



TRUTHFUL DECEPTIONS

ORIGINS+ABDUCTIONS
BOOK 1

RK MUNIN

Truthful Deceptions

RK Munin

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Content Warnings

- Sex work is discussed and talked about in the context that it is a valid occupation but dangerous for humans because they're so much smaller than other species. I do not look down on sex workers of any kind and hope that someday the laws and protection catch up with reality.
- A human is abducted.
- There is a human character who lost her husband in a tragic accident.
- a human character is dealing with past trauma and depression, which includes suicide ideations

Truthful Deceptions

It could be worse, but Opal isn't sure how. Then she finds out!

Everything was going wrong, and Opal didn't know how to fix it. Well, that's not true, she knew one thing that would fix all her woes: wealth.

With things too dire to ignore any longer, Opal did the one dangerous job she swore never to do; she agreed to work a night at a contract brothel. She braced herself for a full day and night of unpleasant roughness and discomfort. What she didn't expect was for her time with a male from a species called Talin to be the most pleasurable of her life.

Then she finds herself kidnapped.

Nope, not happening. Despite the good times, she won't be kept as a slave.

Tropes: humans are adorable, desperate human in a cruel universe, hurt/comfort

MF, first person, past tense, multi-POV

Author's request: I'm an author with clinical dyslexia. My editing team works hard to help me overcome this challenge, but we miss things. Typos can happen to the best of us. If you see something, please send me a kind message or email (author@rk-munin.com) and I'll update my manuscript. Thank you!

Glossary

Artificial wombs: Talin women cannot get pregnant if they don't "scent bond" (see below) with their partner. When scent-bonding started going out of style (and eventually became illegal), the Talins started using artificial wombs to have children. Live births were outlawed and instead, artificial wombs were used. It was expected that each Talin couple would have exactly two children, one male and one female, unless the government requested more to make up for a population imbalance.

- **Cresh (creshes):** It became fashionable not only to have a child produced in an artificial womb, but to have them raised by specially trained professionals. Children spend their lives in the cresh and only leave when it's time for them to begin training for a future career under the guidance of their family.

Ending (clinically referred to as Collapsed Scent Disease): If scent-bonded partners are separated for too long, they can suffer and die. The length of time partners can go without each other depends on the individuals, but most can only last ten or so days apart because they start

suffering. It's a painful death and one of the reasons that a distant Talin monarch started encouraging his people not to scent bond.

Fading (clinically referred to as Catatonic Withdrawal Disease): This is a disease that can strike a Talin at any time in their life, but is most common when they're in their prime breeding years. Without a scent-bonded partner to help stabilize them, they can fall into a deep depression. They stop eating, moving, and eventually die. It's considered a shameful disease among the Talin and those that suffer from it are often hidden away by their family.

Identification Cubes: Often called simply an Ident, these devices act as a combination of communication device, locator, and identity verifier, recorder, and method of payment, among other things. Most species have moved to using small Information squares instead of the awkward cubes, but Talins refuse to give them up.

Information square: These can range from the size of a human hand to the size of a human torso. They look like a square of glass, but are embedded with electronics. They can store data, record, access unibases, store wealth, and act as a form of identification. Most species use these instead of the older, and more expensive Identification Cubes

Innerecranial translator (also known as an INT): This is a small bit of tech that almost every hearing species has implanted in their head. It only works with verbal or gesture-based languages; it can't translate written words.

- Human children usually get one between three or four years old.
- Talin children usually get one when they're about one solar old.

Mattil medal: Awarded to soldiers for acts of bravery. At best, most soldiers only win one in a lifetime of service.

Old Earth: A few years before the beginning of *Creating Captivity* the human homeworld became uninhabitable. The air and water were too polluted for anything but bacteria to survive. Some humans moved to live and work with other species before this happened.

- **Final Cataclysm:** The final days of Earth where people survived by staying in sealed buildings and consumed stored food and water. This was when many humans took any job they could get, even if it paid almost nothing and was dangerous.
- The very wealthy and their staff moved to self-sufficient colonies on Mars or the moon. Within a year they all collapsed because they weren't truly self-sufficient and couldn't survive without the Earth to send supplies.
- For decades before the Final Cataclysm scientists were working on various bacteria that would break down or digest the various toxins in the air and water. They were released but it's estimated that there won't be worldwide results for 10,000-15,000 years.

Scent bonding: Talins have oil secreting glands in their cheeks. Each Talin produces oil with a unique scent and they can become addicted to their partner's smell. The lack of oil producing scent glands in humans is why it's believed that Talins can't become scent-bonded with humans. Like many things Talins believe about scent bonding and affection, this is false.

Species: This is not an exhaustive list of species but some of the most common you'll encounter.

- **Delorta** (Dee-lor-ta): Description-this species looks a bit like the mythical centaur. They have four arms on their human-like upper body with a draft horse-like lower body. Instead of horse hooves they have giant cloven hooves, more like goats.
 - They have three genders: lifebearers, nurturers, and providers. Traditionally lifebearers have and nurse children, nurturers are expected to care for and raise them, and providers are meant to work hard to shelter and feed the family unit. In reality, none of the roles are clearcut and everyone often does some of everything.

Most family units are made up of one lifebearer and several nurturers and providers.

- Their homeworld is an iceplanet. Lifebearers can't get pregnant or carry children successfully anywhere but on their planet of origin.
 - While they can survive hotter environments, they like their environment cold so their space stations are usually kept at very low temperatures.
- **Doringo** (Door-in-go): Description-as an avian species the Doringo have long sharp beaks and their body is covered in feathers, although they don't fly. During their distant evolution their species traded size for flight. They are bipedal with claw-like hands and feet. Their arms and legs seem thin for their body, probably because their feathers make the rest of them look round and fluffy.
 - This species tends to colonize planets rapidly, sometimes with sloppy terraforming that can cause the planet to become inhabitable in the long run.
 - **Hamlershin** (Ham-ler-shin): Description-this species looks a bit like a large octopus but with eyes all over the top of their head. They have thirteen tentacles and use them as both arms and legs interchangeably. Each one has a barbed hook at the end that makes an effective weapon.
 - **Leemron** (Leem-ron): Description-cat like species covered in fur with short, fat rounded ears. They're extremely family oriented and often own and operate businesses as a family for generations.
 - **Nimon** (Nee-mon): Description-insect like species that look a bit like a praying mantis. They have a lot of body language they use to convey emotion. For example they scissor their antenna back and forth to denote agreement or a head nod to show hunger.
 - **Ossiso** (O-see-so): Description-reptilian appearing, but with fur on their head and running down their back. They have the basic two arms, two legs, bipedal shape.

- Ossiso Civilization of Souls: how they refer to their government/civilization
- They have an extremely rigid social structure and the class you're born into dictates what kind of jobs you can have and even what rights you have.
- **Vicpor** (Vic-poor): Description-giant beetles with four legs and four arms all ending with three finger-appendages. They can walk on four, six, or all eight appendages depending on if they're injured. They have an outer carapace and use a hydraulic system inside their bodies instead of muscles.
 - They're infamous for their avarice, even with their own family.
- **Ugarian** (Ooo-gar-ee-an): Description-big furry species that make some humans think of a classic werewolf. Their colors can range from shades of blue and gray to solid colors with the occasional brown individual. They have long, pointed, expressive ears and a shortish snout.
 - They are one of the three founding species of the Ilgorian Federation (The two other species are Ilgorian and Porian)

Talin Government Basics

- **Monarch:** The monarch and Apogee Assembly work together to lead the Talin people. Although the monarch doesn't serve on the Apogee Assembly, they have the power to challenge any laws the assembly wants to pass. They can also unilaterally disbar an

assembly member, but this is considered an extreme action and rarely done.

- **Apogee Assembly:** This is the major law making and governing body. Under this assembly other government programs are overseen. The members of the Apogee Assembly are referred to as Servant Citizens and are elected by their Clan Assembly to a position in the Apogee Assembly.
- It is expected that a monarch's grown children, called Prime Son/Prime Daughter, will serve on the Apogee Assembly. There are always two positions set aside for them, although it's rare that both will serve at the same time.
- **Clan Assemblies:** Talarian, the Talin homeworld, is divided up into provinces. Each province has a Clan assembly made up of a representative from each clan in the province. Those that serve on Clan Assemblies are called Assembly Citizens. These Clan Assemblies will pick one of their members to serve on the Apogee Assembly.
- **Colony Assemblies:** Most colonies don't have large clans or are made up of a few families starting a new clan, therefore these Assemblies are made up of whoever the citizens of that colony feel will do the best job of governing. Most homeworld Talins look down on colonies as being made up of upstarts or new clans.

Talarian: Name of the Talin homeworld.

- They have extremely strict laws about being on Talarian. If you don't have family or property then you can't even visit unless someone with property sponsors you. They don't have any type of inns, hotels, or rooms to rent. If you land without a sponsor you stay on the ship until it's time to leave again.
- Moravi: capital city of Talarian and home to the Apogee Assembly

Time Keeping

- **Universal units:** This is a universal time keeping framework used by most species. It's based on a ten unit day with each unit being the equivalent to about two hours of Old Earth time keeping. Most species divide up a day into a five unit working cycle and a five unit rest cycle.
- **Marks and Strikes:** Talins don't use Universal Units, they have marks and strikes. 1st mark is at sunrise and last mark is at sunset, 13th mark. Strikes are used at night and go from 1 to 13.
 - Each strike and mark on Talarian is the equivalent of 45 Old Earth Minutes. Each mark is made up of 100 submarks. Each submark is made up of 100 micromarks.
 - If you're referring to a passing of time they're all marks, whether they happened during the day or night. For example: *Searin set his Ident to wake him at 11 strike. That was only three marks from now.*
 - Because colonies would be unlikely to have the same day and night pattern as the homeworld, they keep the 26 strikes and marks, but change how many submarks are in each unit so that it all still works for their individual colony time keeping.
 - Talin ships will keep the same time as the homeworld.

Unibase: This stands for a universal database that most species keep and allow free access to for all their citizens. Often ships will have a copy of their species UniBase, but might restrict access to only the members of the crew that are the same species as the captain or owner.

Universal: One of the most common languages used within the known universe. Even though almost everyone has INTs, knowing how to speak

and read Universal is highly beneficial, especially reading because INTs can't translate written words.

- **Common:** This was a second language developed to be interstellar but it never became as popular as Universal.

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Chapter 1

Opal

I stopped at the entrance to the docks. My heart was pounding as if I'd run the length of the station. Nervousness and a bit of fear made nausea rise up. I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes.

Get a grip, I told myself. This isn't anything.

Except it was.

Even though Maglia assured me the species who would be paying for my time were breeding compatible with humans, there were a lot of ways I could get hurt even if their penises didn't have spikes or barbs.

No, I had to stop thinking that way. I'd be fine.

Maglia said she'd talked to the client at length and they seemed to understand that humans were a delicate, vulnerable species. Maglia took good care of everyone she worked with. I trusted her to do her best, but there was always the unexpected.

It gave me confidence that she seemed to know everything about sex work. She'd been in this business a long time and had given me a long lecture on pleasing a client. She'd even given me a bag of goodies. The contents included various lubes and things I could use on myself or the client to create or prolong pleasure.

I hadn't recognized half of them and found myself blushing a few times while Maglia explained how to use everything in detail. Normally I wasn't

shy about sex or sexuality, but I'd never had it treated so clinically. It felt weird, but I was determined to treat this like any other job and do my very best to make the client happy.

The problem was that, instead of going to the ship, I was standing here clutching the bag of items and trying hard to calm myself. If I couldn't get my heart to slow down and my stomach to settle, I'd probably vomit all over my client.

This might be my first time working for Maglia, but I was pretty sure that wasn't a good idea.

“Opal?”

I gasped and turned to find Irga standing there with a crawling bot in his hands. The bot's front six legs were wiggling without any coordination, and the back six legs were all hanging limp.

“Hi, Irga,” I said, overly loud. My volume made Irga draw back. I sucked in a breath and tried again. “What's wrong with the crawler?”

He looked down at the machine before looking back up at me, the tall bushy crown of fur on his head bobbing as he moved. “It's Gilta's bot. It's not acting correctly, so I thought I'd ask Tegta if she could fix it.”

It felt good to talk about mundane things. “If anyone can fix it, it's Tegta.”

“What are you doing here?” he asked, looking happy for me. “Are you working with Tegta today?”

After the mining operation on a nearby moon shut down, a bunch of businesses on our station had also closed. My job had been great, until it disappeared because they closed an entire repair bay. Now, six months later, they'd closed all bays except for Tegta's. She would hire me when she could. But it wasn't often and definitely not enough.

“I have a job, but not with Tegta,” I said.

It only took Irga a moment to figure out what I meant. “Did Maglia get a contract for you?”

“Yes, it's my first,” I said.

He looked excited. “She gets the best prices for sex contracts. That should help. I know Tegta feels guilty over not having much work for you here in the bay.”

“She shouldn't feel guilty; there's not enough work for anyone,” I said. The only steady jobs were with station staff, station maintenance, and this repair bay. We were still close enough to a trade route that ships would sometimes come in for work or to refuel.

“What about your applications to other stations?” he asked. “You're a skilled multi-level technician. There must be someone willing to sponsor you.”

I sighed. “Nothing yet.”

Within the Massoc Republic, outsiders couldn't simply move from place to place. You had to have a sponsor that would take responsibility if you broke a law or did something wrong. So far no one was willing to sponsor me, even with Tegta's recommendation.

“Maybe you'll get steady sex contracts with Maglia,” he said.

I snorted. “This is the first one since I registered three months ago. I doubt this will be a regular thing.”

Irga looked around, confused. “If you're fulfilling a sex contract, shouldn't you be using one of Maglia's rooms?” He took a step closer with an aggravated shake of his head. “You aren't fulfilling the contract on their ship, are you?”

“They paid double to have me come to them,” I said.

“This isn't a good idea,” he said.

I agreed with him, but I couldn't say no to the extra wealth.

“I'm sure it'll be fine,” I said, holding up the bag of goodies Maglia gave me. Not everything in the bag was to help clients enjoy their time with Maglia's workers. “I have a subduer in here.”

“Those won't do much if you can't get to it,” Irga said.

“The client knows I have a contract enforcer,” I said. “If I don't report back, Maglia will bring the station authorities.”

Those words helped me feel better, even if Irga didn't look relieved at all. I stood tall and tried to look confident.

“Everything will be fine,” I said, for both of us.

“Irga!”

The shout made us both turn to see Tegta waving Irga over. “I have time, let me look at the bot.”

“Be safe,” Irga said.

“I will,” I said. “Go get Gilta's bot fixed.”

He was slow to leave but gained speed at Tegta's impatient expression. I watched both of them disappear into her tool room. I didn't have any reason to loiter near the bay doors any longer.

Pulling in a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and marched down the row of ships. I'd had sex in the past. Even if I didn't enjoy my time with this

client, it wasn't as if I didn't know what I was getting into. I'd done other jobs I hated. There was no way this could be worse than cleaning out the station's enviro-sump. I'd showered three times to get the stink off my skin and out of my hair after that. Paid intercourse couldn't possibly be that bad.

That thought made me grin as I imagined meeting the client.

Hello, nice to meet you. Sex with you can't be as stinky and horrible as cleaning an enviro-sump. Let's get to it.

I snorted. No, I wouldn't be telling the client that.

My grin disappeared when I found the client's ship. I stopped at the base of the ramp, trying to figure out if I should walk up the ramp or send the ship a message. I'd brought my information square and could use it to send them a message through the station's comm system. If I sent a message, what would I say? Your prostitute has arrived and is ready to board?

While I dithered about sending messages versus walking up, the hatch at the top of the ramp hissed. I jumped, then felt dumb for being so nervous.

I stepped up onto the ramp, ready to walk up and meet the client only to see a figure rushing down to meet me. I almost turned and ran.

The guy was huge.

He was only wearing pants and a belt, so I could see most of his body. He was heavily muscled and every inch of him was covered in hard keratin plates that made him look tough. Adding to his fierce appearance were the long quills running down the outside of his forearms from his elbows to his wrists.

He was a soft orange color that darkened down his arms, with his wrists and hands a beautiful salmon color. He was scary looking, but also pretty.

He had the basic human shape with two arms, two legs, two eyes, and one mouth, but he lacked visible ears and his nose was almost flat with only two slits. His hands had four digits each, with a second thumb where a human's smallest finger would be.

Coming to a stop in front of me, he made a sound very similar to a purr.

"You're here," he said, looking past me. "Did you come alone? No one escorted you?"

He must be used to buying sex from those who couldn't say no. Those individuals would be accompanied by guards to make sure they did their job and were returned in reasonably good condition.

That was gross, but I kept my mouth shut. I almost turned around and left, but no, I didn't have that luxury.

How many showers was I going to have to take before I felt clean after this?

"I'm here alone." I regretted the words the moment they came out of my mouth. I rushed to add a warning. "Maglia will enforce our contract."

