap at them to be

gentle, except there were a *lot* of Gestalt police on the dock. Not just 25XA, but other species wearing the uniform of Gestalt Special Enforcement. There was also the 25XA Counciltrix.

Fuuuccckkkk...

Keiron moved down the ramp as well, his stride matching and exceeding Septus, and I had to scurry to keep up with him, scales shining in sapphire wafers and plates in the sunlight, composed, resolved, his scales a steady, unrelenting twilight shade. The scales around his head had extended into a sapphire crown, and his irises were a deep, dark hourglass.

The Counciltrix looked at Keiron, scales shifting in disgust and resentment. She dismissed Septus with a flick of her tail.

“Counciltrix,” Keiron said, his voice a rumble. He spoke in High Dialect, sounding like an angel justifying his actions to a god with no choice but to consider it.

The Counciltrix’s annoyance turned the color of midnight storms. “There are more Humans with you. Captain, confirm this.”

The Captain, still somewhat behind us on the ramp, moved to stand on my other shoulder and squared up into parade rest. He shot a quick glance at Keiron, made a last-minute decision, then lashed his tail across his chest. The tip chimed as it hardened into a triangular blade, then the shape split into three and fanned outward with a soft *clink* that somehow echoed in my ears. “Yes, Counciltrix. Six Humans.”

He shifted to the side slightly to reveal the half dozen Human women clustered behind what shield we could provide, then moved back into position.

The collective gasp on the dock was almost hilarious. *Humans? On OUR planet? THE HORROR! It’s a very primitive and tiny invasion!*

Granted, that was how I felt when I saw a cockroach...

At that exact moment, the Captain murmured something, and the ship made a melodic spiraling sound. I half-turned and instead of it being the flamingo color scheme it *had* been when I’d seen it on the asteroid, it was now a glazed-looking gray like someone had dipped it in a vat of thick iridescent goo, its precise shape and any identifiable features obfuscated.

It pulled clear of the dock and beat tracks into the sky. I could practically hear it going *LATER, BITCHES*.

“Did your crew just abandon you to your Human-influenced fate?” I muttered to the Captain.

“Yes, Lady-Scion. That was the plan.” He shot a look at Septus, which clearly said *because I don’t trust this bird to not fuck all of us*.

Keiron switched to Utilitarian, but his tone echoed with High Dialect as his scales washed blue and purple-green. “I do not apologize for reclaiming my mate from those who took her from me. I will not apologize for refusing to comply with a law that does not protect or serve the Gestalt, at the same time that it puts a helpless sentient race beyond protection. That law serves only those who would prey on Humanity. *We will not serve those ends or ambitions.*”

Maybe it was the gravity and “treatments” from the Greys, but I damn near swooned.

Keiron bit out a final sentence. The translator didn’t have a clue, but I could guess: *we do not apologize*.

The Captain squared up and flicked the three blades of his tail to fan in the opposite direction and added a crook placing the fan over his upper heart. His scales intensified to a deep pink at the tips, although the orange flecks conveyed *I hope to fuck you know what you’re doing*.

Keiron’s scales said *do your job*. The plates extended further into blue mirror plates that reflected the cosmos beyond the stars, and he brought his tail across his chest, the tip unfurling into a slowly rotating cosmic disc as more plates extended along his jaw and twilight-stone spikes rose off his shoulders.

Septus made a soft *fuck* chirp under his breath and his fluffy feathers suddenly changed angles and slicked along the edges into sharp edges, turning him from handsome fluffy space-grackle to battle-grackle.

The Counciltrix’s own scales stretched into metallic, angry wafers and her fangs extruded just over her purple-silver lips.

Keiron’s voice became silky and dangerous as he spoke in High Dialect, which the translator struggled with, but I was able to piece together. “*I am the Prime of a broken House. Still, others came forward to court Zero Crimes that would haunt their Houses for generations, and a fate worse than the one my House is burdened with. They did not do this for my House. They did it for the Gestalt, to serve the Gestalt. In a spirit that defies our worthless written law.*”

The Counciltrix’s scales almost seemed like thunderclouds. She was a muted lavender with an iridescent metallic quality that didn’t show itself unless she cared for it too—her mental discipline terrified me, and the

precision of her High Dialect answer pelted me like large hail. “*An intriguing argument, Prime Scion. Now. Perhaps knowledge of who ran the facility may sway my disposition.*”

I grabbed Keiron’s tail to hush him and ignored the Captain’s sudden strange look at me. “Exact individuals unknown, Counciltrix. They were *very* careful to hide all those details. Even their physical presence was obfuscated and limited. The entire complex was built to be as unidentifiable as possible. They are aware of Special Enforcement’s tactics and the Gestalt’s political priorities, and take great pride in not being complacent.”

The Gestalt *really* hated large-scale warfare. And they hated anyone who caused large-scale war, no matter how justified it was. You settle that shit in private and don’t make it everyone else’s fucking problem. Which was exactly why I wasn’t about to name the Greys—if a large-scale war was going to erupt, I wasn’t about to be the messenger that got shot.

Although the Counciltrix would really appreciate it if I’d be stupid enough to volunteer.

The Captain, who was staring at me, his orange speckles churning into fiercely bewildered, too-intense clouds, yanked his attention back to the Counciltrix. “Even the asteroid the facility was built on was destroyed, Counciltrix. They executed their evacuation and erasure protocol as soon as we came out of veil. We met only token resistance. There was no attempt to save the facility.”

The Counciltrix’s tail twitched. Several members of the GSE advanced towards the ramp.

Keiron’s tail turned into a sapphire blade that glinted in the sunlight. “Do not *touch* them.”

The Human women behind me cowered and made terrified noises.

“*Wait,*” Septus trill-growled in *his* own High Dialect.

“For *what?*” Keiron growled.

“You thought this was going to end well, Septus? I’m going down biting and kicking since you won’t, you worthless pee-rot.” I snapped my finger and pointed at one particularly *what the hell* GSE officer.

From the flashes of color, this *really* unsettled the GSE, and the Captain looked at me like I’d lost my mind challenging the GSE with my sad little lack of fangs, claws, and scales.

Sure, if you see someone wearing a unicorn pool floatie, gold spandex pants, ten pairs of sunglasses sauntering through rush hour traffic daring

people to *give me that tire-on-tire massage* on the Turnpike, check your rage and Good Samaritan urges or insatiable kitten-level curiosity. Your chances of being in some kind of altercation that will result in, initially, going viral and then evolving into an eternal meme are too great.

The mental picture of me in traffic at three o'clock on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, especially if I had cat-kit with me, was hilarious.

I was going to miss cat-kit. Could almost hear it now.

Wait. I did hear it.

People on the docks shuffled and moved, and then I heard *mrrp! mrrp-hiss! yowl!*

My cat-kit loped through the crowds, and people shied away from the stray barn cat. It saw me and the tail went up and it sprinted right at me.

“Kitty!” I held out my arms, Septus flinched, and not-cat jumped into my arms and impacted my chest with its delicate little murder-claws. It head-butted my chin and purred fiercely. I held up out from my body. Dirty but not skinny. “You know what they say on Earth, cat. *The cat came back*. There’s a whole song about it.”

Cat-kit purred and blinked at me, its tail swishing back and forth while it dangled like a rag doll. I gave it a final snuggle and put it down at my feet. It sat down at my ankle and barred its jaws at the GSE.

Septus took the moment to un-blade his feathers and return to his most glorious version of feathery fluff, and he strode halfway down the dock. “I said *wait*. The story’s just getting started.”