"Yes, I conversed briefly with Maglia. She made it very clear that if you didn't leave our ship at the agreed time limit, then she'd be quick to collect you," the client said. "I want you to know you're safe now."

That seemed like an odd thing to say, but maybe it was a traditional greeting. Suddenly all I wanted was to get this over with.

"Do you want me to come onboard?" I asked.

"Yes, that would be good," he agreed. "Can I carry your burden?"

He reached for my bag. I clutched it to my chest and took a step back. "No, this is mine."

That was probably rude, but he didn't act upset. "Yes, it's yours, little human. No one will take away your things."

It was almost as if he was talking to a child or I had developmental disabilities. Well, he wouldn't be the first to think humans were a dumb species.

"My name is Tolreum," he said, stepping to the side and gesturing for me to walk ahead of him.

"I'm Opal," I said and moved up the ramp. It wasn't long before I was walking through the hatch and into the ship, with him right behind me.

"Opal is a good name for a rare treasure," he said.

"Where is your..." My words trailed off as I came face to face with three more crew, all as big and dangerous looking as Tolreum.

There were four of them? Maglia hadn't said anything about there being more than one client!

One was going to be difficult enough, but four?

I was going to turn and run when I heard the hatch hiss shut behind me. That sound made me freeze in place. What to do now? Come up with an excuse? Try to contact Maglia so she could talk to them?

As I thought about what to do, Tolreum walked past me and stood with the rest of the crew.

"Opal, this is Mieshorum, Lexarit, and Narmuna," he said, pointing to each one as he named them.

"We own this ship, Ever Secure," Narmuna said. "It's a midclass high-energy transport."

“She probably doesn't know what high-energy transports do,” Mieshorum said with a clear reprimand in his voice.

“Yes, you're correct,” Narmuna said to Mieshorum and then turned his attention back to me. “High-energy transports are specialty ships that can safely carry fuel rods and fuel rounds. We have lucrative service contracts with many stations and outposts.”

“Don't be afraid,” Tolreum said. “Our hull is designed to keep the rods and rounds suspended in a neutral state. Even if there was a failure in the storage crates, the storage bay would keep everything stable.”

Rods and rounds were exceptionally safe once installed in a fuel port and engaged, but they didn't like being idle. They were notorious for exploding during transit.

Tolreum's earlier comment made so much more sense now. He didn't want me to be worried that I was going to get exploded by poorly stored fuel rods or rounds.

Not that I was concerned. The station wouldn't have let them dock if the ship didn't have all the appropriate safety protocols in place.

My worry was about something entirely different.

“I'm only going to serve one of you,” I said, proud of how firm and authoritative my voice sounded.

All four of them made a slow and irregular thumping sound in their chest. It reminded me of an engine that wasn't running right. They all looked at each other until Lexarit spoke.

“There's a contract in place,” he said. “She must abide by the contract.”

The other three made a sound that was like stockinged feet running and looked back at me. Their facial expressions never changed. The sounds must be how they expressed emotions.

“You don't have to serve any of us,” Lexarit said.

Now that I was here, the idea of not fulfilling the contract and getting the wealth made me frustrated enough to be insistent.

“I can serve one of you,” I said. “But only one.”

They looked at each other, making the irregular sound again. I guessed that meant they were questioning or confused.

They leaned in close to each other and whispered for a few minutes. I couldn't make out their words, but the conversation seemed intense. Finally they straightened back up and looked at me.

“We understand that it's important for you to feel useful,” Tolreum said.

“You can choose which one of us you'd like to serve,” Mieshorum said.

“Any one of us is a good choice,” Narmuna said.

Lexarit made a sound that reminded me of someone running in sock-covered feet. “We’ll abide by your decision.”

They were quick to shuffle until they were standing in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder.

“I pick?” I said, feeling slightly amused. This wasn't going at all how I expected.

“Yes,” Tolreum said. “You can ask us questions if that will help you decide.”

That wasn't a bad idea. I stepped up to Lexarit, the first one in the line. He smelled a little like scented soap. The smell was strong enough that I didn't even ask him anything. I didn't think I could handle being close to that strong smell for long without developing a headache.

Tolreum was next. He had a strong scent also, but his was pleasant and made me think of the smoked sage my mother used to flavor our food with when we lived in places where she could grow it.

“How long have all of you been working together?” I asked, wanting to enjoy the way his familiar scent made me more relaxed.

“Three rotations on this ship,” he answered.

“Before this ship, we worked on the Ever Present,” Lexarit added. “It was a similar type, only much bigger.”

“The ship was decommissioned, and we decided to form our own company,” Mieshorum said.

I nodded as I stepped in front of Narmuna. “Was it decommissioned due to micro-fissures?”

All four of them made the same tools-being-dropped-on-a-metal-floor sound while I tried hard not to sneeze because Narmuna smelled soapy, similar to Lexarit.

“You know what fuel-caused micro-fissures are?” Tolreum asked. By his tone I could tell he was surprised by my knowledge. Whelp, that was an easy emotion sound to decipher: surprise.

“This space station used to be very busy,” I said with a chuckle. “I've seen just about everything that can go wrong with a ship show up here.”

This time the sound that came out of them was like the *tink, tink, tink* of water dripping on a bit of metal. It seemed like some of the noises came out of their chests and others came from their backs.

“Do you have a question for me?” Mieshorum asked. He was the last one in the row.

I shuffled over to stand in front of him and took a deep breath. Why did he smell soapy too? Even more odd, his soapy smell was different from Lexarit or Narmuna’s soapy smells.

Tolreum was the only one with a pleasant scent. That, combined with the fact I liked his deep voice the best, meant I moved back to stand in front of him.

“I’ll serve you,” I said.

This time all the crew except for Tolreum grumbled to each other. Tolreum started purring again.

“I’ll take good care of you,” he swore.

All I needed was for him to be quick and not hurt me.

“Where’s your bedroom?” I asked. “Or do you guys share rooms?”

Tolreum stepped away from the others and pointed. “We all have our own quarters. Mine is this way.”

My heart sped up as I followed him.

I was really doing this!

Chapter 2

Tolreum

The ancestors were gifting me with such good fortune! Opal decided she wanted me to be her master. We'd all agreed to pay a portion of her contract, which had been unreasonably inexpensive for something as rare and precious as a human. I'd have to see if my crewmates were willing to let me buy them out of their portions so I could register my name as her sole owner.

I could understand why the little human didn't want to be around all of us at once. She was probably used to having to work for multiple masters. Although the Massoc didn't allow slavery, they could still use work contracts that could force her to work almost as if she was owned. She probably considered singling me out as a relief from arduous work under multiple demanding clients.

I needed to make sure she didn't regret her choice. She'd be upset after she found out what we did to save her. But after she got over that, I'd be ready to shower her with attention and affection.

This little human would never want for anything ever again.

"These are large quarters," she said, turning in a circle to take in the room. She wasn't wrong. We'd specifically bought a ship with four equally large personal quarters because this ship was going to be our home for many solars.

We were close to having enough wealth to buy a second ship, and then the four of us would split up. The eventual goal was to have enough wealth to hire help instead of doing everything ourselves.

She faced me. "Are you in charge?"

I sounded a negative rumble. "No, we are all equally in charge."

She tilted her head. I was excited to recognize that movement from one of the educational vids put out by the Committee of Pet Welfare. That probably meant she had a question.

"Ask me anything," I encouraged.

"If you're all in charge, how do you make decisions quickly in an emergency?"

I was startled by her excellent question. I didn't think humans had the intellectual capacity to think so abstractly.

"That was an issue that came up early in our partnership," I admitted with an amused rumble. "We figured out the best way to organize was for each of us to be in charge of different things. If there is an emergency with the cargo, I'm in charge. If it's a problem with the ship, then Mieshorum leads. Lexarit takes over if something goes wrong with the galley, enviro, or life support systems. If we're dealing with a legal or diplomatic issue, then Narmuna will be in charge. It has worked very well over the last solar."

"What was that sound you made when you first started talking?" she asked. "Does it mean something?"

Her curiosity was a good sign. "My species makes sounds to convey emotions. We can rumble from our chest boxes." I sounded a soothing rumble, then a rumble of agreement. "Other sounds come out of our back plates."

I turned to show her the overlapping, moving plates that ran down my spine. Then I clattered them together to make a soft negative rattle.

"That last one sounded like a hand softly slapping a thigh," she said. "What did they all mean?"

"Would you like me to go through the basics?" I asked. She nodded her head, and I took her through a few rumbles and rattles.

"Your soothing rumble sounds like a purr," she said after I was done.

"Is that good or bad?" I asked, interested that my soothing rumble was the only one she commented on.

"It's nice," she murmured.

I started up a soothing rumble. “Then I can rumble like this whenever we are together.”

She tensed up. That was disappointing to see after she’d been growing more relaxed around me as we spoke. I wasn’t sure why my words made her uncomfortable.

“You’re safe with me,” I reminded her. “I’m very aware of how delicate humans are.”

She bobbed her head up and down. “Um, yeah, that’s good. Thanks.”

Looking everywhere but me, she moved past me to the bunk. She put a hand on my bed and pressed, as if testing the softness. She tugged the single blanket free of the tightly made bunk and rubbed it between her fingers.

She was probably gauging my cleanliness. We’d hired her under the guise of needing someone to serve us. In truth we meant to steal her away from this place. If she insisted on doing a task, we decided to ask her to guide some of the cleaning bots. But it seemed she thought her duty was to see to my room.

I’d have to come up with some non-strenuous tasks for her. Perhaps I could ask her to catalog something.

Turning to face me, she leaned against the bunk and patted it with one hand. “This is a nice bed.”

Why would she say that? It was a standard issue bunk with an inexpensive mattress and bedding. Except she was probably used to a bed made out of even worse materials, poor little human.

I needed to create the perfect place for her to rest! Perhaps I could coax her into a nap instead of trying to work.

“Wait here, I’ll be back promptly,” I said and rushed from the room. I found my crewmates gathered in the hallway talking. They all turned to face me.

“What’s wrong?” Narmuna asked with a worried rattle.

“I need to make Opal a nest!” I explained, moving past them. I jogged down several corridors until I got to one of our storage rooms. I gathered all the spare bedding we had, which wasn’t nearly enough, and ran back to my room.

I turned the last corner only to find my friends had created a pile of pillows and blankets in front of my cabin door. The items were all much brighter and nicer than the standard bedding we bought for ourselves or kept in storage.

“I picked up these pillows at Noriska Station,” Mieshorum said, pointing to the blue square pillows at the bottom of the pile.

“The blankets are made from Jinjoo wool,” Lexarit explained, gesturing to the folded soft yellow blankets. “It is considered one of the softest natural fibers in the universe.”

“I bought that pad for my bunk,” Narmuna said. “It’s too soft for me, but the human will probably like it.”

I doubted Narmuna had even tried the pad; it looked to still be in its purchase packaging.

Unlike me, they’d all been sure we’d find a human pet and had bought things to give them before we even had one. I wish I’d been as confident as they had been. For me, buying items in advance had felt like I was inviting the universe to disappoint me.

“Your generosity is my greatest gift,” I murmured to my dear friends. We’d all met in the military and had been determined to stay together even after our service was finished. To do that, we’d begun a shipping company. Lexarit wanted freedom from his family’s tight control, Narmuna wanted to build our business into an empire, and Mieshorum talked about employing some of our compatriots from the military someday.

I didn’t care about the empire part and was glad Lexarit no longer had to abide by his controlling parents. My dream of the future was simple, I never wanted to be parted from my friends again.

I dreaded the day we would add another ship to our business.

“I’m humbled by my crewmates, partners, and friends,” I said, slapping my fist to my chest in respect.

“The human picked you,” Narmuna said. “It’s important we honor her choice because she probably hasn’t had much agency in her life. Always remember, we are here to help.”

I rumbled my agreement. “That’s something I’ll never forget.”

“It might prove to be easier to get another human now that we already have one,” Lexarit pointed out. “There are still wild humans out in the universe. We might even have docked at stations where there was a human or two but didn’t even know. They might come out of hiding if they see how happy and well cared for Opal is.”

Everyone made rumbles of agreement at Lexarit’s words.

“We need to make sure to take her onto any station and planet we visit,” I said, already looking forward to showing my human all kinds of interesting

and unique things.

Mieshorum sounded a negative rattle. “She shouldn't leave the ship at every station. They're not all safe.”

That statement set off another round of agreement rattles. Most of the places we went were perfectly well maintained and organized, but there were a couple that none of us liked but still did business with due to the higher fees they paid.

When one of those contracts came up for renewal, I might request we drop them for Opal's safety. Even if she didn't leave the ship, there was still danger at those types of places.

“Enough discussion,” Lexarit said, tugging the other two men away. “You should go make a nice nest for Opal. I'm going to check the food stores to see what we have in stock that Opal can eat.”

“That's a good idea,” Mieshorum said. “I'm going to check in with the station. We should be able to leave soon. It'll be good to get out of here and know no one can take Opal away from us.”

Narmuna was already half turning when he spoke. “I'll research the station where we're making our next delivery. I'll report if it's a safe place to take Opal off the ship.”

I rumbled my agreement as my friends all rushed off. Now I was faced with trying to get all this bedding into my cabin.

Dropping everything in my arms onto the pile, I opened my cabin door to find Opal sitting on my bed reading off an information square she must've brought with her.

“You can read?” I asked before I thought better of voicing such a blunt question.

She blinked several times before the corners of her lips turned up slightly. “There are pictures so that makes it easier.”

Standing up, she walked over and turned the information square around so I could see what she was reading. It was a ship's outer-shell sensor schematic with dense Universal character stacks on either side.

That was one of the more complicated systems on almost any civilian ship. It was difficult for me to correlate all the things I'd read about human intelligence and be faced with a human who was willingly studying such a difficult topic.

“Why are you reading this?” I asked. That seemed like a nice, neutral question.

She moved her shoulders up and down slightly. A shrug. I remembered what the gesture was called, but what did it mean? I'd look it up when I had a chance.

"I was hoping to transfer to a different station, and outer-shell technicians are in demand right now."

"Your diligence is impressive," I said.

Her smile disappeared. "I guess."

I don't know why my compliment might have displeased her, so I tried again. "You shouldn't be disappointed if you're having a difficult time remembering everything."

She turned off the square and tucked it under her arm before pointing at the pile of bedding in the hall. "What's all this?"

I made an excited rattle. "It's to make your nest."

"Nest?" she repeated.

"Yes," I said. Her confusion must be because she'd lived so long without a proper nest. "It will be very soft and comfortable for you."

"You want to make me a nest," she said with a nod. "That's very nice of you."

"Why don't you sit on the bunk until I'm finished," I suggested.

She didn't say a word, simply walked to the bunk, turned, and did a little jump backward to sit on it.

I grabbed everything and half lifted, half dragged, all of it into my cabin. After shutting the door, I got to work.

Narmuna's pad was perfect for the base of the nest. I built up pillows in a circle around the edges, then laid several of the fluffier blankets over all of it. I arranged the rest of the pillows on one side for her head to rest on. Finally I laid the blankets across the bottom so she could easily reach them and pull them over her body.

By the time I was done, I'd created a soft, colorful nest, thanks to my crewmates.

Satisfied with the results, I stood up and faced Opal. I was going to invite her to get in and make herself comfortable, but I was struck speechless.

While I'd been assembling her nest, she'd removed all her clothes.

She was impossibly delicate. Her slim body was a little pale but perfectly formed, with no obvious signs of malnutrition. Her arms were crossed over her chest so I couldn't see her small, round mammary glands very well, but it was clear they were proportionate to the rest of her. It was easy to

imagine how her body would develop curves as we fed her nutrient-dense foods.

I couldn't judge her facial expression, but she shivered slightly as she stepped into the nest and sank down. Grabbing one of the blankets, she wrapped it around herself and gave me a slightly surprised expression.

"Oh, this is soft," she murmured.

That shook me out of my shock. I checked the temperature control in the room and set it a little higher. Then I returned to the nest and knelt next to it. I didn't want to invade her nest. It was important humans felt like they had control over their space. I was thrilled she felt comfortable enough to strip down to better enjoy the softness and warmth.

She tilted her head. "Why are you over there?" She patted the spot next to her.

"You want me to join you?" I asked. I didn't want to upset her by misinterpreting her intentions.

She chuckled. "I might not know much about your species, but I know this isn't going to work if you're over there."

I couldn't believe how quickly she'd accepted her captivity! I jumped into the nest, knocking several pillows around. She grabbed the pillows before I could, her mouth turned up in a full smile.

She was so happy with me!

"Do you want to clutch or cling to me?" I asked, opening my arms. She tilted her head again, then nodded.

"Hugging," she said, wiggling closer. "You mean hugging and snuggling."

I hadn't heard those terms, but the way she moved to press herself against my chest told me we were talking about the same thing.

I slowly closed my arms around her. She shifted a bit, but soon her little blanket-wrapped body was secured in my arms.

She let out a long breath. "This is nice," she whispered.

"It is," I agreed, hoping she'd want me to hold her while she slept. Humans slept in groups, probably for safety and warmth. I didn't know how long Opal was forced to live on her own, but I was excited to provide her with all the comfort she needed.

My human would never be cold, scared, or alone again.

I could still feel some tension in her body. Was she hungry or did she need to use the cleaning or elimination room?

She lifted her head, and I shifted so I could look down at her. Before I realized what she was going to do, she pressed her lips to mine.

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Chapter 3

Opal

The moment our lips met, Tolreum jolted and pulled back. “What are you doing?”

“I'm sorry. That was a kiss,” I said, pulling out of his loose hug. I'd been an idiot. Between the soft bed, his purring filling my ears, and the inviting smell coming from him, I forgot I was on an assignment.

“A kiss?” he repeated. “Is it a sign of affection?”

“Yes,” I said. “It's a human thing. I won't do it again.”

He seemed to think about that some more before making the agreement sound. “It's good that you want to show me affection.”

I let out a relieved breath. Maglia had given me a whole lecture about letting the client take the lead, and the first thing I did was try to kiss him when most species didn't kiss.

“You can lip press if you want,” he said. “I mean kiss.”

“No, we don't have to,” I said quickly. “What do you like to do?”

“I liked it when you clung to me,” he said, holding his arms open again. I moved back into his embrace, although I didn't let myself relax. I needed to remain focused. He was paying a lot of money for my time, and I needed him to be happy with my service.

He purred and petted my back. I waited for him to tug off the blanket and explore my body, but he didn't. Of all the scenarios Maglia had gone over

with me, this wasn't one of them. Did I remain pliant and keep cuddling, or did I push him toward intimacy?

"You're tense," Tolreum said. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"No!" I said quickly. "I, um, didn't expect to cuddle."

"But you enjoy the cuddle?" he asked. That's when I remembered something Maglia had said. Some clients wanted to believe the sex worker was enjoying herself. They wanted to pretend the encounter wasn't a transaction.

I needed to be eager and genuine. I could do this.

"I love the cuddling," I said. "You smell really good too."

I moved close and rose up on my knees so I could press my nose against the side of his face. I wasn't lying about how he smelled. The scent got stronger as I rubbed my cheek against his.

Pulling back, I noticed his face was a little shiny at the same time I felt something on my cheek. Running my palm over my skin, I found that it was coated in a fine layer of oil that smelled strongly of sage. It must have come from him, probably a vestigial scent-marking gland.

"I'm sorry, I can't help but produce oil when you do that," he said, his voice sounding a little strained.

"Does it hurt?" I asked. Unless they specifically asked for it, Maglia told me never to hurt the client.

"It.. . it feels nice," he said. "Does my oil bother you?"

"I like the smell," I confessed, pressing my palm to my mouth and nose. Some of the oil got on my lips and caused a pleasant tingling. "It's like the expensive skin care product my mom used to buy when we could afford it."

"You can rub my oil on your skin," he urged. "It won't hurt you."

That seemed like a veiled request, so I put my hands on either side of his face and gently rubbed. Oil quickly covered my palms and fingers, some even dripping down his face to his neck.

His eyes shut, and his breathing changed. Those were good signs, right?

I was enjoying it too. The oil felt lovely, and the more the scent filled the room, the more relaxed I felt.

With my hands covered in oil, I pulled them away from Tolreum's face and rubbed them on my arms and shoulder. He watched me through half-lidded eyes and shuddered a little.

Oh yes. He definitely liked that.

I returned my hands to his face, gathered more oil, then let the blanket slip and rubbed it over my breasts. I didn't expect the oil to make my nipples tingle, similar to its effect on my lips. It felt amazing.

Now I wanted to know what would happen if I rubbed it on my sex.

That created an image of Tolreum going down on me. It was so vivid I felt my body heat up and my pussy clench. I didn't know if Talins had oral sex, but I kinda hoped they did.

"Are you well?" Tolreum asked with a sound that took me a moment to identify as concerned or worried.

"Um, yes," I said, confused. Had I done something wrong? I was having a great time. I hoped we didn't have to stop. "Why do you ask?"

"Your body feels hotter, and there's a new scent to you," he explained, leaning over and sniffing the air. "It's a pleasant scent, but it wasn't there before."

As his head dipped lower, I realized he could smell my arousal. He said it was pleasant, which meant oral sex might happen!

"When female humans become aroused we, um, produce a, uh..." I was not going to say vaginal secretion; that wasn't sexy at all. Then I remembered another word and latched onto it. "Slick. We produce slick that helps make it feel good when males penetrate us."

Tolreum reared back with a surprised rattle. "Are you in heat?"

Human women didn't go into heat, unlike Marpers. Maybe he wanted to pretend I needed someone to fuck me because of a biological imperative? I could play along with that.

"Yes, I'm in heat," I said, cupping my breasts and squeezing. I'd seen a woman do that in an Old Earth vid clip. It felt good when I squeezed, so I did it again. Hmm, nice.

"There're no human males nearby," he said, sounding another worried rumble.

"I know. That's why I need you to give me relief," I insisted, getting into my wanton, needy character. "I can't stand this. Please, Tolreum, help me!"

"I can't," he protested, even as he dipped his head toward me. "It wouldn't be appropriate."

I was confused for a moment, then remembered we were playing parts. He needed me to convince him to have sex. The roles we were playing were clear now. I was a female human in heat, and he was my reluctant savior.

Flopping back on the soft nest he'd made, I spread my legs out on either side of him. I ran my hands down my sternum, then my stomach, until the tips of my fingers were resting in the soft curls protecting my sex.

"I'm in pain, Tolreum," I moaned, parting my labia with my fingers. "Only you can help me."

His eyes were focused on my sex. Cool air washed over my hot flesh, and both of us went still and quiet. I gave him a few moments, but he didn't make a move. Thinking he might need more instruction on human anatomy, I pulled my pussy lips a little further apart.

"This is where you put your, um, male part," I said, running a finger around my entrance. I moved my finger up and pulled back the little hood protecting my clit. "If you stimulate this, I can orgasm. I can do that several times. Orgasm I mean."

There was a very obvious bulge in his pants, but he still wasn't moving. Right, he needed more encouragement. At this point I was hot as hell and wanted to be touched badly. I don't think I was really acting anymore.

"Humans use their fingers and mouths on each other," I said, rubbing the fingers of one hand over my clit and dipping the first two fingers of my other hand into my pussy. I let out an involuntary moan at how good it felt. Damn, maybe I was in heat.

That thought almost made me break character and chuckle.

Biting my lip, I lifted my hips in an invitation. "I need you to touch me, Tolreum. This is agony. Only you can help me."

He finally let out a rumble of agreement and shifted until he was lying on his belly, face poised over my sex.

"I'll assist you," he said, nosing my fingers aside. His breath felt hot on my exposed sex as he spoke. "But only with my hand and mouth. I can't use my mating shaft on you. That would be very wrong."

That sounded like another thing I was going to have to work hard on convincing him was natural and he needed to do for me. I'd never expected that sex work involved so much play acting or psychology. Maybe I could ask him...

All thought left my head as his mouth latched onto my clit. I sucked a lung full of air in and tilted my pelvis to press against his face. It wasn't acting; it was pure instinct.

I'd had a few lovers in the past, but nothing for long. Having to move often for work meant relationships were difficult to find, and long work

hours meant they were hard to maintain. The Massoc didn't do casual sex, so once I was on Bright Star Station, options weren't simply limited, they were nonexistent.

A two year dry spell, along with underwhelming partners before, meant Tolreum's attention shot me right into a powerful orgasm.

I came so hard my chest muscles convulsed and refused to let me draw in air. I lost feeling in my toes. If my eyes were open, I suspected the outer edges of my vision would be whited out.

He kept going. Sucking on my clit like it was a delicious piece of candy. It was only when my chest muscles relaxed and let me draw breath into my lungs that I was able to beg him to stop.

"Enough," I moaned, gently pushing at the smooth top of his scaled head. "Please, enough."

He gave my entire sex a last lick, then sat back with a purr.

"Did that help?" he asked.

Help? Help! I'd just had the most intense climax of my life. Really, I should be paying him for his services instead of the other way around.

That thought reminded me that I was here to do a job. I might have fun while doing it, but I still needed to fulfill my part of the contract.

"That was wonderful," I said, sitting up. My body felt loose and languid, so I grabbed hold of his arm to help sit up. "I've never had anyone help me through my heat before."

"I can do that again," he offered, licking his lips. "As often as you need."

I almost broke character and begged him to take me away with him. A guy who liked to go down on you so much he wanted to do it even when he was paying for sex? I didn't think that existed!

Still, there were very important reasons I couldn't leave Bright Star Station, at least not yet, so I bit back my unwise impulses. Using my hold on his arm, I pulled myself up on my knees.

"You can penetrate me too," I urged. "I'll be in heat for a while yet. I'd like to feel all of you."

He stopped purring and went still again. I almost sighed because we'd been doing so good. And honestly, I wanted him to fuck me. At least I wanted that if I got a look at his dick and made sure he didn't have any spikes or thorns or anything.

I know Maglia checked that it was safe for us to have intercourse, but this was one of those things I wanted to verify for myself.

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“I don't think we should do that,” he said.

I looked down at his crotch. The bulge was still there, so he was interested. Maybe I should start slower.

“Can I look at you?” I asked, hooking a finger in the waistband of his pants and tugging slightly. “I only want to see. You're the first Talin I've ever met.”

He made the rumble of agreement sound, but it was so slow it took me a moment to figure out which sound it was. I guess that's what Talins did when they were reluctantly agreeing.

“Will you release my arm so I can stand?” he asked.

I nodded and let go. Scooting back a bit, I grimaced at how sensitive my slit was. Even feeling the soft blankets of the nest was almost too much.

Standing up, he took off his belt and set it aside. Then he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and drew them down until gravity took over and they dropped to his feet.

The moment his crotch was uncovered, I couldn't look away. It was similar to a human in the basic shape, but much different in the details.

He was bigger than anyone I'd ever been with before. Far from being intimidated, my mouth started to water and my pussy clenched. I honestly wanted him inside me in the worst way.

Slow, I reminded myself. I need to go slow.

“Can I touch you? Please?”

A full body shudder went through him. “Do you need to touch me because you're in heat?”

“Yes!” I agreed quickly. “I need to touch and be touched while I'm in heat. It's about intimacy along with sex.”

Where did that brilliant lie come from? Maybe I was going to be better at sex work than I thought.

I reached up and gripped him gently with both hands. He sucked in a breath and watched me with intense eyes. I was careful as I explored him, feeling up and down his shaft. There were slight ridges running

perpendicular that I couldn't see but could feel with my fingertips. What would those be like pressed into my sex?

I moved one hand further down to cup his single ball. "Humans usually have two of these," I murmured without thinking. Wincing at my poor choice of words, I opened my mouth to apologize when he spoke.

"That's my seed sack," he said in a deep, growling voice. "You're rubbing my mating shaft with your other hand. Normally they're tucked away in my flesh pouch, but your scent and actions have hardened my shaft and pushed the pouch out of the way."

Why did his words sound so sexy? They should've sounded clinical, but the way he spoke was more like a sexy accusation instead of an anatomy lecture.

"I want to put my mouth on you," I said, already moving my head into position.

"No, you shouldn't," he started to protest. "It wouldn't...*by the ancestors!*"

Those last words were close to a shout as I sucked the tip of his shaft into my mouth. Ah, he tasted like sage here. Using my hand and mouth, I worked his cock similar to the way I might a human male.

I heard his breathing change and felt his entire body tense. This might not be a normal Talin sexual interaction, but by the way his body was reacting, he was enjoying it.

Yay me! I was getting the job done and having a great time.

I kept it up, losing myself in the feel of him in my mouth. Sucking on him was both comforting, like having a pacifier, and also arousing. It was hard to explain so I didn't bother. I just let myself enjoy.

I didn't know how long it went on. I only came out of my haze when he gently pushed at my shoulders.

"Please, Opal. You need to stop," he said. The mild panic in his voice made me pull back.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No," he said with a negative rattle. "But I was close to climaxing, and that wouldn't have been appropriate. I want to fulfill your needs, but I can't do that. It's not right."

Not appropriate or right? That sounded like some deep-seated social guilt. Lots of species had hangups around sex, including some humans. Well I

wasn't going to let his inhibitions get in the way of what he'd paid good wealth for!

"I'm still in heat," I whined.

"What can I do to help you?" he asked, voice strained.

"You need to lie down," I insisted.

He flopped down onto his back, almost perfectly centered in the nest. "Here?"

"Perfect," I said and swung my leg over his stomach. He let out a startled rattle, but it was muffled by the bedding.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Pleasing myself," I said.

And hopefully you also, I added silently.

He was purring as I leaned down and put my lips on his shoulder. I noticed a strip of exposed skin where his neck met his shoulders that wasn't covered by keratin plates. I pressed my lips to it and felt him shudder. I was thrilled to find another erogenous spot.

While I kissed and licked the skin at the base of his neck, I reached up with one hand to rub his cheek. He sucked in a breath, then let out a low growl.

When I bit down gently, he gasped and grabbed my hips. I'd been slowly inching them down, hoping to work his shaft into my needy channel. At first I thought he realized what I was doing and was going to stop me.

But he moved his hands up my back, rubbing and petting my skin. One hand tangled in my hair, probably to keep my face where it was.

As I licked, kissed, and bit at his neck, I inched my hips down until I could feel the tip of his shaft poised at my entrance.

Before he could realize what I was doing, I dropped my pelvis and impaled myself.

We both cried out. It felt that good.

I let out a loud moan and ground myself against him. His purring had changed a little, and it was making his cock and body vibrate. It was amazing.

"Please," I begged. I wasn't pretending at all. I needed him to take over the fucking because I was close but couldn't make my body work!

"No, Opal. I can't," he whispered, but didn't make any move to pull me off.

"I'm so close," I sobbed. "Tolreum, don't leave me like this. It's torture."

I wasn't exaggerating. I was on the cusp of another orgasm and could tell this one was going to be even better than the first. My entire body felt like electricity was sparking through my nerves. It was intense and nearly painful.

"The ancestors will never forgive me," he moaned, then wrapped his arms around me and rolled us over. He began thrusting. Each time he bottomed out, the vibrations became so intense I swore I could feel them in my chest.

I cupped his cheeks and drew his face to mine. "I'm going to lip press you," I warned him, then pulled his lips to mine.

He didn't hesitate to open his mouth and let me explore. He was a quick study and moaned as our tongues met and stroked each other. I kept rubbing his scent glands with my fingers until oil coated my hands and dripped down my forearms.

Wrapping my legs around him, I tilted my pelvis a little. That was it! Now he was rubbing my clit with each stroke.

I screamed into his mouth as I came again, my body flooded with so much pleasure my extremities tingled.

He thrust a few more times before letting out a roar and pressing hard inside me one more time. Heat filled me and sparked my flagging orgasm into another peak.

I ended the kiss and dropped my head to the pillow under me. I couldn't hold it up any longer. My legs flopped down, and my entire body gave an excellent impression of the Old Earth Jello I'd seen in vids as orgasm aftershocks made me twitch.

"You're perfect," I whispered. My arms were the last to give out, but I managed to swipe some oil onto my lips before they fell to my sides. "I wish our time together never had to end."

He pulled out and laid down in the nest next to me, purring. "It doesn't have to."

His voice sounded distant, but his words made me smile.

"Good," I whispered as I drifted off to sleep to dream of a world where Tolreum stayed with me on Bright Star and everything worked out perfectly.

Chapter 4

Tolreum

I woke up from a dead sleep feeling two deeply conflicting emotions: guilt and satisfaction.

Mating with Opal and then sleeping with her tucked tightly against me was one of the most amazing things I'd ever experienced.

As wonderful as that was, there was no question that I'd given into my baser needs and acted inappropriately with Opal. Even if my suspicions were correct and she was as intelligent as any Talin, I still didn't have the right to engage in intercourse with her.

Except, despite my sense of guilt, I didn't think I could ever give up this intimacy. Every part of her was addicting: her taste, the sounds she made, and the way her body responded to my touch.

I was a quick study. I was sure I could make her responses even more intense.

What was interesting was that I didn't feel any panic. If any Talin authority found out that I'd had intercourse with my human pet, my family would strike my name from our lineage, I'd be stripped of my wealth, and I'd be shoved out of the empire. If I attempted to return, I'd probably be executed.

I'd never broken a single law in my life, and yet here I was, doing something so egregious that the punishment was on par with murder.

Clearly, Opal was worth all the risk.

As if my thoughts had woken her, Opal moved in my arms, making soft, sleepy sounds.

“Tolly?”

Tolly? Was this my nickname? I liked it!