Well, fucking *finally* then.

“This is where it ends, Septus,” the Counciltrix said.

He tossed his avian head in a precise way that made his feathers all shift colors in the sunlight while flashing their sharp tips to the sky. “No, Esteemed Counciltrix, this is just the second chapter in the story.”

He extended one wing-arm towards the dock beyond the GSE.

More movement in the people on the dock, and this time, there was a strange bell-chiming sound that made my skin crawl.

Like the tick-tock of a clock, but with strange bells.

“Right on time.” Septus’ arrogance rolled off his feathers like droplets.

CHESS

I grabbed Keiron's forearm as it hit my bones and drowned my ears. My pet mewled and pawed at my calf. I put a hand to my head. "What's that sound?"

"What sound?" Keiron asked.

"*That* sound. The bells."

"There are no bells," Keiron whispered.

Okay. So there were no bells. I definitely was hearing bells. In the way that the translator "spoke" to me. Maybe it was on the fritz. Note to self: ignore the bells.

The people on the dock continued to rustle, and I sensed the ship crew behind us—having a slightly better vantage point—shift, and a shocked vibe permeated the air.

Oh hell, what now?

The High Priest who had saved me at Keiron's trial walked up to the Counciltrix, flanked by several other lesser priests.

This had been Septus' plan? To call the *Temple*?

The sound of the bells matched the High Priest's footsteps. I muttered to Keiron, "You really don't hear that?"

"No," Keiron murmured back, scales shifting with concern.

The Priest, hands folded together in a triangle and tail an unusual multi-pronged plume shape I'd never seen before, but reminded me of how Keiron had been able to soothe Ohade's agony, looked directly at me for an uncomfortable duration of seconds that was probably a lot shorter than it actually felt.

But it felt like, somehow, it had been a good long stare, which conjured

the dizzying memory of the Alignment in the sky, and the Priest's gaze felt like that damn javelin of stars headed right into my brain.

I gripped Keiron's arm for balance and grit my teeth against the desire to look up and see if the stars were still there.

Of course they were still there. If they'd disappeared, everyone would be talking about *that* and barely notice anything else. Be like, *oh, yeah, some Humans, but have you seen the STARS THAT AREN'T THERE ANYMORE?*

Nope. Not looking to confirm that the stars were still there. Pretty sure they were still there. If nothing else, they existed in my mind, so according to the rules of *Box Duck Noodle*, they *did* exist on some existential level along with my lifetime supply of dread.

The High Priest spoke to the Counciltrix in High Dialect. My translator was able to catch a few words—something about the Temple providing sanctuary for the Humans, and they would stay within the Temple.

“*Within* the Temple?” the Counciltrix demanded sharply.

Keiron snapped, “Not *this* Human.”

Septus gave Keiron a meme-worthy *are you stupid* look.

The Captain leaned over and told Keiron, “Perhaps you should shut up now, [*no translation available*].”

It probably was *dumbass*.

The High Priest's tone was like a soft sheet draping over my hot body on a summer night as he spoke to the Counciltrix in High Dialect, each word measured and graceful and not-negotiable.

[*No translation available*]

Keiron cocked his head slightly, expression baleful, and translated under his breath to me. “He's telling her that because Humans can find their perfect mate without a trinket, it's a cosmic mystery that the Temple must explore further. And the Temple's claim takes precedence over Gestalt law.”

From his mouth to the cosmos' ears. I had to catch myself on Keiron's arm as a wave of relief crashed through me.

Septus somehow smirked, practically fluffed into a smug, menacing, hilarious, shiny floop of sharp claws, murder-beak, and feathers.

The Counciltrix, however, was not buying it. She turned a shade of steely violet. “Your Eminence, Humans have never demonstrated this ability before.”

Keiron caught me before I could snap something, but the Priest had me covered. “The Lady-Scion is the *only* Human that has ever come to the

Gestalt with her mind undamaged, and she asserts that Trinkets are unknown to Humanity.”

“And Humans may not have a proper understanding of love, and it is a translation error.”

“And it may also *not* be. I would suggest that it is not advisable that Humans with intact minds, and perhaps this ability, be placed as the wards of esteemed Gestalt Houses. There is the potential for chaos within those Houses as a result of their presence.”

Translation: your resident pet Human might fall in love with someone they shouldn't fall in love with, and destroy all your precious plans because the cosmos gives no fucks about your politics.

Septus couldn't resist a chuckle. Just so we all knew where the Priest was getting this idea.

“And such chaos wouldn't exist within the Temple?” the Counciltrix asked dryly.

The Priest's scales rushed with a very amused shade of celestial blue. “If it did come upon us, it would be an opportunity for profound study. This would not be disruptive for us besides the excitement such an opportunity would present. But outside the Temple, we have already witnessed what mundane disruptions of anticipated pairings do to even the most esteemed of Houses.”

The Priest glanced at Keiron.

No reason to bring the horny cousin that had sealed House 8's downfall into this mess.

Not-cat hissed and peeled its lips back from its jaws to expose its first set of fangs.

“If you, however, believe that the other Houses would be willing to assist the Temple's investigation of this phenomena, such coordination would be most welcome.” The Priest half-bowed to the Counciltrix.

Septus indulged in another chuckle.

I leaned over and muttered to him, “Everyone knows you're writing his lines, bird.”

“Maybe *you* know, little Human, but I want my watchers to know I'm not just a *parrot*.” He tapped the tips of his wicked beak together.

“Look at you, aspiring to a career in elite Gestalt politics.” I muttered out of the corner of my mouth.

“You already have one, Lady-Scion. I hope you're learning something.”

The Counciltrix's tail fluffed into something like feathers while her scales turned a gorgeous color of clouds. One of her minions leaned in to whisper something like *he's got a point* and I'd never personally thought *political scheming* had a color scheme, but apparently *political* was a color scheme, because it was all over the Counciltrix's scales right then. She definitely did not want to have to take half a dozen Humans (or potentially *more*, if more facilities were found), find them new homes among "proper" Gestalt keepers, and then said Humans fell in love with some Prime Scion or something and torched the family's plans.

The Human might be the "perfect" mate—the most perfect one, that would give the best scales and perks from the cosmos—but when it came to the Houses, obviously, everyone's idea of "perfect" was what Keiron had originally had in mind.

So Humans scampering around potentially mucking up marriage plans and trinket aspirations among the Gestalt's elite wouldn't make the Counciltrix any friends. But the thought did pass over her scales she could pawn us off on her enemies...

The Counciltrix stepped aside for the Priest and gestured to the ramp with one hand. She said nothing. The lavender color of her scales said enough.

The High Priest, flanked by four other Priests, stepped up onto the ramp.

Those damn *bells* again. Wearing some kind of anklet under their robes? His staff didn't appear to have any moving parts. Septus backed up for him, as did the ship's crew. I didn't budge.

The High Priest's strange plume-prong tail dipped over his shoulder as he paused in front of Keiron and me. He reminded me of a deep, very still well, from the color of his scales to his presence.

I'd never seen him up close, or had a chance to get a clear look at him. But his eyes were odd: his pupils were three black dots, but the dots also had a halo around them. His scales were a deep, galactic blue, almost black at the base, but a saturated teal at the tips, and somehow they looked much thicker than they were. Keiron's scales were like shards of sapphire and twilight, but they looked solid. The Priest's looked hollow, and like his scales contained something.

To my eye, it wasn't physically possible to tell how old a 25XA was. I'd always guessed based on perception and more or less gotten the impression I'd been more or less right. My perception was failing me with the High Priest. He seemed very old. Still, steady, soothing. But instinct told me he

wasn't actually old at all, and that he was actually closer to Keiron's age than not.