“Yes?” I said, starting up a soothing rumble. I loosened my hold so she could sit up and moved to a sitting position with her.

After a yawn, she blearily smiled up at me. “How long have we been asleep?”

I looked over at the door display that showed Talarian standard time. “About seven marks.”

“I don’t suppose you know what a mark translates to in Massoc jigs?” she asked.

I sounded a negative rattle. “I don’t.”

She ran her fingers through her shoulder-length brown mane. “I haven’t slept that well in forever.”

Her words made me swell with pride. She’d felt secure and comfortable enough with me to sleep without fear.

A sudden thought occurred to me. “I need to feed you!”

She blinked then smiled. “Yeah, I’m a little hungry. Do you want to share a meal? I probably have a little time left before I need to leave.”

I stifled an anxious rattle.

After we’d discovered we couldn’t buy Opal outright, we’d “rented” her labor for as long as a contract would allow. That was only half a rotation, but we decided it would be long enough to abscond with her. By now we were far enough out of range of the station she’d been trapped on that they couldn’t force us to return her.

It was probable that she had mixed emotions about her abusers. I’d read it was common with wild caught humans. They were so used to being treated badly they’d feel a sense of affection for those who worked them half to death.

I was going to need to be prepared for a period of emotional adjustment that might be disruptive and disquieting. It would be best to put off telling her for as long as possible. Especially if I could get her to eat before she became distressed.

Standing up, I pulled on a fresh pair of pants before returning to the nest to lean over and run my scent glands over the top of her head.

“You stay here, and I’ll fetch food,” I said.

“Can I use your cleansing unit?” she asked as I straightened up. As much as I wanted her to remain in the nest looking charmingly tousled, I sounded a rumble of agreement.

“I don’t have any suitable cleansing gels,” I warned her.

She pointed to her bag. “I brought a bottle of neutral-scent wash in case you didn’t like the way I smelled.”

Neutral-scent wash would take away all the bonding oil I’d spread on her. I hated it but held back my intensely negative reaction. I could always rub my scent glands on her again. Besides, it would be good for her to remove the smell of our copulating before she left my room and mixed with my crewmates.

“Very well,” I said, taking a last look at her adorableness before leaving my cabin.

There wasn’t anyone in the hall, so I rushed to one of the bays and ducked into the decontamination closet. The sonic cleanser cycled through and removed any smell of intercourse without the need for me to disrobe. With that finished, I made my way to the galley.

Lexarit was sitting at the single table with an information square and his Ident both displaying lists. He looked up when I walked in.

“Is she hungry?” he asked, jumping to his feet.

I sounded a rumble of agreement. “She slept and only now woke up.”

“The poor thing is probably exhausted,” he said as he picked several packets from a stack on the counter. They must be what he deemed safe for her to consume. “Has she told you anything about her life on the station?”

“No, not yet. She’s reluctant to speak of her past,” I said, “She’s very insistent about making sure I’m happy.”

Lexarit sounded an angry rattle. “She’s probably been abused by those with power over her. Have you explained that she’s safe with us?”

“I’ve told her she’s safe, but I haven’t explained that she belongs to us,” I said.

“Does she know we’ve left the station?” he asked.

“No, she slept through the launch,” I said. “I wanted her to eat first.”

Lexarit rumbled in agreement, pulling one packet out of the reconstitutor and putting in another one.

We talked about our next stop and the accommodations we’d need to make for Opal. Once he was done, he handed me a tray with far more food

than even I could finish.

Before I could say anything, he sounded a negative rattle.

"I know it's too much, but I need to know what she likes so we can stock plenty of it. Try and get her to sample everything and note what she enjoys."

I sounded a rumble of agreement. "That's an excellent idea. Thank you."

"She might have chosen you, but she's still precious to all of us," he said, his voice gruff.

Picking up the tray, I felt a sudden burst of confidence. "We're all going to find our humans."

"I hope you're right," he said. "Now go take care of Opal."

I left my friend in the galley and returned to my cabin. I was a little surprised to find she was already finished in the cleansing unit and dressed. She was at the small table with two attached chairs, which had a complicated mechanism to unfold out of the wall. I even struggled with it. I'd have to ask her the secret to getting it to deploy.

She was leaning her head to one side and combing her mane with her fingers. Looking up, she smiled at me and straightened in her chair as I crossed the room to set the tray on the table.

"You need to sample everything," I explained, sitting across from her.

"I'll try," she said with a chuckle, tucking her wet hair behind her ears. "You have a really nice cleansing unit. I'm so used to sonic cleansers that it was a novelty to bathe with hot water."

"Next time I could join you," I said. "I'd enjoy bathing you."

Her smile brightened. "Sure. I'd like that too. I'll bring my favorite washes with me next time."

I was confused for a moment, then remembered she thought we were still at the station.

"You need to eat," I encouraged, desperate for her to have a full belly before finding out the truth.

My Ident chimed with a message moments before the ship shook slightly. Opal froze, her hand halfway to her mouth.

"What was that?"

There was no point in pretending any longer. "The engines are probably transitioning to a long burn cycle."

Her hand shook, and the food she was holding dropped back down onto the tray.

“Long burn cycle?” she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper. “Ships only do that when they're outside the final retrieval boundary.”

“Yes,” I said. “That's correct.”

Her eyes went wide and she stumbled to her feet. “No. Please tell me you didn't leave the station with me onboard.”

I remained seated. “I saved you.”

“Saved me? Ha!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, saved you,” I repeated. “You'll never have to worry about food, clothing, or health needs again. Anything you require will be provided. Most importantly, you'll never have to labor ever again.”

“Except in your bed,” she snapped.

I sounded a negative rattle. “No! If you go into heat or wish to be intimate again, I would welcome it. But that would never be a requirement between us.” I didn't want to say the next part, but I had to. “Honestly, I shouldn't have allowed it, but your allure was much too strong for me to resist.”

Her jaw dropped. “I'm so confused. You contracted me for sex but didn't want to have sex? And now you've kidnapped me but you don't want me? I don't understand.”

A loud rattle of anger came out of me before I could stop it. “You worked in a brothel? That's so dangerous for a tiny, helpless human!”

“No kidding,” she snarled. “You're the reason it's dangerous. If you'd followed the rules, we would've had a nice evening, and then I would've gone home to a healthy station account.” She threw up her arms and wailed. “Now I have nothing! I am nothing. I'm a slave!”

“You're not a slave,” I insisted, tempted to go to her.

She glared at me even as water dripped from her eyes. “If I'm not a slave, then what am I? Your girlfriend?”

“My pet,” I answered, then regretted it when she let out an angry scream.

“Pet? Pet!” She looked around the room and ran for the bag she'd brought with her. It was sitting on my bunk, and as she grabbed it, I stood up but didn't approach.

“I'm not a pet,” she said, rifling through the bag. “I might be human, but I'm not dumb. Hell, I'm probably smarter than you.”

She pulled an item out of her bag and held it out between us as if to ward me off. I didn't know what it was but didn't plan to do anything unless she tried to hurt herself.

“Yes, you might be,” I agreed. “I’m beginning to realize you’re far smarter than I’d been led to believe.”

“Yes, I am,” she said, waving the item in the air. “I could take a range-finder sensor apart and reassemble it with my eyes closed. I’d like to see you do that!”

“I couldn’t,” I agreed. “I acknowledge your skills and intelligence. I’m afraid that doesn’t negate the reality that you’re now a pet.”

“Turn around and take me back,” she demanded, jabbing the item in her hand in the air between us. “I won’t tell anyone what you did, and we can pretend it was all a big mistake.”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” I said. No matter how angry Opal was with me, I couldn’t bear the thought of living without her. It might have been less than a full rotation, but I knew I wouldn’t survive if I couldn’t be with her.

“Damn it, Tolly,” she said, water falling from her eyes again. “Don’t do this to me. I thought you were so wonderful.”

“I’m not sure if I’m wonderful,” I said. “But I’ll be a good owner.”

With a screech of anger, she charged at me, arm extended and the item in her hand aimed for my chest.

I let her run into me with the blunt end of the cylinder in her hand. I heard a clicking, but nothing happened. I didn’t know what the thing was supposed to do, but when I didn’t react, Opal dropped it and backed up.

“Please try to be calm,” I begged. “No one on this ship will ever hurt you. We won’t sell you or rent you out. Unlike those heartless Massoc. You’re perfectly safe with us. When we visit a Talin station, you’ll be seen by proper healers. We’ll get you better clothes and all the things you need or want.”

As I spoke, Opal shook her head and kept backing up. When she got to the cabin door, she slapped a hand to the display. The moment it opened she fled out into the hall.

Chapter 5

Opal

I should've had Maglia insist on using one of the rooms on the station instead of letting me go to a ship. She hadn't been overly concerned, so I hadn't been either.

Now I was paying for my over confidence.

Holding my bag to my chest, I sprinted down the hall. I was being stupid, because where was I going to go? Even if they had emergency pods or escape tubes on this ship, they'd be able to pick me back up right after I launched.

Panic made me keep going despite common sense.

Narmuna stepped in my path. I skidded to a stop, almost falling on my ass. "Opal, what's wrong?"

I turned to my right and ran. If my mental map was correct, I was heading for one of three storage bays.

"Opal, you shouldn't go down there!" he called, his footfalls heavy behind me. I expected to be grabbed at any moment, but it didn't happen.

I got to a series of doors. I knew the last one was to a bay, but the first one was too small to go anywhere significant. I slapped my hand down on the display, and it slid open to reveal a storage room half the size of Tolly's room.

After I ducked inside and the door closed, I fiddled with the door display. It didn't take me long to create a logic fault so the door thought it was broken and wouldn't open. If they knew how to clear basic error codes, my trick wouldn't last long.

Fighting tears, I backed up until I was stopped by the first in a row of shelves. I could hear talking beyond the door, but no one had tried to open it yet.

My legs suddenly didn't feel strong enough to keep me standing. I collapsed to the floor and gave up holding back my tears.

I sobbed quietly, a skill I'd learned as a child. That meant I heard the door's display make a bunch of angry sounds. The guys were trying to come in and my logic fault was keeping them out.

It wouldn't last long. I needed a plan.

Nothing came to mind. Panic ate at me, making it hard to think. My breathing was harsh and ragged, and it felt like I couldn't get enough air in my lungs. This wasn't good.

"Calm the fuck down," I muttered.

I started counting my breaths. That helped. I didn't feel great, and tears were still flowing down my face, but at least I was thinking straight. What to do?

"This is a disaster," I whined.

Wait, maybe that was the answer, I should follow disaster protocol: assess, communicate, and rescue.

Assessing my situation was easy. I was on a ship surrounded by males who thought they owned me. I didn't have any easy way off the ship, at least not until they docked. If they were going to fulfill their fuel contracts, they'd have to dock sometime. Then I'd need to be prepared.

That left me on a ship with these guys while I waited.

Disaster protocol was all about communicating to find out who was still alive, who needed help, and what the survival situation looked like. I was the one who needed help, but communication wasn't a bad idea. Getting the guys to talk to me could only be helpful. The more I got to know them, their routines, and their reactions, the better I'd be able to plan an escape once we docked somewhere.

The last thing they always talked about was rescue, either by someone else or yourself. In this instance, I was going to need to rescue myself.



Tolreum

“We should force the door open,” Mieshorum said. “I can always replace it when we get to the next station.”

“But it’s against the design of the ship to go without a functioning door,” Lexarit argued. “If you give me a little time, I’m sure I can get it to open.”

“I’m with Mieshorum,” Narmuna said with a worried rattle. “We need to get this door opened immediately. Opal is trapped in there and could be suffering horribly.”

The door had malfunctioned after she’d gone in. I suspected she was the reason for it. If she decided to leave the storage room, I was sure the door would magically return to its original state. I wanted to tell my crewmates that, but I didn’t think they’d believe me.

“Tolreum, what do you think?”

Narmuna’s question pulled me out of my thoughts. They’d all been talking, and I’d stopped paying attention.

“Let her remain,” I said.

The hallway filled with their agitated rattles.

“At least for half a rotation,” I amended. “She ate and drank before she realized we’d left the station. That’s when she panicked and ran from my cabin.”

None of them responded, so I continued.

“There’s nothing dangerous in there, and the smaller room probably makes her feel secure. We should let her feel safe, not force our way in.”

Mieshorum sounded a rumble of agreement. “Your suggestion has merit. We’ve already traumatized her.”

“Yes,” Narmuna said. “I don’t like it, but allowing her to remain where she is for a few marks won’t hurt her and might go a long way to earning some of her trust.”

“One of us should remain on duty here until she’s ready to emerge,” Lexarit said. “We could make sure to have food and drink to coax her out.”

“We need to make sure she can communicate with us if she wants out but can’t get the door to open from her side,” Mieshorum said.

“I’ll find a small information square I can drop through a vent,” Narmuna said.

I knew I needed to contribute, so I sounded a rumble of agreement. “There’s an easily accessible vent into that storage room from the bay. I’ll help you.”

“I’ll stay here,” Mieshorum said. “When you’re finished, you can take my spot.”

I sounded a rumble of agreement, then followed Narmuna.

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Chapter 6

Tolreum

Five marks later, the storage room door's display flashed a few times. I remained sitting but shut down my Ident and reclipped it to my belt. Information scrolled quickly down the display, and, oddly, it looked to be in Universal. I didn't even know our displays could be switched to read in Universal instead of Talin glyphs.

Finally a set of numbers displayed, and it returned to the format I was familiar with. The door slid open soundlessly to reveal Opal. She was standing with her bag hanging from her shoulder, arms down at her sides and hands tightly fisted. Her mane was fully dry and looked surprisingly fluffy.

I badly wanted to run my scent glands over the top of her head. Would she ever let me get close enough to do that again?

She took a step forward, putting herself in the hallway. I stayed where I was so she could stand over me. She held up the information square we'd pushed into the room using a low vent I basically ripped apart to get access. Narmuna had created a communication line between the square and my Ident using Universal. I'd hope she'd speak to me through that, but she never responded.

"This says I won't be punished," she said, waving the square a little.

“You won’t. Your actions were entirely understandable,” I said. “We only want to make you comfortable and happy.”

“If that’s your goal, I need an elimination room,” she stated. Her face was tight, and her eyes looked red and inflamed.

My poor human had leaked so much water out of her eyes that she’d irritated the delicate orbs. I wish we’d all taken more time to consider other ways to acquire her. Ways that might not have been so traumatic.

“I’m going to stand up,” I said. “I’ll walk you back to my cabin, and you can use the unit in there.”

Standing up, I turned to lead her, but she remained standing in the hall. “Opal?”

“I don’t want you coming into the cabin with me,” she stated.

“You’re not allowed to lock me out,” I said. The idea of her being hurt while I had to waste precious time disassembling a door to get to her made me go cold. “But I’ll let you have the cabin to yourself.”

Her face showed surprise. “You will?”

I sounded a rumble of agreement. “It’s important that you have a space of your own. I’ll take my things out and move into the spare cabin. I’ll request access any time I wish to converse with you.”

She opened her mouth, closed it, then nodded with a jerky movement. “Yes, you can do that. And, um, and you don’t get to touch me.”

Her demands were reasonable, though heartbreaking. “No one will touch you unless it’s an emergency or you request it.”

Again, she seemed surprised by my answer. I was a little shocked she wasn’t demanding we turn around and return to her station. She must have realized that would never happen.

“Good,” she said, but didn’t sound as confident as before. “That’s exactly what I want. Let’s go back to your cabin. I mean, my cabin.”

I rumbled in agreement again and turned to lead her. It didn’t take long for us to reach the open door of my cabin. Lexarit suggested we leave it open as an invitation for her. I stopped in the hall, and she rushed past me, through the cabin and into the elimination room.

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While she was in there, I hurried to grab some of my clothes and necessities. I dumped them in the hall, then straightened out her nest, fluffing the pillows and folding back the top blanket.

She still hadn't emerged by the time I returned to my spot in the hall.

"She doesn't look as upset as what Narmuna described when he saw her," Mieshorum whispered from further down the hall. Everyone had probably been in the control room watching Opal on the vid capture we'd set up in the hall.

"She's still deeply unhappy," I said. "Her eyes are red and swollen."

"Narmuna noticed that," he said, holding up several items. "He suggested some soothing gel and a cooling pack. The Committee of Pet Welfare pamphlet says it's safe for them."

He tossed me the items, and I quickly placed them on the edge of the nest. I worried a little that it was taking Opal so much time to use the elimination unit, but she could also be delaying returning to the cabin.

She couldn't know I was going to keep my word and not force any contact with her.

"We heard her demands," Mieshorum said. "We think you answered them all correctly. Hopefully within the next few rotations she'll accept her new, improved life and relax her restrictions."

I doubted that.

She emerged from the elimination unit, staring hard at me. "I thought this was my room and I would get privacy."

"I only wanted to make sure there was nothing you needed before I shut the door," I said.

"Nothing."

What did I expect? For her to demand I hop back into the nest and cuddle her?

I stepped back and let the door to my cabin close. Once it was shut, Mieshorum moved to help me pick up all my things.

"Lexarit moved most of the boxes from the spare cabin into the alcove next to bay two and set up the bunk," he said. He sounded an amused rumble as he gathered my things. "How many belts does one really need?"

I wanted to echo his amused rumble, but I couldn't. I did manage to keep my tone light. "Don't make me point out your collection of ikla figurines. At least my belts are practical."

We kept up the conversation until we got to my new cabin. Even with half the boxes we'd stored in here gone, it was still a tight fit. We dumped all my things on the bunk, then I turned around to return to the hallway outside my cabin.

Mieshorum didn't say anything except that Narmuna would be there in four marks to replace me. I settled down on the hard metal floor and stared at the closed door. I wouldn't be leaving when Narmuna showed up.

I wouldn't stray from this spot until Opal came out. I was determined to be the first face she saw when she was ready to leave the room.

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Chapter 7

Opal

After I was alone, I eyed the nest. As comfortable as it was, I couldn't use it. There were too many pleasant things that happened there and didn't fit with my current situation.

Grabbing the top blanket and one of the pillows, I went to the bunk. The pad was hard, but it felt fitting somehow. After jumping up onto the bunk, I draped the blanket over my head and around my shoulders. With my blanket-wrap, I wiggled back until I could rest my back against the bulkhead. I hugged the pillow to my chest, finding comfort in my childish pose.

I had a headache from all the crying, and my stomach was a giant knot. My mind kept flashing back to Tolly. How could someone who treated me so gently do this to me?

Resting my head against the slightly curved bulkhead, I closed my eyes and stifled a sob. I fought against being overwhelmed by a deep sense of helplessness.

To my shock, I drifted off and woke up slumped sideways and stiff, and my minor headache was now a horrible pounding behind my eyes. I pulled out the information square I'd brought with me and saw about eight hours had gone by since I'd come back into this cabin.

On top of the headache, my mouth was beyond dry and I was hungry. As much as I hated it, I was going to ask for help. I guess it was time to test their hospitality.

With a groan, I slid off the bunk, tugged my bag over my shoulder, and went to the door. It opened to a sight I wasn't prepared for.

Tolly was sitting up, but also sound asleep. Next to him stood Mieshorum, leaning causally against the wall.

Without saying a word, Mieshorum pushed off the wall and gestured for me to follow him. It was casual, like we were work partners or even friends. I wasn't prepared for that at all.

Confused and curious, I moved with him. When we got past a T-section of the hallway and were no longer in line of sight to Tolly, Mieshorum stopped and turned.

"I wanted to let Tolreum sleep," he said. "He drifted off only about ten micromarks ago. I don't think he's actually rested since you came onboard."

Even though his words were spoken in a neutral tone, my immediate reaction was to be defensive.

"I didn't ask for this," I snapped, thinking about the hours I'd spent in the storage room and later on the bunk. I shouldn't care that he spent all that time, which by now had to have been roughly thirteen hours, sitting in hallways and staring at doors.

Mieshorum sounded the same purring sound as Tolly. "I know. You're not to blame. Your actions are appropriate. I only hope you realize we are not taking your painful transition lightly. It's understandable that you're scared, angry, and unsure. None of us will be comfortable until you are, especially Tolreum."

His frank agreement threw me off balance.

"Um, yeah, so that's fair," I agreed, the words sounding dumb to my own ears.

"What do you need from me?" Mieshorum asked. "If you need comfort only Tolreum can provide, I'll wake him. He would want that."

I refused to feel guilty.

"No, that's not necessary. Is there a med kit on board?"

Mieshorum jolted and made a sound that reminded me of a hatch whooshing open and closed quickly. It wasn't a sound Tolly had gone over with me.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

“No, just a headache,” I said. “What does the sound you just made mean?”

“It indicates worry or concern,” he said absently as he pulled off his Ident. He brought up a holo of a document in the glyph language I couldn’t read. He skimmed through for a few seconds then made the whooshing-worried sound again.

“Headache is a pain in a human’s brain,” he said, as he read. “This could be caused by many things, but it can be a sign of a brain aneurysm, meningitis, or a brain tumor!”

He sounded a thunderous rattle that echoed through the hall and made me wince. That didn’t help my head at all.

“It’s not a brain tumor,” I said when he stopped rattling. “I only need—”

I didn’t get to finish my sentence as two things happened at once. Mieshorum picked me up and the other crew came charging at us from different directions. I couldn’t even say anything because they all spoke at once.

“What’s happened?”

“Is she hurt?”

“Give her to me!”

That last demand was from Tolly, and thankfully he snatched me out of Mieshorum’s arms and away from his soapy smell. I didn’t think a non-toxic scent could cause my headache to get worse, but his had.

Surrounded by Tolly’s familiar sage scent, the headache eased a little, but it was still painful.

They were all continuing to talk over each other, and all I wanted was some water and a pain wafer.

“Put me down,” I demanded, not surprised when Tolly didn’t. “Put me down or I’ll vomit all over you!”

That got a reaction, but not the one I expected. Tolly sounded a rattle that was like hundreds of feet pounding the ground, making the air around me vibrate and silencing the other men and making me wince. Damn, these guys could make some loud noises!

“Grab the medical equipment and meet me in my cabin,” Tolly said. “Opal is desperately ill!”

The discussion stopped. Tolly sprinted the short distance back to his/my cabin. Mieshorum stayed with us while Lexarit and Narmuna disappeared in another direction.

Tolly eased me onto the nest then went to the display next to the door.

“Get a vessel she can purge into if necessary,” he ordered Mieshorum as he tapped on the display.

The brightness of the lights reduced significantly, and the air pressure in the room increased. After a few deep breaths, I could tell he’d increased the oxygen percentage.

He returned to the nest, sinking down to his knees outside it and resting his elbows on the pillow rim.

“I know you’re in pain and scared, but we’ll figure out what’s wrong. You’re not going to die.”

I blinked, overwhelmed by these guys' reaction to a headache. I mean, sure, there were instances that a headache meant something much worse was going on, but statistically, I was probably fine.

Mieshorum returned with something that looked like a bucket that ended in a short tube the size of my fist.

“She could use a bathing converter,” he said, handing it to Tolly before sinking down to sit outside the nest.

Both men were purring as Tolly set the bathing converter, whatever that was, down next to me and urged me to use it if I needed to purge.

“I’m not dying,” I said, feeling the need to reassure these worried Talins.

Lexarit and Narmuna came bursting through the door, arms full of items. They slid into place on either side of Tolly.

“I’ve got the scanner,” Narmuna said, dumping out one of the bags and searching through the pile.

“These are the rest of the med supplies we have,” Lexarit said, opening up the boxes he’d brought to rifle through them. “We need to get better kits. There isn’t even a body sterilizer in here.”

“This thing is useless,” Narmuna said, tapping at the tiny display on a cheap handheld scanner. “It doesn’t have a human biology program.”

“Nothing is programmed with human biology,” I said with a snort. “That’s why I keep the program on a data crystal.”

They all stopped talking and looked at me.

“You do?” Narmuna asked, sounding a loud purr.

“Not with me,” I said, the sarcasm dripping from each word. “If I’d known I was going to be abducted, I would’ve packed that along with some spare clothes.”

None of them responded to my sarcasm. I doubted they even noticed.

“We should’ve been better prepared,” Narmuna said, tossing the scanner aside and getting up. “I’ll find the nearest station with a full medical facility.”

“Make sure they have human physiology data for their scanners and diagnostic machines,” Lexarit said as the door slid shut behind Narmuna.

He left before what they’d all decided fully registered.

“You’re going to divert to the nearest station?” I asked. Maybe I’d be able to escape sooner than I expected.

“Yes, but only if they have a proper medical facility,” Tolly said. “I want you to focus on staying calm. You’re not going to die. We’re going to find you the best care.”

Despite the headache, I laughed.

“That’s a sound of amusement,” Tolly said, sounding more worried rattles as he looked over to Lexarit. “Could the tumor be affecting her ability to process thoughts or control her emotions?”

“I. Do. Not. Have. A. Tumor,” I said, slapping my hand down on the nest next to me with each word. “It’s a simple headache because I’m stressed, dehydrated, and maybe a little hungry.”

I leaned over and rifled through one of the boxes Lexarit brought. I found a familiar packet of mild pain relievers and held it up. “This is what I need.”

Before I could open it up and take one, Tolly snatched it from me. I sighed, wishing I’d been faster.

“Give it back,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Let me read the label,” he said. I tried to be patient, but now that I wasn’t being entertained by the guys doing all kinds of extreme stuff to cure me, my headache was killing me.

“The label won’t tell you anything,” I grumbled. “Trust me, I know I can take it. I have the same exact one back home.”

Tolly looked up. “It doesn’t say if it’s safe for you.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” I snapped. “Tolly, you’re going to have to trust my judgment on this.”

To my surprise, Tolly held out the packet to me with a purr. His next words were downright shocking. “You’re right. I need to trust your judgment.”

I grabbed the wafers, my hands trembling too badly to get the package open. Tolly took it from me again but only to open it and pull one out. He set it in the palm of my hand.

“Is that enough?” he asked, even as I popped it into my mouth.

“Should be,” I mumbled as I shut my eyes and let it dissolve under my tongue. Within a few seconds, the headache receded, then disappeared.

I sighed with relief.

When I lifted my lids, all three Talins were staring at me intensely enough to make me jerk back.

“I’m fine!” I nearly shouted. That reminded me that my mouth was dry. “But I need some water.”

Lexarit jumped to his feet and stopped Tolly and Mieshorum from getting up with a rattle. “I’ll get several canisters of water, one of sopa, and a mug of tlash tea. They’re all safe for Opal to consume, and the sopa and tea will be soothing.”

Mieshorum made the agreeing sound as Lexarit left.

“Bring some flat bread also,” Tolly called out as the door shut. I was thankful to Lexarit because tea sounded good.

“How often can you safely take one of the wafers?” Tolly asked.

“One a day,” I said. “Are we really going to make an unplanned stop at a station because I had a headache?”

Tolly purred. “Absolutely. The headache might be an indication of something else.”

“Yes, it is,” I said, half amused and half frustrated. “I’m stressed because someone kidnapped me!”

This time the Talins drew back and went silent. They didn’t make a sound, but I got the distinct impression of guilt coming from all three of them.

Narmuna returned and resumed his spot outside my nest. “The nearest station with adequate facilities is a little over a rotation away. I’ve already sent them a docking request.”

“What station?” Tolly asked.

“Twin Star Station,” Narmuna answered.

Several years ago I’d stayed briefly on Twin Star while waiting for final confirmation on my job with Bright Star. I didn’t have any friends there, but I was familiar with the layout of the place. If I was lucky, there might be an opportunity to get away from Tolly and his crewmates.

If only I wouldn’t miss the purring.

Chapter 8

Opal

After they tried to feed me seven meals' worth of food in one sitting, I kicked them all out of the room and took another long, hot shower.

I hated putting on my soiled clothes, so I rifled through Tolly's items. There wasn't much there. All I found was a pair of pants and a belt half tucked under the bunk. Did he not have many possessions or had he cleared them out because it was my cabin now?

I was able to wear the pants by rolling the waist down and then belting them tight enough to keep them from sliding off my hips. It was too bad these guys didn't wear shirts, but I made a top out of one of the sheets in the nest.

It was an easy garment my mom would make us when we were kids. It ruined the sheet because I had to cut out a big triangle. I cut a slit in one of the points and slipped it over my head then tied the other two points behind my back.

Feeling better, I spent some time washing my clothes in the cleansing unit then left them to dry. I'd never washed anything by hand before, but I hoped they were clean enough to wear later.

I wasn't tired, and I was feeling a little restless. Standing in front of the door, I debated about opening it. Tolly or one of the other crew members would be in the hall, I was sure. As much as I was frustrated with them, I

had to admit that, outside of kidnapping me, they were being intensely caring and kind.

Maybe even too caring.

My need to move around overrode my worry about their next overreaction. I tapped the door display, and it opened to show Tolly and Lexarit standing across from my door and talking quietly. They both looked up and purred.

“Opal, you should be resting,” Tolly said. “Are you in pain?”

“Do you need more water or sopa?” Lexarit asked.

“I’m not in pain or thirsty,” I said.

Reassured that I was fine, Tolly took in my outfit. “What are you wearing?”

I shrugged. “What I could find. My clothes are drying in the cleansing unit.”

“Did you forget to take them off when you went to bathe?” Lexarit asked, sounding a worried rumble.

I couldn’t help the laughter that erupted from me. “No, I didn’t forget. My clothes were dirty, so I washed them by hand.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Tolly said. “I’m sorry, Opal. I should’ve asked if you wanted me to launder your clothing. I can fix this.”

He rushed past me into the room. When he came back, he had my wet clothes in his arms.

“I’ll be right back,” he called as he rushed down the hall.

“I’m going to want those back,” I muttered.

“He’s going to put them in the laundry unit. They’ll be done within half a mark,” Lexarit explained. “I recognize the pants, but where did the top come from?”

I was tempted to lie, but Tolly probably saw the ruined sheet. I should’ve shoved it down the waste receptacle.

“I made it out of a sheet,” I said.

Lexarit looked closer. “I can see that now. How did you cut the cloth?”

“I pulled the automated biopack cutter out of the room’s air-balancing unit,” I explained. “I was able to use that to make rough cuts, but I promise I put everything back the way it was.”

He didn’t say anything or make a sound for almost a minute. Maybe I shouldn’t have confessed. Was the nice-guy act about to end?

I opened my mouth to start apologizing and promising I wouldn't touch anything else, but Lexarit finally spoke up to ask a question.

"Did you work on air balancing units before?"

"No, but I've seen the schematics," I said. "And I've walked by a few that were being repaired or refurbished. They're not that complicated."

"Ours are unique," Lexarit said. "We had them specially designed in case there was a fuel-containment issue."

"Oh, that explains the extra sealant markers," I said. "I swear, I put them all back exactly as they're supposed to be."

"But you couldn't have seen it before you took it apart," he said.

"No, you're right," I said, confused about his continued questions. I was nervous about being punished, so I rambled on. "But there're only so many ways you can make an air-balancing unit, and almost all of them have pack cutters. If that one was designed with a crush applicator then I would've checked to see if there was a heat-transfer unit in the cleansing unit. They usually have a blade-like part too, but they're harder to get to because you have to lift up heavy floor panels."

"I didn't know that," he said, as if he should've. Maybe he was feeling defensive because he wasn't as familiar with the ship's systems as he could be.

"Most don't," I assured him. "There's no reason to know because heat-transfer units almost never need to be repaired or replaced."

Lexarit seemed like he was going to ask me another question, but Tolly came rushing back down the hall.

"Everything should be clean and ready to wear within the mark," he declared. "I'm sorry I wasn't prepared with suitable clothing for you."

"Prepared?" I repeated, unsure how to interpret his apology. "How long have you been planning this?"

"We've been hoping to find a human for several solars," Lexarit answered. "Almost as soon as the first group was brought back to Talarian. Your species is so charming and adorable. We decided we'd find a human of our own."

Right, the pet thing. I bit my lip to keep from saying something nasty.

"Is there anything else you need?" Tolly asked.

"No," I said. "But I'd like to walk around a little."

They both made the stockinged-feet-running rumble of agreement sound.

"Moderate movement is probably good for you," Lexarit said.

“Let me show you our ship,” Tolly said. “It’s important that you know where all the dangerous areas are.”

I kept my mouth shut because I was getting what I wanted. But I was tired of them acting like I was an idiot who’d walk in a fuel rod boiler or out an airlock vent.

“Can I accompany you?” Lexarit asked.

I was a little surprised to realize he was asking me and not Tolly. “If you want to.”

He made a rattling sound that sounded like windchimes. “Thank you.”

“What was that sound?” I asked.

“It shows eagerness or excitement,” Lexarit said as we slowly walked down the hall. I had a basic idea of the ship’s layout and knew we were heading aft.

“Our ship has three bays,” Tolly said. He was in charge of bay integrity and payload safety so it made sense he’d want to show me that first. “We had them all retrofitted with double-paneled sheeting.”

I listened with half an ear as he spoke. I was familiar with all the things that needed to be done to house fuel rounds or fuel rods. The first station I worked at had an accident and lost half the station and many souls. It was horrible. After that I’d refused to take a job on any station, ship, or outpost that didn’t have a history of fuel safety.

I’d become a bit of a fuel round and rod expert. I already knew the ship was safe; I’d made sure before even stepping aboard. Well, safe from exploding.

We finished touring the bays and continued on to the ship’s engines and enviro-control rooms, but we skipped the storage rooms, which almost made me laugh. They probably didn’t want to remind me of the hours I’d spent hiding in one of them.

I saw their modest but nice galley, everyone’s room, and the tiny, crowded cabin Tolly was supposed to be staying in—when he wasn’t sleeping in the hall.