Not that I knew exactly how "old" Keiron was either, beyond he had been around longer than I had. "Age" in the Gestalt was a *very* complicated topic, as "time" was also a very complicated topic. Each species had its own maturity curves, life stages, and life spans. Each planet had its own seasons, orbital periods, rotational period and so on. Each species had evolved with those unique timescales, and almost without exception, each species was hard-wired to those concepts of time. Hell, there were even planets that were what were called "orphan" worlds on Earth that had no star but were inhabited, and those planets obviously were eternal night with no seasons at all. Or had seasons determined by volcanic activity or magnetic activity or whatever within the planet.

Entire wars had been fought over coming up with a standard unit to measure basic time intervals across the Gestalt for commercial purposes. The result had been a blistering level of bureaucratic bullshit where "universal time" involved calculating everything based off the rotational period of certain, mutually agreed-upon pulsars, red dwarf stars, and the sub-atomic decay of some specific particles or radiation or *something*. And the purpose of Gestalt Standard Time (as I liked to call it) was to coordinate things between planets. When it came to interplanetary interactions between sentients, nobody actually gave a shit as long as everyone involved fit their respective species' standards that such an interaction was appropriate.

Still, minor wars, conflicts, and feuds broke out all the damn time about, well... time.

In short, converting Earth "years" to Gestalt Standard Time to 25XA Local Time to the 25XA concept of "age" was just about impossible. Or at least difficult enough everyone would ask why the hell I even cared so long as Keiron and myself were peers relative to our species' individual concepts of maturity.

On *Earth*, we imagined aliens fighting over resources or technology. You know what aliens *actually* fought wars over?

If it was Taco Tuesday or not.

Hollywood would have been so disappointed.

But the Priest was making me question exactly how *old* he was, because every instinct told me he wasn't nearly as old as my initial impressions gave—which made his strange scales seem even odder, and it was like something

hummed in the back of my head.

He, to his credit, gave me just as much scrutiny as I was giving him.

Keiron had said that the Temple and trinkets were High Science—not faith. Not magic. Not wishing. *Science*.

That old Human saying of *wish upon a star* rattled around in my brain.

“Your trinket, Lady-Scion,” the Priest said, gesturing towards my barren ear.

“They took it,” I said. Keiron’s scales smoldered dark and furious.

“They *took* your trinket?” the Priest asked with mild horror while the Captain stiffened all over.

“Yes.”

“Another crime.” The Priest twisted to look back at the Counciltrix with something like sternness mingled with appalled shock.

The Counciltrix just looked annoyed.

The Priest told me, “Introduce me to the Humans, please.”

I hesitated.

“No harm will come to them, Lady-Scion,” the Priest added, his voice sounding surprisingly youthful. “They will be cared for, housed, and treated as guests of the Temple.”

Keiron shifted next to me, and Septus made a little *squuk!* noise. Apparently “guest of the Temple” was kind of a big deal. The translator supplied no context beyond the word for *guest* conveyed a meaning *guest* did not convey, which was delightfully *not* helpful.

“Could you tell me that again,” I said slowly, “but in High Dialect?”

The Priest shifted, and somewhere, bells shimmied, but the Priest, after an obvious moment of surprise, complied. When he spoke, the High Dialect words sounded like waterfalls rushing and the vastness of space unfurling and unfolding. His tone conveyed flavors of meaning—things he didn’t want to tell me, things that worried him, but, most importantly, that he really had no bad intentions, and truly would look after the other Humans and that *guest of the Temple* meant something very significant.

But I also knew he was up to something. He was going to still treat the Humans like he was observing wildlife.

I turned towards the women still hiding behind me at the perilous edge of the dock.

“No,” Marlowe told me while Brynn and Fairen looked like they were about to nope out of there. “What the fuck are you doing, Chess?”

“Okay, just *listen* to me—”

“Keep him away.” Marlowe pointed at the Priests. “All of them.”

“I’m not doing this again.” Fairen’s voice carried over the sound of the docks somehow and trembled with panic.

“Fairen, come away from the edge,” I said. “He’s the Priest who helped me and—”

“*No!*” she screamed. “I’m not doing it again!”

“Fairen, what are you—” I lunged forward to grab her, Keiron grabbed me with his tail and the Captain grabbed Brynn—the closest to him—who screamed as Fairen jumped off the edge of the dock.

CHESS

I screamed, the others screamed, Keiron wrestled me back with a harsh *you are not dying with them*.

Fairen plunged into the lower city below. For a split second, her hair twisted in the wind, pale and so long, mingling with the gray fabric, and then... she was gone.

Septus jumped after Fairen.

Then time felt like it re-split and everything began to happen along its own timelines.

“Brynn, don’t,” I begged as she crawled up to the *very* edge, hair torn by the constant breeze, and looking over the edge. “It won’t be like with them —”

She gave me a terrible look, like her soul was ten thousand miles behind her eyes, and it was too far for anyone to ever cross. And worse, the other women looked at the edge of the dock—which opened onto the city below—like maybe Fairen was right.

A huge black space grackle shot up from below the dock, wings spread and feathers extended, black but rushing in a thousand iridescent colors. I gasped. In the grackle’s massive silver talons it—he—had Fairen.

The space-grackle’s wings beat hard against the air, driving up little bits of dust, and I had to shield my face as he gently deposited Fairen on the dock. Actually, he deposited her on the other side of the Priest so she’d have to run through a wall of people if she made a second attempt. Fairen remained crumpled on the ground, visibly wracked with sobs.

Septus seemed to spin and twist and returned to a more humanoid form. He stood over Fairen, avian expression concerned and troubled while the

light of stars twinkled off his beautiful, slightly illuminated feathers. He looked at the other Human women. “I *will* catch all of you.”

The Captain swept around them, saying, “Move away from the edge, please.”

They complied, clumping together and giving me looks of pure hatred. Keiron shifted to half-shield me from the burning hatred, scales washing with bewildered concern while the Captain gave the Humans a wary look, his own scales flaring bright pink at the tips and centers.

“That is unnerving,” the Captain muttered to Keiron.

“Agreed,” Keiron said.

“Please listen to what the Priest has to say,” I begged the women while I quaked. Septus helped Fairen to walk back to the group of women, gallantly half-carrying her, and Fairen dropped miserably to the ground at Marlowe’s feet. She shook with sobs but didn’t make a sound.

The Priest seemed dumbfounded by what confronted him.

“Start talking,” Marlowe told me sharply while Seren dragged Brynn back to her feet, and Fairen whimpered.

“On 25XA,” I said, trying to figure out how to cram all this information into a quick lecture, “there is a Temple. It’s not a Temple like on Earth, it’s not a holy place in the way we’d understand it. There they make the trinkets that find your mate. The Priests have demanded they be allowed to put you under sanctuary in the Temple.”

“How about we just go back to Earth?” she said.

“That’s not going to happen. *They* lied to you. They were *never* going to take you home. And the Gestalt can’t return you home.”

“Well, why not?” Marlowe demanded.

“*They* are the only species that have ships that can make the trip at all, and they don’t sell those ships to anyone. Out here *nothing* is like we imagined it would be. We’ve got it all wrong.”

I’d been exactly where they were, so I got the looks of disbelief and denial. Despite the resistance, they let me come closer to speak to them quietly.

“The choices,” I said, “are the Temple or the Counciltrix. If you go to the Counciltrix, you’ll be like the handful of other Humans that the Gestalt has ‘rescued.’ But those Humans are.... They weren’t the ones *they* intended to keep around long-term. You’ll be kept by a member of the Gestalt elite as a very exotic pet, curiosity, and lab rat. I don’t know what the Priests at the

Temple will do. Probably more or less the same thing. Minus the mind-mapping.”

The Priest didn't disagree.

Seren tossed her hair. “So we're still prisoners.”

I sighed heavily. “The Gestalt doesn't give a shit that we're victims. Humans are forbidden. There are *no* exceptions. There's *no* version of this where you walk down the docks and make your own way. You will be taken into custody, and if you manage to avoid that, you'll be abducted and promptly trafficked, probably right back to *them*, like I was, because we were all the ones they chose for long-term use. I cannot stress enough that you have no rights, no one is coming to save you, even having knowledge of your whereabouts is a Zero crime.”

“What about you?” Marlowe demanded, jerking her chin up.

Just going to have to be honest, as much as it made me sick. “I'm going home with Keiron. There's only one path to citizenship for a Human, and it's not officially recognized. I'm the only exception. You have to find your perfect mate. The Temple will defend the union if that happens.”

The High Priest stepped forward *one* step, his voice precise and calming, or it would have been if it hadn't been such an obvious attempt to be soothing. “We want to understand Humanity's unique connection to the cosmos. The Counciltrix and her kind want to understand Humanity's unique biological and physiological adaptations.”

I translated for the Priest since the others didn't have translators.

“Well, fuck your *connection*,” Marlowe said. “I'm not your damn lab rat.”

The Priest startled. “We would only want to discuss and observe—”

“Shut *up!*” she shouted, voice cracking and the Priests all cringed at the sound and I winced at the grief and panic and torment. “That's what *they* told us, and it was all a lie! All a lie! We want to *understand*. We only want to *observe*. The fuck they did!”

She pointed at the multiple probe-wounds on her forearm and calves and thighs. Then she pointed at poor Fairen. “Tell *her*, with that *thing* in her. It might be all of us! And—”

My cat chirped in distress and pawed at my ankle.

The Priest looked at me, scales washing pale in horror, and Captain Peach Cobbler leaned over and whispered that two of the Humans were pregnant, and perhaps it would be best for everyone if the Gestalt found out about that

from the ship's owner and not here on the dock.

"They won't be finding out from me," Septus murmured in a slow, low whistle like a sad violin.

The Priest assured them. "I give you my word that we will address the issue immediately."

"You mean burn the evidence?" Marlowe spat.

"No. I'll make sure it gets into the right hands. If that is what you want. If it isn't, we can find a very hot fire," the Captain told her.

"Shut up," Seren snapped at him. "Just *shut up*."

The Priest and Captain shut up.

"So this Counciltrix is going to assign me a keeper and turn me into a lab rat?" Marlowe demanded angrily.

"Very high chances," I said. "And what they'll do will be... your mind may be turned to oatmeal."

"While that Priest is going to tell me oh no, we won't do anything but observe?"

"Yes."

Marlowe glared, yanked her chin up, and stalked past us down the ramp. "I'd rather be with the honest assholes, because I don't believe this Priest guy."

The Priest watched her go, his scales washing a few shades paler in total shock.

Marlowe walked *right* up to the Counciltrix, who audibly made a sound of *the fuck* and backed up a step while her scales washed to a lavender so pale it was almost white.

Marlowe put her hands on her hips and glared at the Counciltrix. "Go ahead and mind-map me. I'll be sure you get plenty of violent fantasies."

Marlowe had apparently left all her fucks back on the asteroid.

Septus chirped something. [EXTREME VULGARITY]

The Captain uttered [EXTREME PRAYER TO ABSENT GODS].

"We would not have harmed her," the Priest said.

Oh for fuck's sake. "I'm pretty damn sure the Gestalt's idea of *harm* and a Human's idea of *harm* are two very different things."

The Priest, in High Dialect, admitted this may well be true.

The Counciltrix spoke to Marlowe in High Dialect and pointed with the bladed tip of her tail to stand behind her right shoulder. Marlowe did as told and batted the Counciltrix's tail away.

The entire dock collectively gasped. Septus covered his beak with his wings.

The Counciltrix craned her neck around to look at Janessa, who glared right back at her. “I left all my fucks back on Earth, Boss.”

Keiron’s scales turned the same color as his soul leaving his body, while the Captain went pink *all* over. Keiron actually was breathing hard, his muscled chest lifting and panting like he needed a paper bag.

Septus slowly lowered his wings, eyeing the scene on the dock sideways. The Priest ducked his head to look at me like he’d never actually seen me before.

Keiron recovered quickly and murmured, “Did she just... there seems to be a misunderstanding.”

“There is?” I asked.

“She just stated she would not be having sex with the Counciltrix.”

I gave him my best *the fuck* look.

He tried again. “Which means, of course, that she believes the Counciltrix wants Humans for sex.”

“What are you talking about?”

“*Fucks*,” Keiron said it very carefully, which nearly knocked Septus and the Captain on the floor.

It took another ten seconds, but my over-stimulated brain connected the dots. I poked my translator for the definition of “fuck”. [*Fuck: verb - to engage in sexual activities, noun- the sex act*]

“It’s a euphemism for not caring,” I told Keiron. “A *fuck* is something you care about, so when you give no fucks, you don’t care.”

Keiron took a deep, long suffering breath. “Why do all of your words have one profane meaning, and one innocuous meaning? Very well.”

The Captain slapped Keiron on the chest with his tail and decided *he* (with scales entirely the color of strawberry lemonade) was going to tell the Counciltrix that no, she had not just been accused of starting a private Human harem.

Seren followed Marlowe without a word, choosing whatever fate the Gestalt elite offered.

Fairen, surfacing from her grief, looked up at the Priest, “You’ll get this *thing* out of me? And make sure the Captain gets it?”

“Right away, if you wish it,” the Priest said gently, which I translated with relief. “And we will never permit anything of the kind to happen to you

again.”

Fairen held up a hand. One of the junior priests took it and helped her to her feet. The others quickly clumped with Fairen. The junior priests collected around them and ushered them away with words in High Dialect.

“Don’t forget translators for them,” I told the High Priest.

“Already being prepared. But they will not help with my inability to understand Humans,” the High Priest said, his scales a paler shade of teal, much like Erkus’, and confirming my suspicion he was not some grizzled old spiritual veteran of the cosmos. Somehow, the color shift communicated his relative youth to me.

Septus followed to fend off the news-hounds. “Off to do my job. If I last longer than seven seconds, mission accomplished.”

Keiron slid his tail along my spine and drew me against him. His scales were still extended and hard, so it was like snuggling up to a lot of pebbles.

Ahane.

Keiron held me tighter and ducked his sapphire-crowned head against my neck. He drew in a breath. His body trembled with the effort of not squishing me or spearing me with his claws.

I quaked as all the emotional dams started to spring leaks.

I rasped, “I want to go home.”

CHESS

We took a private pod back to the farm. Pretty sure Septus paid the bill, but I couldn't be bothered to confirm.

I snuggled up against Keiron's side and tried not to think. He placed his arm and his tail around me and held me close while gently stroking my cheek with the talon of his other hand. My not-cat curled up against my thigh.

The silence was cold. The only sound was the cheerful humming of the pod, and the wind outside picking up. The skies appeared to be clouding over with a thick layer of clouds, and there was a deep rumbling from that direction. Constant thunder, probably. My first storm since arriving on 25XA.

Seemed appropriate.