Eventually we made it up into the control room. Narmuna and Mieshorum were already there. They both turned and purred when they saw me.

“How are you, Opal?” Narmuna asked.

“Your color looks better,” Mieshorum said.

“I’m fine,” I answered.

“You're so brave,” Narmuna said, as if I was suffering from a life-ending disease.

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I pointed at Mieshorum's workstation display. “Is that shipping-lane data?”

Mieshorum sounded a surprised rattle. “Yes, it is. Aren't you clever for recognizing it.”

I stepped closer, confused by several of the symbols. Admittedly, I wasn't that familiar with the subject. Maybe I could learn a few things while I was waiting for the opportunity to get back home.

“What's the yellow splat mean?” I asked, pointing to one of them and not touching the display.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lexarit pull Tolly away. I didn't pay too much attention to them because Mieshorum was explaining the complex data that went into the yellow splat symbols. I followed him for about one sentence, and after that I was lost.

When I saw a familiar menu, I pointed at it. “Could we look at those?”

Mieshorum sounded an amused rumble. “The ship's diagnostic schematics?”

“Yes, please,” I said, excited to get some insight on the ship I was traveling on.

He sounded a rumble of agreement. “Certainly.”

Then he switched over so I could see a 3D holo of all the ship's systems. I felt like he'd handed me the codes to a safe full of wealth!



Tolreum

“We need to talk about Opal,” Lexarit said the moment we were alone.

A shot of fear went through me. Did he know we'd been intimate?

“In regards to what?” I asked.

Lexarit sounded a worried rumble. “I don't think she's of low intelligence. We had a conversation while you were taking her clothes to be cleaned. She's proved to me that she's exceptionally smart.”

Relief made a rumble of amusement slip out of me. Lexarit misunderstood my amusement.

"I'm being serious," he said with an annoyed rattle. "I'm beginning to question her entire species being labeled as they are."

I completely agreed with him, but I didn't want to give in too easily. "Perhaps she's a particularly brilliant human."

"The only way we could know is if we interact with some other humans," Lexarit said, sounding a frustrated rumble. "Even better is if we could observe Opal interacting with them. If she pretends to be less intelligent, then we'd know she was used to pretending around her fellow humans."

"That's unlikely to happen," I said.

"Perhaps not," he said with an excited rattle. "Do you remember when we dropped off an entire shipment of fuel rounds at that station under construction?"

"The one with the rotating platform?" I asked, vaguely remembering. It had been in our first solar of business and we'd taken a last-minute assignment we barely managed to do within the time frame requested.

"Yes, that one," he said. "There was a human there when we were."

I let out a rattle of surprise. "There was?"

"We never saw her," he explained. "Her owner was very protective of her. But he is the one who runs the company that made that station. It should be easy enough to find out their schedule. Perhaps we could intercept them at a station or colony."

I liked the idea of giving Opal a fellow human to interact with, even if only for a short while.

"Do you think the owner would agree to that?" I asked.

"I've heard his pet is insistent on meeting every human she can," I said.

Part of me was eager to talk to another owner so I could see if he had any insight on Opal, but the other part feared Opal would confess to the other human what we'd done. That human could tell her owner and I'd lose everything.

My hesitation was brief because Opal was more important than me.

"See what you can find out," I urged.

"I'll send out data packets now," he said, going back into the command room. I followed him back inside to hear Mieshorum praising her.

"Yes, exactly," he said. "That is the third redundancy. You're very good at reading schematics."

"Only this kind," she demurred, never lifting her eyes from the holo display at Mieshorum's workstation. She shifted the image 180 degrees then

expanded it. "What about this over here?"

Mieshorum eagerly answered, then continued to explain as they traced various nodes and systems. I knew Opal wasn't being polite, she was deeply interested. I was sure that if Mieshorum quizzed her later, he'd be impressed with her retention of knowledge.

Narmuna had been working quietly at his display but looked up and spoke. "Twin Star Station has responded to my request. We have permission to visit their medical area and merchant row, but only for a limited time. We have to shuttle in, they don't want our ship to dock."

"That's acceptable," I responded. It was common for us to have to keep our ship at a certain distance away from a station if we weren't there to deliver. It was a safety measure many places utilized. It was the reason we had a tiny shuttle. In an emergency it could fit all four of us, although it was tight. I didn't think we'd be able to get the four of us and Opal in there at the same time.

"We should probably limit the shuttle to two of us and Opal," I said. "Who'll come with me?"

My crewmates all looked at each other, then Lexarit spoke. "Narmuna is the most skilled of all of us at close-quarters combat and has already dealt with station administration. He should accompany you and Opal."

"Close-quarters combat?" Opal said, her voice a little high. "Do you guys get into fights often?"

We all looked at her, but it was Narmuna who explained. "Humans are rare and precious. There are many who'd try to steal you from us."

The line of her mouth flattened. "Like you stole me?"

"Yes, but we only did it because we want to take care of you," Narmuna said. "We would never exploit you."

Opal rolled her eyes, and I knew that meant she was annoyed or felt what Narmuna said was ridiculous.

"They even have human physiology on their unibase," Narmuna said, not noticing the eyeroll.

I was surprised, but Opal didn't seem shocked. "When will we get there?"

"About half a rotation," Narmuna said. "You should rest. The station is crowded and noisy. It will be a trial for you."

"I think I can handle it," she said, her tone dry.

Chapter 9

Opal

When Tolly warned me the shuttle wasn't very large, he hadn't exaggerated. It barely fit the three of us comfortably.

It was the type of shuttle that could act as a remote for a larger ship. Having the ability to leave a ship and still pilot it was essential for hauling loads as dangerous as fuel rods and rounds.

To accomplish that, this shuttle was outfitted with one full workstation and several displays attached to the walls that could act as workstations without the holo capability. It even had a small elimination room. But other than that, there was no spare space!

They hadn't even bothered putting in seats. We all sat on the floor, although Tolly had brought a few pillows for me.

In theory, I could see how they'd get four of them inside, but they'd literally be shoulder to shoulder with limbs probably constantly bumping into each other.

"They're having us dock in one of their repair bays," Narmuna said. He was piloting the shuttle while Tolly and I sat behind him. "I warned that we have a delicate human with us, and they assured me there isn't much going on in the bay and nothing that would be harmful to Opal."

I didn't point out that I used to work in a repair bay doing all kinds of the most dangerous jobs. I had a feeling that would only upset them, and I

didn't feel like listening to their angry rattles.

It wasn't long before we were passing through the dock's ion shielding and landing. A control arm grabbed the shuttle, and we were placed in a corner of the bay.

Narmuna insisted on getting out first to verify it was safe for me, then Tolly and I followed him.

"I can't believe they wouldn't let me bring a dagger with me," Narmuna grumbled.

Almost every station I'd ever been on had a strict no-weapons policy. That didn't stop visitors from sneaking them on or making them, but those were rare. Getting caught with a weapon would result in a heavy fine or sentencing someone to a forced work contract.

"Do Talin stations allow you to carry weapons?" I asked.

"No," Tolly said. "But we wouldn't need them on a Talin station."

"Talins don't commit crimes?" I asked. There were a few species with exceptionally lower crime rates, were these Talins one of them?

"They do, but it's rare," Tolly answered. "Usually crimes have to do with military or government misconduct."

"Or stealing a human," Narmuna said. "That's becoming far more common. I think if there were more humans left unattended, that would be the highest number of crimes reported."

I was so curious about that, but a Massoc walked up to us. Her uniform told me she was of high rank within the hospitality sector of the station.

"Good individuals," she said. "I've been assigned to escort you during your stay. You can call me Ambassador Tulm."

I wasn't sure whether Tulm would be able to help me or not. I didn't recognize her, or anyone else here, which wasn't surprising. I hadn't been here very long, and I'd stayed to myself.

The biggest problem I faced, besides simply getting away from the guys, was that the Massoc didn't do refugees, asylum seekers, or anything like that. Their system was very simple and strict: Either you had permission to be where you were or you didn't. Permission was granted to those with jobs. Everyone else left.

If you didn't leave, you were sold.

The only reason I hadn't run into this issue on Bright Star Station was because I'd made so many friends. They helped me get just enough work to be considered "necessary" for the station's prosperity.

Here I had no friends, no job, and no one to go to for help. I didn't think I was going to find much opportunity to escape on Twin Star Station.

Narmuna stepped forward and introduced us to Tulm.

When he got to me, her gaze turned intense. "Opal Stillwater? I know you."

"You do?" I said, surprised.

"Yes, you made an excellent impression on one of my males," she said. "Garwe said you helped him solve an issue he'd been struggling with."

"Garwe!" I'd completely forgotten about meeting the Massoc in one of the station's eateries. He'd been angrily staring at a large information square with several empty mugs of tea on his table. Curious, I'd glanced over his shoulder when I'd walked behind him and then got caught up in the electric schematic.

Without thinking, I sat down next to him and started asking questions. We talked and came up with a solution together. It had been the most enjoyable evening I had on the station. He'd even bought me several mugs of expensive tea during our long conversation.

It seemed I did have friends on the station and didn't even know it!

"I need to tell Garwe you're here," Tulm said. "He always regretted that he didn't get to tell you it worked."

"That makes me so happy," I said. "I'd wondered but had to leave the next day."

"It took some time to work it all out, but in the end he never had another issue with that system," she said. Her hands fluttered at her sides, a sign of concern. "You must be the reason we were asked if our med staff had human files. Are you unwell, Soul Opal?"

It was sweet that she was giving me the same honorific she'd give another Massoc. That only started happening after I'd worked on Bright Star Station for several years.

"My health is fine," I assured her, then pointed to the Talins. "These guys are worried."

"You're very small. I'd be worried too if I was in your mate group," Tulm agreed, then slapped her hands to her belly in a sign of agitation. "This way, we should hurry."

I wanted to tell her we weren't a mate group, but she'd already turned and was swiftly walking off. I lifted a foot to follow, but Tolly swept me up to

cradle against his chest. Without any effort, he jogged to catch up with Tulum, Narmuna right next to us.

"You were here before?" Narmuna asked.

"Only for a few days," I said. "I was waiting for final permission to take my job at Bright Star Station."

"As domestic staff?" Narmuna asked.

"No," I said, confused. "Why would you think that?"

"Because that was the contract we hired you for," Narmuna said. "Domestic duties not to exceed five marks."

"You guys thought you were hiring me for domestic duties?" I said. "The contract must not have translated well between Massoc and Universal."

"We don't read Universal. We ran it through another translation to read it in Talin," Tolly said.

"What did you think we were hiring you for?" Narmuna asked.

"Sex."

My single word answer made Tolly stumble and Narmuna sound a loud angry rattle. The commotion made Tulum stop and spin around.

"Is there an issue?" she asked. I could tell by her rigid hand placement that she wasn't happy with Narmuna for being so loud.

"I'm sorry," Narmuna said. "We found out something upsetting. We aren't going to cause any trouble, and I won't rattle like that again."

Tulum was silent for a moment, as if trying to decide whether she could trust Narmuna to behave. It's not that she was afraid of them, but Massoc valued those who worked hard to fit in and focused on social harmony.

"We will not put up with anyone causing distress to others," Tulum warned him. "Violence will not be tolerated."

The way Tulum spoke made it sound like we'd all be summarily executed if we sneezed too loud. I knew that wasn't the case, but she was probably being strict because the guys hadn't proved themselves yet.

Tulum focused on me. "You know what is appropriate. You need to keep your mates in line."

I didn't want any one of us to get shoved out an airlock, so I waved my hands in an agreeing manner.

"I'll talk to them very sternly," I said. There was no point in telling her they weren't my mates because to her, if they acted like mates they were mates.

Tulum's hands relaxed. "Good."

She turned and walked again. The guys were quick to keep up, and everyone in the bay went back to work.

“You thought we expected sex from you?” Narmuna asked. “Is that why you said you couldn't service all of us?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “What did you guys think I was going to do?”

“Work with the cleaning bots,” Tolly explained. “When you demanded to go into my room I thought you wanted to start cleaning there first. That's why I built the nest, so you knew it was a good place to rest, not work.”

This made me review our interaction in a new light. He hadn't been pretending to be reluctant, he really was. I was the one who forced the issue. I basically coerced him into having intercourse.

Then he'd given me the best sex of my life.

I felt guilty, but I was also angry about feeling guilty. This was not comfortable.

“Had you been doing this job long?” Narmuna asked.

“No, yours was my first assignment,” I said. “Originally I worked in the repair bay. But after the mining on the nearby moon closed, there wasn't enough work to keep me employed.”

“What work did you do in the repair bay?” Narmuna asked.

“Mostly I helped with replacing relay engines,” I said. “But I was studying to be able to do more inner-shell work. Inner-shell techs are in high demand right now.”

Tolly made a very quiet rumble of agreement. “That's why you're so interested in schematics.”

I nodded. “Mieshorum is very knowledgeable. He helped me understand why nodes and channels have to be multi-level with retardant mesh between them.”

“They do?” Tolly asked, then added. “No, that's not what I want to know.”

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

He opened his mouth, hesitated, then let out a sharp breath. “I'll ask later, after you've seen the medical staff.”

“I didn't know humans could be mechanical techs,” Narmuna mumbled, as if trying to correlate this information with what he'd read about humans.

“Not only can we be mechanical techs, but one of my cousins was able to become an engineer,” I said, pride making me smile. “She's the smartest person I know. She designed heat-exchange units for the space stations.”

“A design engineer?” Narmuna said. His tone was unflatteringly incredulous. “That can't be true. You must be mistaken.”

I let out an annoyed huff and rolled my eyes. I might feel guilty about forcing sex on Tolly, but Narmuna didn't get a pass.

“Because you are omniscient of all things,” I snapped. “He who's only ever met one human gets to know everything about us?”

Narmuna went silent, and we reached the medical facility. I was briefly here years ago, but it looked the same. It was big enough to have three patient sections against one wall, each one separated by a narrow wall but open at the front to the rest of the room.

“I'll remain out here,” Tulum said, then met my eyes. “Remember what I said.”

“Yes, Soul Tulum,” I said. It occurred to me it would be easy to get the guys in trouble and have them ejected from the station. As long as their actions weren't too disruptive, they'd simply be shoved back onto their shuttle.

Of course, that left me on a station I didn't have permission to be on with no job prospects and no wealth to get back home.

Unless there was a job opening.

If there was a job, I had Garwe to speak for my skill level. That would go a long way for both the job and permission to live here.

The guys could've accidentally solved all my problems by taking me to this station.

Tolly laid me on one of the beds in the patient bays, then only stepped back far enough to let one of the Massoc past him. Narmuna stayed at the foot of the bed. I really didn't like having either of these guys staring at me, but especially Narmuna. He might not be making any noise, but I could tell he was irritated.

“I need to check on something,” he said. “Inform me if you're finished here before I return.”

Narmuna left before Tolly could respond. Wow, I didn't think I'd pissed him off that much.



“It seems your iron levels are low and you could use more Vitamin D,” the medical staff leader said. “Other than that, you have no physical issues.”

“Are you sure there’s not something else?” I asked. “She’s had headaches.”

“Those are common among humans,” he said. “We can sell you mild pain relievers.”

Opal shot me a look that I had no problem interpreting. It was the equivalent of *I told you the same thing!*

I almost sounded a rumble of amusement.

“There’s one more set of results we’re waiting for, but I doubt they’ll show any anomalies,” the medical staff leader continued. “Although you should buy her better shoes; these aren’t meant for walking on the metal floors of ships.”

Opal was wearing the thin slippers she’d arrived in. She’d walked barefoot for most of the time she’d been on board, but I could see what the medical staff leader meant. The shoes were obviously old and of poor quality, worn almost through in several places on the sole.

“We’re going to buy her as much as we can while we’re here,” I told him.

One of the medical staff began talking to her about nutritional needs specific to her. I saw Narmuna at the door to the medical facility waving at me. It seemed he wanted me to join him outside.

“I’ll be right back,” I said.

“Sure,” Opal grumbled and went back to studying on her information square, ignoring the medical staff director.

The moment the medical facility door shut behind me, Narmuna began talking.

“You won’t believe what I’ve discovered,” he said, voice low and harsh. “It’s absolutely incredible. It goes against everything I thought I knew.”

“What?” I asked, both confused and a little annoyed. I was scared to make any noises, and it was a constant battle not to rattle or rumble.

“Opal is telling the truth!” he hissed. “She worked as a technician on Bright Star Station. According to her work agreement, she was paid the same amount as the Massoc workers there. She couldn’t have had that job and be of low intelligence.”

I didn’t answer because I already knew this. Actually, Narmuna was the last one of us to come to this realization, so he was the slow one of our group. I didn’t say this, but I had to stifle an amused rumble.

“I think you’re correct,” I said. “I’ve had such suspicions since the first night I spent with her. Either humans are smarter than we think, or she’s an exception to her species.”