The other Humans were safe from the Greys now.

And Ahane was dead.

But I couldn't believe that. Everything told me he *was* alive. Somehow. But I was probably in denial.

Keiron held me close, kissed my hair. "We'll go to the Ward and ask the doctor to check. Tomorrow, unless you want to go tonight."

"Tomorrow is fine." I needed to face Taidc and Erkus. We didn't need to tell them what the Greys may have done to me—again. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Keiron murmured endearments in High Dialect.

The pod stopped. We got off.

Taidc and Erkus came out the front door and waited up the path for us.

"You didn't send word to them," I said softly, holding his hand as tight as my sad little Human hand could grip something.

"I was not able to." Keiron sounded gutted while his scales turned the

shade of a still pond in summer. He lashed his tail around my wrist. The tip transformed into a shaggy metallic orb that jangled with his trembling.

“I’m with you.” Not like I had any other way to assure him or comfort him beyond the dubious pleasure of my company.

He bent and kissed my cheek, and spoke in High Dialect, telling me the equivalent of *and for that, I am endlessly happy*. Even if it betrayed his grief.

We went up the walk.

Taidc took one look at Keiron’s scales, and his own scales turned almost black while the tips glowed a terrible shade of pistachio. They seemed to become brittle, like chunks of dead tree bark. He didn’t say anything, but his thoughts were easy to read: he was Second Scion. He should be the one who was dead, not his younger brother.

Erkus’ scales became delicate, brittle wafers of heart-breaking, perfectly exquisite blue. His tail knotted into a wafer-encrusted ball.

I told Keiron, unable to stand the pressure of their silent grief, “We can go look for him.”

Taidc snorted, the pistachio washing away into complete darkness. He folded his arms across his chest and his tail knotted and unknotted while he glared at the empty space between all of us.

I moved to speak again, but Erkus cut me off and told Keiron, “Brother, Ahane knew it was a dangerous mission. We all knew neither of you may come back. We are glad that you and Chess have returned to us.”

A curt nod from Taidc.

“We don’t *know* he’s dead,” I said. “We didn’t see him die.”

My words seemed to twist a knife into Keiron’s scales. They washed a terrible shade I’d never seen before.

Erkus said, kindly, “Sister, you may be right.”

Taidc made a terrible noise that might have been a sob.

“But it doesn’t matter,” Erkus added with firm kindness. “When someone goes off-beacon, unless they are specially trained and equipped like Keiron, they’re not coming back. The lost don’t come back.”

“No one *ever* comes back?” I asked, my natural Human tendency to refuse to accept any outcome I didn’t like as finally kicking in.

“Miracles happen. But they’re called miracles for a reason.”

I looked at the long walk back to the street. Humanity believed in miracles. “I’m going to hope one day he comes up that walk. My Humanity finds the idea of leaving anyone behind...”

“Humans will sacrifice everything on a hopeless cause?” Taidc demanded roughly. But that was the emotion chewing at his voice.

“Sometimes,” I said.

Taidc stalked away, his tail swishing like blades of green metal. “No one dies for me except me.”

And he would never forgive any of us—or himself—for that.

Erkus watched Taidc go, and then told Keiron, “It was all over the channels about the Humans you rescued. Until the censors shut Septus down. He lasted thirty-seven seconds.”

“That’s thirty more than he was counting on,” Keiron said.

“I saved the broadcast for you so you can review it. It was excellent, if I’m any judge of such things. He was able to get out that they rescued Humans, and that the Temple took them in, and a few other bits of story.”

“He didn’t mention that the Counciltrix took some Humans?” I asked.

“No, she did?”

“Two chose to go with her instead.”

“He did not mention it, but they did cut him off.”

Keiron nodded. “Ohade?”

Erkus’ scales shifted to a stormy shade of blue. “Are you asking because you’re thinking of looking for Ahane?”

Keiron straightened, but his scales and voice retained their agony. “No. Ahane would never forgive us if we abandoned the House to hunt in the dark for him.”

Then he repeated it in High Dialect. So I’d know that we weren’t looking for Ahane. We would mourn him instead.

I threw my arms around Keiron and held tight, trying to squeeze some of his anguish into myself.

Denial or not, Ahane was still alive, and we were going to find him.

AHANE

A hane shoved his way through the trembling, shuddering, spark-tossing, wire-spewing, metal-shattering lower hallways. Magnetic locks thrown, ship free of the dock, and assuming Keiron and the others weren't wandering around lost in the cosmos-foresaken worm-pit, they were probably disembarking. Time to catch up.

But first...

Finally: an access panel.

It flashed red/orange in the Grey's pictographic language. The translator beeped in his brain. *[TRANSLATION: UNCERTAIN]*

"Guess," he ordered the translator, though he already had a guess in mind. *[BEST GUESS: "ERASURE SEQUENCE ACTIVATED"]*

"Yep. Guessed right." The Greys were going to blow the facility up, along with everything (and everyone) unfortunate enough to still be on this space rock. And part of that was going to be sealing up everything to achieve maximum pressure throughout every nook and cranny.

Meaning: he wasn't going to be able to get back up to the main level to rejoin Keiron. It also meant that his plan to escape through an escape pod was also shot, because those shafts were pressure vessels critical to blowing up the facility, and all the pods that *would* launch had already launched. Everyone else still on the asteroid would stay behind to make certain the erasure was complete.

So scratch the escape pod plan, he needed to find a ship to steal. And he needed to make it quick, because the main ship wasn't going to stick around to be caught in the blast wave when this place turned to dust.

"One problem at a time," he muttered to himself.

A metal spar crashed down in front of him. He ducked backwards, scales hardening into gemstone armor and shielding him from the sparks and debris. The rumblings in the base got worse and louder.

He vaulted over the spar. Something moved out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned, nothing was there in the flickering lights and dust.

No, there was something there.

A Grey? Why did he care if a Grey was in the chaos?

Something moved over his heightened senses and scales, tingled against his tail—his tail had never been particularly sensitive. He'd never really ever been able to spell Ohade like Keiron. Keiron was the Twilight Scion, the one who had a little extra cosmic glimmer. *All* his brothers outshone him with the cosmic gleam, but it was not like he was ashamed of his ruby scales. Cosmic glitter had never interested him much, and had never been very practical for hunting or working on machinery. The slight cosmic touch that made Keiron so mentally adept, Taidc such a formidable warrior, Erkus such a gifted Doctor (or Erkus *would* have been, if Keiron had been able to keep him in school), and Ohade such a talented musician (before Ohade had gotten the plague) had not been passed on to Ahane.

In the order of Houses with multiple sons, it was said that one son was always the “plain” son, that the cosmos did not breathe upon. The steady one, the practical one, the one who was the neutral particle that did not create a reaction with any other sibling. He was the plain son, and once their parents had died and the House had collapsed in disgrace, he had taken great pride in his natural talents. He had enjoyed the Lower Practical Sciences. He enjoyed cooking. He enjoyed looking after the farm. All his brothers had their gifts, and his gift was he had no special gifts that required nurturing or accommodating or grieving that their circumstances wouldn't allow for the gift to flourish.

He was like grass: boring, dull, unremarkable, often ignored, and excellent at preventing erosion.

But now, something told him there was another living sentient in this crumbling hallway.

“I know you're there,” he growled while dust and small bits of debris splattered his shoulder. He couldn't stand here and shout at the shadows for long, but if there was a Grey he could make use of, he'd do it. Until he speared said Grey through the neck with his tail.

A pulse shook the entire base and nearly knocked him off his feet.