“It doesn’t matter which one it is,” Narmuna said, shocking me.

“Why wouldn’t that matter?” I asked.

“Because we’ve taken a slave,” he stated grimly. “If she isn’t of low intellect, then keeping her in captivity isn’t the act of having a pet, it’s enslaving a sapient creature.”

I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t struggling with the same issue. “We can’t abandon her here. Even if we give her wealth, she’ll have no protection. She’s still smaller, weaker, and has no political power to keep her safe.”

“We’re not leaving her,” Narmuna said, and I could tell by the tension in his body that he was fighting to keep from rattling. “We need to keep her. To do that we simply need to change our tactic.”

He lost me. “What?”

“I have an idea, but we all need to agree because it’ll put us all in danger,” he said.

There was no question that I was going to go along with anything Narmuna proposed if it meant I got to keep Opal in my life. But I couldn’t ask the others to do the same.

“We’ll all talk when we get back,” I said.

One of the medical staff walked through the door. “She’s ready to leave, but the medical staff director won’t give her the shoes back. He says they’re in deplorable condition and insists she not walk at all until she has acceptable footwear. One of you will have to carry her.”

I rushed back in. Everything else could wait, my Opal needed me!

Chapter 10

Opal

I was eager to leave the moment the medical staff finished poking and prodding me. Tulum was happy to lead us through the station to the merchant area. It felt like it'd been forever since I was in a shop that sold more than the bare essentials.

Despite Tolly trying to convince me otherwise, I'd brought my bag with me. It was all I had in the world right now, and I refused to be separated from it.

My information square had some credits on it, and I was tempted to spend them. If Tolly and Narmuna weren't paying attention, I might even be able to have some things shipped to my quarters on Bright Star Station.

Being able to do that would ease a lot of my anxiety about being away.

The first few shops were Massoc specific, so there wasn't anything interesting there for me. Then I saw a shop I was desperate to go into.

"Tolly, put me down."

"Not while your feet are bare," he said, not breaking stride.

I looked forward and clapped my hands to get Tulum's attention, one of the only acceptable noises among the Massoc. She stopped and turned, forcing Tolly and Narmuna to stop also.

"Do you have a request?" Tulum asked.

I pointed to a store and made an excited hand gesture. “I’d like to visit that shop first.”

She wasn’t surprised and didn’t comment, only changed direction. Tolly and Narmuna remained silent and followed her into the shop.

“You could’ve told me you wanted to change direction,” Tolly murmured.

“I asked you to set me down,” I pointed out.

“Not the same thing,” he argued with a short, quiet purr. “But now I know that if you ask to stand, it’s because you’ve noticed something. I’ll ask better questions next time.”

His reaction startled me. It didn’t occur to me that he’d be willing to be guided by me. He wasn’t even reprimanding me. He decided he was going to change the way he interacted with me, taking responsibility.

It almost made me want to say I’d learn to communicate better. It didn’t matter. We weren’t in a relationship or anything!

The moment we walked into the shop, I pushed on his arms. “Put me down. This time I mean it.”

He hesitated and looked down to examine the floor. It was covered in colorful rugs, the same ones sold in the shop.

“I guess it’s safe for you to walk in here,” he said, slowly setting me on my feet.

“You could give me my damn shoes back,” I mumbled.

“We’ll be buying you new shoes soon,” Narmuna said, hearing my annoyance. “We aren’t trying to limit you, only keep you safe and comfortable.”

It felt like they thought I was so delicate I might be crushed under my own weight. It was both sweet and annoying as hell!

“We should buy enough of these to cover all the hallways, the galley, and Opal’s room,” Narmuna said, examining a stack of rugs closely. “She’d be able to walk barefoot and be comfortable.”

That was an interesting idea. Theirs would be the first ship I’d ever been on with rugs.

“I have shoes,” I reminded them.

They didn’t listen to me and started talking to the merchant about a bulk order. The merchant was so excited he didn’t pay attention to me as I moved to look over a shelf of materials. I picked out the one that could be resold on Bright Star Station for the best price and took it over to the small table where the merchant was tapping frantically on a display. Tolly and

Narmuna weren't looking at me. They were facing each other and talking in low tones, but I was sure that both of them knew exactly where I was.

"I have a request," I said.

The merchant looked up. "Anything, Soul Opal."

I shouldn't have been surprised he knew my name. This station wasn't that big, and having me and the Talins here was probably the gossip of the day.

"I want to buy this, but I want it sent to Bright Star Station," I said, handing him the cloth. "My quarters number is 1557 and my station ID is 3030549."

"Certainly," he said. "But this is ceremonial. It's going to be expensive."

I pulled my square out of my bag. "I should have enough to pay for it if you don't charge me to send it."

He hesitated. "I'll have to wait until a through-ship comes in."

I already knew that would only be a few days. Deliveries were so rare everyone on Bright Star Station had the schedule memorized, including me. Thankfully almost every ship stopped here first. "That's fine."

He glanced at the Talins, then back at me. "Is this a secret?"

"Yes," I said.

"It's hard to keep gifts from being found," he whispered, grabbing the cloth and tucking it away. "If you have anything else you need to send off, have it brought to me. I'll package it all up."

His offer made me thankful that the Massoc considered gift giving important among mate groups.

"Can I include a message?" I asked.

He handed me his information square, and I tapped a quick message to be included with the material. As far as getting help, it wasn't going to do me any good. But it would be reassuring to know I was alive and trying to get home.

I handed him my square to pay, but he pushed it away. "No, I've changed my mind. You're not paying. Your mate group is about to buy out most of my store. I'll get to close until I get more stock in. You're giving me a vacation I never expected."

I folded my arms over my chest and rested my hands on opposite shoulders. It was a sign of sincere thankfulness.

"You're a well-balanced soul," I said.

"As are you," he agreed.

“We will need all of this delivered to our ship,” Tolly said, pulling the merchant's attention from me to the two Talins. “Our shuttle isn't big enough.”

“I'll coordinate with Soul Tulum,” the merchant said. “We'll make sure everything is delivered after you're finished shopping.”

“They have to leave at the end of this work cycle,” Tulum warned, standing in the front opening to the shop.

“Then we'd better hurry,” Narmuna said.

After paying for the order of rugs, Tolly picked me up and carried me several shops down. It was a clothing shop with a tailor machine. I didn't even hesitate to step on the measuring platform the moment Tolly set me down next to it.

Once the machine was done measuring, I faced the display and looked for the basic shirt and pants I always ordered. I found them, but the colors were limited, so I got a gray set. It seemed like the best color to keep clean. I was shocked to find they offered underwear, so I ordered two pairs. That made me smile as I turned to face the Talins.

“Can we get shoes now?”

They didn't move.

“You only ordered one outfit,” Narmuna said. “And it's a dull color.”

“You didn't order any wrap garments,” Tolly said. “Humans like wrap garments.”

“I'm a human and haven't heard of that before,” I said.

“You might've been on your own for too long,” Tolly said. “You might not be aware of the latest human trends, or perhaps the words aren't translating correctly. Let me show you.”

I moved aside when he reached for the display. He tapped it until it showed a dress that wrapped around the body and tied at one hip on the inside and the other hip on the outside. I could see why they called it a wrap. The styles varied from tight and feminine to loose, long, and masculine.

“That's nice,” I said. “It looks comfortable.”

“All humans wear them,” Tolly said with way too much authority. Then he picked one in burnt orange with red trim. Then he ordered seven more in each color they offered.

“Get her more of what she ordered,” Narmuna instructed. “She should have choices. But get better colors.”

“Yes,” Tolly agreed and moved through the menu. “You make a good point.”

He had to call the shop clerk over to force the machine to offer the shirt and pants in more colors. Then he ordered a set in almost every option. By the time they were done, I was going to have more clothes with them than I had back on Bright Star Station.

I couldn’t believe the amount of wealth they were spending on me.

“Will all this be ready by the end of the work cycle?” Narmuna asked.

“I’ll transfer some of the orders to the other machines in the back and make sure they’re all finished in time,” the clerk said.

After that we found a shop that sold shoes and had absolutely nothing I could use and no cobbler machine. It frustrated the men, but then the assistant said they could fix my old ones. That was better than nothing.

“What do you need next?” Tulum asked as we left the store.

“Food packets,” Narmuna said.

Tulum made an agreeing movement with her hands and walked us down a level and across the wide thoroughfare. I spotted a drink kiosk and was suddenly desperately thirsty.

“I know we’re in a rush,” I said. “But could we buy some miesua?”

Tolly and Narmuna stopped and turned to where I was pointing.

“You drink that?” Tolly asked.

I snickered at his disgusted tone. “It’s good.”

“It’s sweet,” Narmuna said.

“That’s why it’s good,” I said.

“Humans do like sweet things,” Tolly said, changing direction.

“She shouldn’t have too much,” Narmuna said.

“She can decide what she wants,” I said with an annoyed huff.

Tolly and Narmuna exchanged a look, then moved their gazes to me.

“Yes, you’re correct,” Narmuna said. “You’re capable of judging what’s appropriate to consume.”

The sudden change of attitude startled me into silence as Narmuna bought three containers of the drink. He handed me one then tucked the others into the pouch on his belt. I opened the miesua and drank half the container in one long swallow. It was sweet, tart, cold, and refreshing.

“Thanks, that’s perfect,” I said with a satisfied sigh.

Both Talins purred quietly at my words.

"I hate to hurry you, but I'd feel better if we were finished before the end of the work cycle so we have time to get everything to your ship," Tulum said.

"Yes, of course," Narmuna said and we set off again.

The next shop was a familiar sight. Every station I'd ever worked on had one. It was the place everyone went when they needed to buy necessities like food. This one was much larger and better stocked than the one on Bright Star Station but had all the same familiar foods.

"What do you like?" Tolly asked.

"What?"

"We're here to get you food," he explained. "We have plenty of stores for ourselves, but limited items that you can digest. You've been living on a Massoc station so you know what you can eat."

I didn't plan to be with them long, but ordering some extra food wouldn't do them any harm. I listed off all my favorite packets as my eyes wandered around the space. The store's floors were the basic metal plating, so getting set down was going to be a fight.

"Tolly," I said, pressing my palms to the sides of his face. I felt his oil warm the skin of my hands, and the scent of sage filled my nose.

I'd smelled it consistently whenever I was around Tolly, but never this strong. It gave me flashbacks to our night together, and I had a sudden and intense need to be touched by him again.

"Opal?" Narmuna said, pulling me back to reality. I'd been so caught up in my flashback I forgot we were in a public place.

I shifted my eyes to Narmuna. "What?"

Why was my voice so breathless?

"You were going to ask Tolreum for something," Narmuna said. "You had on your request expression, but then your face changed. Your new expression wasn't clear to me."

I felt my face go hot. "N-nothing," I stuttered. Then I remembered why I'd put my hands on Tolly's face to begin with.

"I'd like to walk around," I said. "A little time on some metal floor won't hurt me."

When Tolly hesitated, Narmuna spoke up. "She's right. Tolreum, we need to respect her wishes when it's not a dangerous situation."

He put a lot of emphasis on the words *respect her wishes*. This treatment by Narmuna was new and made me curious. Of course the caveat about

danger was familiar.

“Be mindful of any gaps between plates that might have sharp edges,” Tolly said.

I didn’t bother responding with snark because two of the store clerks came rushing over. They each had two cargo bots following close behind. They engaged the Talins in some pleasantries then assured them they could have everything transferred to their ship in time.

I moved off and found a few high-value items that could easily be resold. While everyone was distracted, I took them to the back table where they packed up purchases. There was a row of cargo bots, and I dumped everything into one of them. It was easy to program the bots to take them to the rug seller. I was also able to include a short message to the rug merchant to send these items to my station.

With that done, I hit deliver and the bot headed out the short door designed for the cargo bots. No one noticed.

I felt a little guilty because I’d technically stolen the items, but I was sure the clerks were going to overcharge the Talins anyway, so it would all work out.

“Opal, please join us.”

I looked over at Tolly’s words and made my way back to them. Gather bots were rushing around the store, grabbing and bringing items to the cargo bots gathered around them. The Talins and two clerks had moved to a large display mounted on the end of a shelf. When I got there, they had lists of food packets scrolling slowly across the display.

“We got a box of every food packet you can safely consume,” Tolly explained. “We wanted to know if you have any favorites you’d like us to get extra of.”

“We should get several cases of miesua,” Narmuna said.

“Yes,” Tolly agreed and tapped the display until he found miesua and ordered four cases. Four! I wouldn’t consume that much in a year.

“That was thoughtful, thank you,” I said and Narmuna purred briefly before stopping and looking around to make sure he wasn’t in trouble. I couldn’t blame him. Until you got a feel for what the Massoc considered disruptive, it could be nerve racking.

“There’s a chill box in the galley,” Tolly added. “We can set it to your preferred temperature.”

“Are you almost done here?” Tulum asked. I could tell from the tension in her hands that she was anxious.

“Yes,” I said.

“I don’t like being rushed,” Tolly grumbled.

“We can always buy more items at another station,” Narmuna said. “We’re only here because it was closest. In fact, our next stop is Telmaru Station. It’s so large it should have everything we can’t find here.”

“You’re correct,” Tolly said. “Unlike here, they have an entertainment corridor.”

If he was trying to upset Tulum by insulting her station, it didn’t work.

“Yes, that’s an excellent idea,” she agreed. “The sooner you leave here, the quicker you can reach Telmaru Station.”

I almost snorted but kept my amusement to myself as Tolly picked me up. Tulum turned and led us away, moving so fast we were jogging back to the bay. Her hands only relaxed as the shuttle hatch was closing behind us.

“The Massoc entry in our unibase referred to them as particular,” Tolly said as he settled me in his lap. “I think we should expand on it.”

“I agree,” Narmuna said as he started up the shuttle. When he was finished communicating with the station’s bay controller, he looked back and focused his gaze on me. “I think you should help us write it. It’s clear you have far more knowledge of Massoc culture than we do.”

The corners of my mouth lifted at being asked to share information. Maybe they were starting to realize I wasn’t an idiot.

Chapter 11

Tolreum

“So we’re all in agreement,” Narmuna said.

“Yes,” Mieshorum said. “Opal is just as intelligent as the rest of us. I don’t understand how other owners haven’t realized their humans are smart.”

“Our species can be willful,” I reminded him. “Look at how long it took for us to come to terms with having to trade with other species.”

“Almost an entire century,” Narmuna said with a rumble of agreement. “I studied that period of our history thoroughly while in the final solar of my crash education. We wanted to be perfectly independent, but the universe doesn’t distribute natural resources evenly. Monarch Sorarchus finally persuaded the Apogee Assembly to agree to the first trade agreement but only after she and her mother before her kept campaigning for decades.”

“Except we were open to seeing Opal as she truly is. I think the ancestors brought her to us because they knew we would figure this out,” Lexarit said. “They knew we’d treat her as she deserves.”

“But now that we all know and agree, what do we do?” I asked. “We can’t put a collar on her and pretend it’s acceptable. But she can’t be in Talin space without being owned, by us or someone else.”

“We should give her choices,” Mieshorum said. I could hear the reluctance in his voice.

“Not yet,” Narmuna said.

“I don’t want to give her options either,” I admitted. “I’m scared she’ll decide to leave us. Even if we give her as much wealth as we can spare, she’ll be in a great deal of danger no matter where she goes. There’s no truly safe place for humans except with us.”

“Tolreum’s right,” Mieshorum said. “But if we don’t give her the freedom of choice, then we’re no better than the Talins who regard humans as inferior.”

“I’ve been thinking about this and believe I have an idea,” Narmuna said. We all gave him encouraging rumbles of agreement.

“Tell us,” I urged.

“We make her a partner in our ship,” he said.

We all went silent at Narmuna’s suggestion. It was so outrageous I wasn’t even sure how to react.

Lexarit pointed out the inherent flaw in Narmuna’s logic. “If she’s considered a pet by our government, how could she hold any possessions?”

“That is the biggest issue, but I have a solution,” Narmuna said. “We’ll have to create a second company that owns her. The same company will own an equal percentage of the ship, like we do. Then I create a web of ownership until all decision-making for Opal’s company is made by her through various channels. It would be laborious for her to get things done, but it would mean if she was ever alone without us, all she would need to do is message the broker who will handle her “company” and she can fund her own rescue.”

“Narmuna, you’re brilliant!” I exclaimed with an excited rattle.

“But would it work?” Mieshorum asked.

“I’m sure it would, although I’d rather Opal wasn’t forced to test the efficacy in an emergency situation,” Narmuna said. “We’ll need to get her an Ident she can use to present herself as a Talin when messaging the broker. But that shouldn’t be too hard. We could buy a black-market one and clone one of ours to it.”

“We should have everything in place before we tell her that she can leave,” Lexarit said. “She won’t believe us unless we have everything ready with all the interfaces set up.”

I couldn’t help but voice my own concern.