Chunks of debris fell around him.

He ducked as another chunk of debris fell just by his foot. Larger chunks fell behind him.

A shout of pained surprise tore at his hearing.

He spun back around.

That sounded like a human female! He strained his ears, and thought he heard something—yes, that coarse, rough speech. What the *hell* was Chess doing down here?

His brother's mate was the most singularly obnoxious creature sometimes. She did, however, make up for it by keeping Taidc in check, and her risking her life for Ohade was a debt he would never be able to repay. Keiron demanded they dote on her like a pampered kit-kit with pureed worms and minced vegetables, which was *obnoxious*, but under that eerie exterior which never showed any emotion at all yet she seemed so bright, his brother's mate was a formidable creature.

Which he still couldn't reconcile with she was a *Human*, and there was *nothing* formidable about Humans.

There was something about just how... *bright*... she always seemed to be despite rather unremarkable coloration and only the most basic of taproot limbs and anatomy. Even being around her was unnerving and exhausting. Keiron said it was the subtle, fast movements of her eyes—it gave her the appearance of being bright, and that her brain was absorbing and processing tremendous amounts of information.

What information? And for what purpose? Ahane had asked.

To that, his brother had said, his scales flush with pensive thoughts, *I don't know.*

That had unnerved him even further. What was there to process or perceive? Keiron had declined to share his theories. He may have confided a trifle more with Taidc, but for now, Keiron kept Chess' secrets.

"Chess?!" He ducked back the way he'd come. It was dim back here as the lights had started to fail, and obviously, a lot had simply fallen to the ground.

A Human woman—*not* Chess—was trapped under some fallen debris. He yanked up in shock for a split second. The woman squirmed and wriggled with the same sort of mad determination he'd seen in Chess when she'd been like *smear that pus in my wound* at the clinic. The pathetically small muscles of her shoulders and puny arms strained against her skin as she somehow

managed to drag herself forward under the debris, wriggling through a tiny crevice made by the way the debris had fallen.

She stopped squirming and looked up at him.

Her eyes, even in the dim conditions, were so *bright*.

“Help me out of this or leave me to die,” she told him, her voice harsh and raw like Chess’, but even more so, and deeper in tone and a bit husky and her accent was different. And the force of her demand hit under his scales.

And pissed him off immediately.

“Maybe I should leave you to die,” he bit back.

“Then get lost already!” she snarled. “Let me die in peace.”

“There is nothing peaceful about this situation, so I suppose I will help,” he growled.

“Oh, thanks, you’re a fucking *prince*.”

The translator translated *prince* as “Prime Scion” and compared it to the various ruling families of several more well-known planets. “Either you are not a psy like Humans are supposed to be, or you have very low standards.”

“I’ve been *here*. What sort of standards you think I have? The bar is in fucking *hell*.”

The translator offered him several translations of bar as *an obstacle to a goal, a place for inebriating beverages, a rigid piece of strong material meant to provide support or obstruction, to exclude from a set, or, finally the shape of food, frequently sweets*.

None seemed to fit the context of her statement. Probably a limit of the translator. If he lived long enough, he’d have to file an addition. But how many definitions could one word *have*? And how did Humans know which meaning was the intended one?

He hefted one of the beams with ease and she quickly squirmed free and sprang to her feet. She had on loose pants and a loose top, although made of the same fabric as the gowns the other Humans had worn, and crudely made, but they covered most of her body except for her wrists, hands, feet, and from the neck down.

He gawked. Chess *had* maintained she was large for a Human woman, but this Human woman was *much* smaller than Chess. How small did they get? This one was small and looked made of sticks, which made the swell of her hips and breasts seem absurd. Her hair was wild and dusty and she had, more or less, the same basic bland, boring coloration of his brother’s mate. She reminded him of a pebble he’d pulled out of his boot. Small, obnoxious,

somewhat hazardous, and unremarkable to look at.

“What are you doing down here?” he demanded harshly. “You should be with the others!”

“Well, I’m not,” she shot back. “And if you want to get off this rock, you’re going to need my help to do it!”

“I do not need *your* help.” He turned back around and headed the way he’d come.

She said, “Let me come with you.”

It dawned on him a bit late that she understood him. He looked over his shoulder, tail swishing.

Yes, this Human had a translator tucked behind her ear—a very sleek one, from the look of it. A unique design he had not seen before. Grey tech.

No matter. Not important. “If you can keep up, you can come.”

And of course *now* he was going to get caught with a Human. No idea how Keiron would talk his way around that one.

Obviously, it didn’t matter if he couldn’t get himself (and now her) off this damn asteroid.

The Human tagged along. Blast. He couldn’t just... *leave*... the obnoxious thing here. And already she pissed him off. Her presence was like a light shining right in his eye.

He turned around, tail lashing back and forth. “How many other Humans are down here?”

She stiffened all over like he’d shoved an iron rod into his spine. “There’s just me.”

“Why aren’t you with the others?” This time, his question wasn’t rhetorical. This was a service level, not a procedure level. There was no evidence Humans had ever been on this level.

The tiny Human in front of him seemed to shift in a way that impressed upon him she had no time for his questions and was not impressed by his line of questioning, although it was hard to tell what her exact disposition was. “Sorry, I didn’t get the group text anyone was going to rescue us.”

Group text? The hell was a group text? The translator did a literal translation of *group* and *text*, which it identified as “writing.” But clearly it was an idiom. And was she being sarcastic, or just relaying information? He squinted, trying to tease out any small clues to get her meaning, but came up with nothing.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

She screeched, jumped, and grabbed his tail. He startled, and she yelped, “Come on, Prince Red, let’s go! We gotta get out of here!”

Somehow, her little body nearly spun him around as she sprinted down the hallway. He followed, jogging to her sprint, while she gripped the end of his tail in what might have been a death-grip for Humans but he boggled at how dare she touch his tail.

Focus, Ahane.

He headed down one hallway, but she yanked his tail. “*This way!*”

He tried to ignore her hand just... jerking... on his tail.

She was an idiot Human. She didn’t know better.

He tried to lift his tail out of her grip, but she clenched down harder, sending a jolt through his scales that was wholly inappropriate to the situation they were currently in. He tried again, but she was pointing frantically down the hallway.

There were only illuminated Grey *ERASURE PROTOCOL* blinking on all the panels to indicate the correct route to take. “How do you know?”

She yanked his tail once again. “Because I know what’s down *those* two hallways.”

He scowled. And she was still tugging on his tail. Rude. Very, very rude creature. But she *also* had been in residence at this facility and likely knew better than he did about the internal layout.

He would just stab her with his tail if necessary. She seemed heedless of the danger she was in holding it. Best to keep that little trick to himself. She had no idea how dangerous *he* was, but he knew how much of a physical threat a Human was.

And that was no threat at all. Until she found something to poke or bin to peer into and something bit her.

Which, based on his experience with Chess, was going to happen within the next five minutes, and keep happening every five minutes after that.

The hallways twisted as the entire base got rocked by louder and louder booms. Beams collapsed from the ceiling, walls crumbled and tore and splintered. This Human wasn’t moving fast enough.

He grabbed her and tossed her behind him. She got the idea and lashed her legs around his side and her arms around his neck. Her body pressed against his sent a strange jolt through his scales.

“That way!” She pointed and kicked him in the belly with her heels. “Go! Go!”

More strange jolts as she kicked him. Did the Human have little spikes in her heels? Keiron had never mentioned that, and Chess' feet had looked smooth, but that didn't mean anything.

He sprinted down the crumbling corridor, springing and ducking around debris, jumping over puddles of things that reeked and raking his claws through an ambitious, larger Grey that lunged at him from behind a slab. The Human yelped, then said "Holy fuck!" when he ripped the Grey's face off and threw it away.

"You know them?" Ahane asked as he resumed his wild bolt down the hallway, narrowing what little cosmic breath he had to focus on the task of *getting out of here*.

"Nope. Just like your style, Prince Red."

What was it with Humans giving names to things that already had names? Chess had an assortment of names for his brother, including *Big Blue Jerk*. Was his name not good enough? Did they just enjoy stating the obvious? And why did they have words that had ten different meanings? Why not just have ten different words?

"Their genetic engineering for combat is clearly thirty generations behind," Ahane commented.

She hauled herself forward so her face was closer to his. "You engineered too?"

"Of course not. Unless you count trinket-births, in which case, yes." His parents had been trinket-mates. He'd gotten the least of the breath, so to speak, but he had more than zero.

"So... yes?"

"What do Humans do? Just breed with random people?"

"Sure seems that's what a lot of us do. Pretty sure that's what my mom did."

Interesting. So Humans did not just breed with their mates, but with random partners. Many species in the Gestalt preferred to be selective according to *some* criteria, but there were a few species that chose to intentionally conceive offspring with random partners.

He lunged over a massive chunk of collapsed wall, then came to a large double door at the end of the hallway. He hooked his claws into it and *cranked* for all he was worth. The doors, their locking mechanisms having crumbled, burst outwards on their tracks.

She gave him a few little kicks with her heels. "Aren't you glad you

listened to me now?”

He ignored her teasing and took in the modest hangar. The large spars spanning the ceiling already sagged and cracked, and panels had come loose, and lighting flickered, and the entire thing tilted slightly to one side. He perceived that the asteroid had started to list, and the list was increasing while the entire asteroid started a wobble around its vertical axis. Soon, what artificial gravity there was would no longer be calibrated properly (or work at all), and things would get *very* interesting.

Another series of booms nearly knocked him off his feet and one central spar in the ceiling cracked and sagged downwards, bringing chunks of innards with it. She squeaked and her little arms squeezed his neck. “What are those noises?”

“Erasure protocol. They’re destroying everything. Including the asteroid.” Ahane took in the two options they had for escape: one Grey single-person transport, and one single-pilot cargo hopper of a generic Gestalt design, complete with Gestalt registration and identification on the hull. He could fly that one well enough to pilot it around the asteroid back to the main ship.

The Human squirmed down off him. She pointed at the bay doors. “Can you fly one of these?”

“Yes. That one.” He pointed at the one he’d selected.

“I can open the bay and we can get out of here. Deal?”

“How do you know how to open the bay?” he asked suspiciously.

Something about her seemed to get angry and defensive, although it was impossible to read her non-existent expressions, and her exposed skin did not change color or texture. “I’ve seen it in the Greys’ heads when they talk to me. Now are we going to escape or you want to waste time making sure I’m worth escaping with?”

“You *aren’t* worth escaping with, Human. Getting caught with you is a Zero Crime. I should just leave you here, that’s how much you’re worth.”

She seemed to dim a little, then returned to full brightness. “Fine. I was warned about you Gestalt assholes anyway, so whatever. But you want to be a fucking criminal or a fucking corpse? Because I know where you can find certain death.”

She raised her hands and spun around, then dropped gracefully to the ground, crossed her knees, and rested her elbows on her knees. She then plopped her chin in her hand.

Fuck.

A Human. But at this point, what was one more Human? Chess wasn't going to let Keiron leave the other Humans behind, so him showing up with one more in tow was like having ten worms chewing on you instead of nine. At some point, you were just screwed on a level that did not merit further calculation.

He snorted. "Open the bay."

"Aye, aye, Captain." She headed over to the small podium. She limped equally on both feet as she did so. Her short shirt sleeves and the bunched-up cuffs of her pants revealed deep, large probe wounds on the back of her arms and lower legs. The wounds were so large they seemed to engulf all her limbs, and they were deep shades of blue, green, purple, and a stained yellow shade.

A sudden crush of anger at the realization made his scales sharpen and extend.

He yanked the access panel to the ship open and consulted the insides. Not even the usual protections against thieves. He manipulated the wires and panels and nodes with a few deft twists of his fingers and a solid kick to the lower panel and the door opened.

The ship was tiny. All cargo hold, a small flight deck, and a single too-small bed with a tiny utility room for personal needs. A one-person ship for hauling small loads. If it hadn't been for the scarring on the outside, he'd have dismissed it as a simple hauler for moving objects around the asteroid.

He wedged himself into the very small flight deck.

He swore.

The *exterior* of the ship looked standard issue, but the interior was Grey tech.

Klaxons signaled the bay doors were opening. The little Human slammed into the ship and caught herself on the back of the chair. "All done!"

BOOM BOOM BOOM.

Everything began to shake. Debris fell on the roof.

She practically crawled over the back of the chair like a kit-kit. "Let's get out of here."

"Go throw the handle by the door." He scanned the controls for something that looked familiar. There would have to be *something* so this ship could pass docking at standard Gestalt docks, since it clearly was not intended to announce it was Grey. And *no one* would have paid to have the Greys install these avionics in a shitbox like this. The entire cockpit was

worth at least thirty of these ships.

Keiron was going to love this. Nice little extra to put out behind the barn and fiddle with. Laws of salvage said it was *his* now, and unless the Gestalt wanted to claim it was evidence of criminal activity, he had just obtained a lifetime of tinkering and reverse-engineering for his family.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Might be a very short lifetime.

The Human crawled back onto the pilot's chair. Clinging to the back and half on his shoulder seemed to be the only place for her anyway, given he was folded up to even fit. He paused in his contemplation. "Go sit on the floor."

"Why?"

Did she have to argue about *everything*? He twisted his head to look at her, and her face was *right* there, peering at him. Her eyes were an unremarkable shade of brown, but as he stared into them, saw that the irises were mottled with tiny streaks of color that radiated from her perfectly round pupil. Each of the streaks was a slightly different shape, length, and color, with the outer ones being more like specks, while the inner ones radiated outwards. The shades ranged from deeper browns, to almost greens, to ambers, and even a few that seemed gold. A darker ring encased her iris, clearly separating it from the white sclera.

It instantly reminded him of a supernova, when a star shed its outer shell in a brilliant ring, while the contents burst outward from a dark core.

Which was stupid, because he'd seen the eyes of hundreds of species and thousands of individuals, and yet, for whatever reason, there was something about *hers* that struck him and made him think of exploding stars.

"This bay is about to explode, big guy," she told him, bonking her forehead against his like a kit-kit.

He startled and his scales washed a paler ruby. Gruffly, he said, "And you're going to end up on the floor anyway. So get down."

She contemplated resistance for a split second before common sense kicked in and she tucked herself into the corner of the already tiny flightdeck.

The bay doors *were* now open, and the mesh wasn't working, so now everything *in* the bay was exiting the bay, except for the two ships, which were still held by their magnetic locks. As soon as the floor, detached, though...

He'd never flown a Grey ship, but he *had* been to several tours of the

commercially-available Grey ships, and read some of the documentation they made available to potential buyers. Not that he would be a potential buyer. He just liked knowing how things worked. Upon second contemplation of the flight controls, he recognized some of the systems, but not all. This was not a commercially available system, and it had been modified for this little ship. It also did not appear to have biometric controls on any of the panels. That was a standard Grey feature, although it could be disabled. And lucky for him: it had been disabled. Probably because biometrics left evidence trails, and Greys didn't like evidence.

"Hold on," he told the Human.

"Holding on." She held onto the base of the pilot's chair.

CLANK.

Magnetic locks released.

BOOM BOOM BOOM.

Each one rattled his teeth, and she made small noises of terror. Debris and chunks fell onto the ship.

He pointed the ship at the now-rotating door as the asteroid started to tumble in space, but the ship didn't.

BOOM.

Part of the hangar collapsed to his left and the entire ceiling above him cracked as the spars gave way and the floor that had previously been under them splintered into a rotating tunnel. The ship careened through the chaos as he tried to maneuver it to the crumbling exit.

On the console, a light flashed red and orange, with a single glyph illuminated. A tiny hexagonal button emerged from the console to his right.

[BEST GUESS TRANSLATION: EMERGENCY]

What a clever ship. It could state the fucking obvious with glorious accuracy.

BOOM.

They weren't any *less* dead if he didn't press the emergency button.

He pressed it.

The controls went dead and dark gray under his hands while the screens and displays displayed another series of glyphs.

[BEST GUESS TRANSLATION: EMERGENCY MODE]

This was definitely an emergency, and no shame in admitting he did not have the skills to handle the ship in this moment. Time to turn it over to an AI that had been specially built to handle exactly this scenario, by someone far

more trained in such scenarios than himself.

The ship spun itself around.

“EEEEEE!” the Human screeched. He grabbed her with his tail.

A never-ending boom, followed by a terrible cracking that went on and on and on and *on*, tore at his ears while the Human screamed. Everything went dark, misty gray.

The ship accelerated into nothing.

AHANE

He was still in the pilot's seat, but the force of the acceleration had smashed him so hard into it his scales had left indents in the upholstery. His ears and scales still rang with the violent spinning and tumbling from their escape. The ship's autopilot had righted itself and now seemed to have it in steady flight. There were some indications that the ship had taken damage during their escape.

He whipped around. "Human?! Where are you?!"

A little voice barely more than a kit-kit's mewl. "Here."

He twisted and looked down. The little Human still clung to the base of the chair. Somehow, he'd instinctively wrapped his tail around her wrists, hooking her to the base by restraining her.

Relief poured through him. The flightdeck was too small for him to move around in it. He leaned over as much as he could manage and quickly unwrapped his tail from her wrists. "Are you hurt?"

She slowly moved out from under the chair, like her entire body hurt, and she rubbed her wrists together. Dark blue bruises encircled the joints. "Yeah. I'm okay."

He scooped her up with his tail and drew her close to steady her. She didn't seem to be excessively distressed given their circumstances, so he turned his attention back to the flightdeck. The gray that had obscured their view was gone, and now all he saw was stars. The flight controls had regained their colors and the displays no longer showed the emergency text. He took another few moments to study the flightdeck.

His scales turned black-red at the tips and thickened slightly as his hearts shot blood through his organs. His tail scraped the ground. She squeaked at

the sound and tucked herself as far away from him as she could manage.

They were nowhere near where they'd started from. There were no other ships nearby. No evidence of a debris field either. No residual heat signatures from the explosions.

The Human clutched her wrists in front of her breasts and scanned the deep, dark dome of the sky around them, her eyes huge and bright and... terrified.

"Where do we... go now?" she asked, her voice soft and trembling, and like she already knew they were probably still dead.

"No idea." There were no beacons within range for the ship to even detect. Even if he *had* been on-beacon, in this remote part of the Gestalt, the beacons were so far apart that actual skill was necessary to traverse between them.

She looked down at the console in front of them, then at him, her eyes brighter than the stars. "You don't know?"

"I'm a mechanic, not a pilot," he said. "And we're off-beacon."

"So we're lost."

"We're lost." And if he was reading the diagnostics correctly, they were damaged and leaking fuel and possibly coolant.

For a moment, it seemed like her weak muscles had given out and she was about to collapse into a pile of bones and skin, but then she visibly hardened all over, almost like she had scales—which she clearly didn't. She muttered something under her breath.

[NO TRANSLATION]

She looked him up and down, a little ridge of flesh forming between her wild dark brows to show an expression that passed for skepticism or intensity or doubt or thought. Her gaze was almost tactile, like she was feeling every scale and ridge on his body. He almost moved to permit her to have a better view, then caught himself. He did not need to submit to this Human's *inspection* of his body. He would tolerate her curiosity. He had little choice in it, and best for her to get it out of her system now.

Humans stared at things. Perhaps they did not stare more than other species, but their gaze was so *bright* it was impossible to *not* notice when you were the subject of a Human's attention. And this Human was far less discreet about it than his sister-in-law.

It gave him a chance to study her too, although the baggy attire she wore concealed most of her body. There were the probe wounds on her forearms,

and multiple small punctures in the veins of her slender little hands, and worse: probe wounds on her neck.

Those made his muscles clench. Two probe wounds, deep and purple in multiple shades that betrayed they were violation upon violation. The bruising spread up her jaw behind her ear and into her hair, as well as down her neck to disappear under the crudely stitched collar of her shirt. Her fingernails, like Chess', were thin and puny and useless. Same for the nails on her toes.

She looked back at the starfield. "So... you going to ask for directions?"

"There is no one to ask," he said. "We are also out of range of the communications grid, and I do not intend to find out who can hear us. I suspect it will be the Greys."

When he'd gotten his tours of the Grey ships, his focus had been on engines, not the consoles and flight systems. Such things were High Science. He preferred things he could touch and see and hit with a hammer or laser-wrench.

This was a ship that had been modified by the Greys, so it could probably take them to the Grey system. Maybe even the homeworld, if he could figure out how to get it on course, preferably without triggering any rescue beacons. The Greys wouldn't be stupid enough to have rescue beacons broadcast on any channels or frequencies that the rest of the Gestalt could pick up. "Rescue" would come in the form of a Grey Capital Ship, and then the best hope he'd have would be Gestalt Special Enforcement.

Catching him. With a Human. In a Grey pod. After raiding a Grey dark site.

Zero crimes as long as his tail.

Or he found his way back to 25XA. In a Grey pod. With a Human. After raiding a Grey dark site.

Zero crimes as long as his tail.

And they were *definitely* losing fuel and coolant, and the power levels were already starting to drop.

"So what do we do?" she asked.

"This is a Grey ship, so it has a way to navigate off-beacon and get itself back home." He began to search through the autopilot's pre-loaded flight paths. All of them were unavailable except one. "And there is a failsafe flight path that's still available."

"Don't tell me."

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”

“Agreed. But it’s that, or as you said, certain death. Would you like to twirl around again?” Part of him hoped she would. And perhaps she would stumble right into his lap.

What are you thinking, Ahane.

Her lips curled in a sort of feral grin that made his second heart pump blood straight to his cock.

She looked at the darkness with that wild grin. “Well, the assholes always *did* tell me I’d be welcome on Grey homeworld. Knock knock, motherfuckers.”

THANK YOU



I hope you enjoyed *Spared By The Monster Vol 2*. Don't worry about Keiron and Chess—Ahane is just fine. Sort of. He has no idea what he's in for with his new Human companion. The plain brother of House 8 is going to put his humble cooking skills to the test in *Seared By The Monster*.

I'm not sure which brother (or Septus, perhaps? Captain Peach Cobbler? The owner of the battle-yacht? The Counciltrix? No one is safe from the very primitive and tiny Human invasion!) would come after Ahane. I haven't finished *Seared* yet, so feel free to send me your vote.

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