“What if she leaves us, even after we do all this for her?” They all went silent and stared at me. “What?”

“You weren’t eating,” Lexarit said. “Before we brought Opal onboard.”

“I was eating,” I said.

“Not much,” Narmuna said. “Maybe a meal every other rotation.”

“And you were acting oddly,” Lexarit continued. “In the past, when we delivered to Dekoro Station, you nearly sprinted to the gaming area to run a few of the races. Last time, you stayed on the ship. You haven’t been yourself.”

Mieshorum sounded a comforting rumble. “You don’t have to say it, but we all know what’s wrong.”

It seemed I wasn’t as good at keeping my secrets as I thought. I’d been able to dismiss the early signs that I was suffering from the Fading. At first it was nothing but a kind of listlessness that made it hard to focus on my tasks.

I’d pushed through. I was fine. I had to be fine; my friends and crewmates were counting on me.

Except I was far from well. Each rotation, everything got a little bit worse. Finally food stopped tasting good, and I had to convince myself to rise from my bunk each work cycle.

“I’m not Fading,” I said, forcing myself to utter the word that no one liked to say. Dying from Fading was a mark of genetic and spiritual weakness. If my family found out I had it, they’d have disowned me.

Lexarit made a sound of agreement. “You’re not Fading now, but that’s because of one change.”

No one needed to say what the change was. If they’d noticed I wasn’t eating or interested in anything before Opal, then they definitely observed my change with her arrival.

“The best thing that ever happened to me was when she picked me in our lineup,” I murmured.

“Did you have intercourse with her?” Narmuna asked.

I let out a startled rattle. “I.I...” what was I supposed to say? Admitting the truth would surely turn my friend against me.

“She was a sex worker,” Lexarit reminded me. “We didn’t know that originally, but now we do. When she was in the cabin alone with you, she would have assumed you wanted sex. It was a logical conclusion on her part.”

“I tried to refuse,” I said, knowing I deserved their anger. “But her touch felt electric. She was so gentle and kind. She lip pressed me like the humans

do to each other. She was immediately addicting. I have many regrets, but I can't bring myself to regret that."

"I understand," Narmuna said. "If a human came to me offering a true relationship, I'd accept also. I'm only disappointed we didn't know she thought that was the job."

"Yes," I said. "That is one of my regrets."

"Have you two been intimate since that first time?" Lexarit asked.

"No," I said. "I hope to please her in that way again. The scent she produces when aroused is indescribably delicious."

"As long as she knows it isn't a requirement," Mieshorum said.

"I'd never force her!" I said.

The others sounded rumbles of amusement. "We know," Narmuna said.

"Otherwise we wouldn't find you sleeping in the hallway so often," Lexarit said.

"I don't fall asleep that often," I objected, feeling both annoyed by their amusement but also relieved. I hadn't lost them.

"If she's interested, you should start teaching her your job," Narmuna said after the amused rumbles faded.

"What?" I said. "Why?"

"Because she'll want to be useful," Narmuna said. "It's obvious she's used to working. We'll make sure she never overworks herself, but she won't be content if we don't let her be a real part of the crew."

"You're right," I said. "I'll start doing that."

"She's such a fast learner," Mieshorum said. "I thought she might want to learn about the inter-shell instead. She's so tiny it would be easier to ask her to take a look at an issue instead of trying to get a bot to do it."

They all let out frustrated rumbles. The ship was mostly perfect, but the one recurring issue they had was in the inner-shell section, and trying to fix it with bots was always laborious and took longer than if one of them could fit in there.

"You're brilliant," I said.

"I know," Mieshorum said.

"Before I begin the process, I want to verify that we're all in agreement," Narmuna said. "We're going to redistribute the ownership of our ship with Opal. Each of us will now control twenty percent."

No one hesitated. We all sounded rumbles of agreement.

“I’ll try to have all the documentation done and recorded by the time we get to the next station,” he said. “We don’t tell her until it’s all done.”

Another round of rumbles of agreement came from all of us.

“After she accepts our offer, we should include her in the discussion we have on which contracts to take next,” I said.

“Of course,” Lexarit said. “She’ll want to be part of all the business decisions.”

Tension I hadn’t realized I’d been holding relaxed. I pulled in a deep breath of air and regarded my friends. “The ancestors have blessed me in so many ways.”

“All of us,” Narmuna said.

“Me more than the rest of you,” I said. “I can’t thank the three of you enough for letting me be this happy.”

Narmuna sounded a rumble of agreement. “I don’t know how, but I’m sure Opal is going to bring us much more good fortune.”

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Chapter 12

Tolreum

Despite my best efforts, I slipped into a light sleep while sitting in the hall outside Opal's cabin. I woke up with a start to find Opal crouching in front of me, a concerned expression on her face.

"Tolly, are you okay?"

Purring, I sat up. "I'm sorry. What do you need, Opal?"

She tilted her head, then took one of my hands in both of hers. "If I give you your cabin back, will you sleep in a bunk? I'm much smaller than you. I can take the spare cabin. It won't be a problem."

I sounded a loud negative rattle. "It would be a problem. Your nest wouldn't fit in the other cabin. At least not without reducing it. That's unacceptable."

She bit her lip, then tugged at my hand. "I'm not happy with you sleeping in the hall."

I got to my feet. "I'm sorry. I'll do better. I won't drift off again."

She shook her head. "That's not what I meant. I mean it makes me sad that you feel obligated to sleep in the hall instead of a bunk."

I sounded a comforting rumble. "You shouldn't feel upset. It's my own lack of fortitude."

"Fortitude? That's silly. We spent an entire work cycle running around the station. When we got back to the ship, I took a shower and a nap." She

pointed to the boxes I'd stacked next to her door, then gestured to the rugs the crew had helped me lay down throughout the ship. "But you were busy unloading and placing things."

"I'm used to laboring," I said.

"Sure, but not after a horrible night sleeping out in the hall," she said, leading me into her cabin. I was happy to see the nest was mussed, meaning she'd been sleeping there. "I want you to get comfortable and really rest for a while."

I looked down at the nest. It appeared inviting, but the thought of laying down by myself didn't feel good.

"Are you still fatigued?" I asked. "Do you need me to comfort you while you sleep?"

She looked confused for a moment, then grinned. "Yes, I'm still tired."

I let her tug me down into the nest. I lay on my side and opened up an arm. After a moment of hesitation, she nestled next to me.

Pulling in a deep breath of her soft, natural, human smell, I ignored the ache in my scent glands. I was scared of doing anything that might upset her. We lay in silence for a bit. Despite my exhaustion, I knew I couldn't sleep. I needed to stay awake to enjoy every submark of this moment.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I jerked a little at her apology. "Why would you be sorry?"

"I basically forced you to have sex with me," she said. "I lied to you about going into heat. Humans don't do that, but at the time I thought you wanted me to pretend. Today I read about Talin culture and society on your ship's unibase. You guys don't approve of sex. When I realized that, the guilt was almost unbearable."

"Would you show me the passage you read?" I asked. I couldn't remember where it might say that, but I didn't bother reading the unibase entry our species put out about ourselves.

She grabbed the information square sitting on the edge of the nest. Her lips pursed as she searched, then she turned the square for me to see.

Integrating Young Adults into Workplaces and the Military

Issued by the Committee on Adultlettes and Young Adults

Although it's expected that young adults will engage in intercourse with each other, it should be closely monitored. While experimenting with sex and sexuality is natural, in such situations, accidental scent bonding is always a worry.

If two young Talins are interested in marriage, then they should absolutely be encouraged to engage in intimate acts. However, they should be warned that doing such a thing too often, even after the marriage contract has been filed, could result in the urge to scent bond. This should be talked about and adamantly discouraged.

Reading the passage made sadness well up inside me. This reminded me of the way I'd been lectured by the authority figures in my life any time I was found even sitting too close to another Talin.

"It's not that we don't approve of sex," I said. "It's that there is a constant concern about Talins becoming scent bonded."

She tilted her head. "What is that?"

I had vowed to be as honest with her as possible, but I wished the topic wasn't such a difficult one.

"In the past, we would scent bond with each other," I explained. I pointed to the side of my face. "Talins have scent glands here that produce oil. We would rub our oil on each other and become addicted to our combined scents."

"You would do this during sex?" she asked.

"Yes, but not exclusively," I said. "But sexual activity is a common trigger for our scent glands to produce oil."

"Is scent bonding so bad?" When I didn't answer right away, she held up a hand with a frown. "You don't have to answer my questions if they, you know, make you uncomfortable."

I sounded a rumble of agreement. "I'm uncomfortable, but it's important for me to talk about these things. You have made me realize a lot of what I thought was true might not be accurate."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "I have?"

"Yes," I said. "Mostly that humans aren't a low-intelligence species. I'm sorry I thought that at the beginning."

"I'm sorry I forced you into having sex," she said, reaching out to pat my thigh. "You must have thought I was the weirdest domestic servant ever."

I sounded a negative rattle. "I thought perhaps you were lonely. Being the only human on Bright Star Station couldn't have been easy."

A strange look crossed her face before she asked another question.

"You never told me why scent bonding is a bad thing," she pressed.

I decided to be blunt. "If we're separated from a bonded partner for too long, we can die. It's called Ending, or if you want to be more formal, scent

collapse syndrome. Scent bonding is an addiction that can kill us."

Her expression turned sad. "That's horrible. I mean, it's sweet, but also sad."

"Our species used to write poetry," I whispered. Although it could be easily accessed in various archives, it was considered an artform only suitable to our past selves and much too sentimental for our modern empire. "There are so many poems about the beauty of scent bonding. Poets tried again and again to put the feeling in words."

Her expression turned soft with a half-smile. "That sounds a lot like love."

I sounded a negative rattle. "Scent bonding is biological. Love is a human emotional concept."

My words were a little harsher than I meant them to be, but she didn't lose her smile.

"If you say so."

The silence stretched between us until I broke it. "Perhaps there are some similarities. Humans can become ill if they don't have the appropriate level of companionship."

She bit her lip and nodded. "Then I guess there's no worry about the two of us scent bonding," she said, rubbing her own cheek. "I don't have any scent glands."

I wasn't ready to tell her yet, so I kept quiet. She yawned, a clear sign of fatigue in humans.

"You need to rest. What can I do to make you more comfortable?"

"You need the rest too," she said. "You were the one falling over in the hall. Lay back down."

"Anything you like," I agreed, stretching out on my side again.

"On your back please," she said, pressing against my chest. I rolled on my back and was rewarded for following instructions when she nestled against my side.

"This is nice," she murmured.

"It is," I agreed. Purring, I gave into my need and rubbed my aching scent glands into her hair.

She took a deep breath. "I like that. It smells good."

Yes, I thought. *It smells good because my life is now tied to you.*

The poets were right. Scent bonding was a type of wonderful horror.

I didn't say any of that. Despite my best efforts, I fell asleep with her small, soft body tucked tight against me.



Opal

What was I doing?

Instead of reading about the next station we were going to or double-checking the escape route, I was laying here snuggling with Tolly.

Honestly, I was crazy for stopping when I saw him in the hall in the first place. I'd been reading up on their culture on the ship's unibase, stumbled on the sex stuff, and had to put the information square down.

It made me not only feel guilty but restless. Now that the Talin's knew I was perfectly healthy, I didn't expect to find anyone in the hall. I'd planned to find my way to the galley for a cup of tea and maybe a snack. I assumed the door was programmed to them when it opened, so I expected to have company quickly.

Except Tolly had been there in the hall, fast asleep in an awkward position.

A whole new wave of guilt hit me. I'd reminded myself repeatedly that it had simply been a misunderstanding and they'd kidnapped me, so who cared?

Why were they all being so sweet? They'd panicked over a simple headache. They'd bought enough rugs to cover the floor of every room and hallway except for the storage bays so I could go around barefoot if I wanted to. They'd purchased enough clothes so that I wouldn't have to do laundry for a month if I didn't want to.

And all they wanted back was for me to be happy?

Being a human pet might not be such a bad job. The hours were easy, and the benefits were stellar.

I almost snorted at that. What would that kind of job posting look like? *Position for human pet, no experience necessary. The only requirement is to be human.*

It was so tempting to stay. If I had freedom, I'd probably even let them put a collar on me. Except I couldn't.

Tolly began purring and moved a little in his sleep. I shifted position until I was almost entirely against his chest with my face next to the strip of bare skin at the base of his neck. He didn't wake up, but his purring intensified.

Pulling in a deep breath, I told myself I wouldn't miss this.

I was such a liar.

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Chapter 13

Opal

“We’re going to be very busy unloading the fuel rods,” Tolly warned me. “Loading and unloading are the most dangerous parts of hauling fuel. It’s important you stay in your cabin.”

“I understand,” I said, not adding that I had no intention of obeying.

“If you need me, you can use this,” he said, holding out an information square. “This is linked to the ship’s comm system.”

Had he forgotten he’d already given me a linked information square? I took the square without saying anything.

“Narmuna had to go onto the station, but he’ll be back before we’re finished unloading,” Tolly continued. “We’ll be leaving as soon as we’re able because this isn’t a very reputable station. That’s the reason we took the contract; there weren’t many who were willing to deliver here.”

I didn’t want to hear that, but it wasn’t as if I had any choice. I needed to get home.

“Your face isn’t displaying any emotions I can interpret,” he said, sounding a worried rumble. “Are you upset at being here? We’ll be leaving within a few marks.”

I forced a smile on my face. “I’m fine.”

He paused, as if he wasn’t sure how to respond to my flat voice. Damn it, I needed to do better.

“No really, I’m good,” I said. He was about to turn around when I spoke up. “Um, before you go, I wanted, I mean, I...”

He purred and opened his arms. “Opal, what’s wrong?”

I pressed myself against him and let out a sigh when his arms tightened around me.

“The last two days have been perfect,” I whispered. “I want you to know that.”

“I feel the same,” he murmured.

After our stop at Twin Star Station, the guys made me feel like a member of the crew instead of a pet. Mieshorum was always asking me if I was free for more lessons on the inner-shell area of the Ever Secure. Narmuna requested I write up an entry for Massoc in the ship’s unibase. After I’d finished, he read it and helped me add details to clarify some things. Lexarit constantly asked for my opinion on everything.

The four Talins always sat down with me at meals, even though they only ate at one of them. They talked with me as if I was their equal.

If I thought it was going to be hard to leave Tolly, now the rest of the crew was making me want to stay. Damn them!

“Opal,” Tolly said with a purr and pushed me back far enough for our eyes to meet. “Narmuna is arranging something very important. I’m hoping that once he’s done, you’ll be very pleased with the results. We plan to celebrate tonight. For now, relax and wait patiently.”

With that he rushed out, leaving me without answers and with a broken heart.

Blinking back tears, I looked around the cabin. Like all the hallways, the floor was covered from wall to wall in colorful rugs. The guys had created a massive storage cabinet by removing the retracting bunk and adding doors. All the clothing they’d bought was hanging in there.

The cleansing unit had a large container full of skin and hair products. They’d bought anything and everything the Massoc had that might work for me.

I was even wearing my resoled shoes that somehow were even softer than they’d been when I first bought them despite the new, rigid soles.

I was being treated like a princess and a crewmate. If I’d read a story with this plot line, I would’ve rolled my eyes.

The ship jolted, telling me it was finished being secured. They’d start off-loading soon. I needed to make my escape now if I was going to have

enough time to find a transport before they realized I was gone.

Picking up my bag, I opened it and thought about what to take with me. I packed my personal information square at the bottom. I tucked a second information square into a deep pocket in the front of my bag. It was the one they'd slipped to me when I'd hidden in the storage room, and it had access to all the ship's systems.

Although I felt a little guilty for taking anything, I tucked a set of pants and several shirts in there and a few of the toiletries. I gave in to temptation and wrapped one of the smaller, soft blankets around my shoulders.

With my bag bulging with items, I took a last look at the nest, forced back my tears, and left.

It wasn't long before I made my way to the small access hatch at the fore of the ship. Standard procedure during the off-loading of fuel was to unlock everything so if there was an emergency it was easier to leave or rescue crew that might be trapped. That meant the access hatch would open easily when I pressed. Except it would also alert Tolly and the others through the comms, so I had to disable that first.

Sitting down next to the human-sized hatch, I went to work on the system through the information square they'd given me. The access allowed me to shut down the warning for this hatch.

I made sure it would only last for a few minutes so it wouldn't be a vulnerability for them in the future. Setting the information square down on the floor, I opened the hatch and slipped out. It was a tight squeeze and a hard drop, but I managed to stay on my feet.

The bay was busy with bots moving the large, triple-walled fuel cases from the ship, their metal legs loud on the bay's floor. There were several Marpers shouting at each other across the bay and another set shouting from the entrance to the specialized corridor for the bots to travel through.

All the noise and movement made it easy for me to slip around a bot and out of the bay.

The corridor beyond the bay was empty, so I jogged until I got to a more crowded section of the station. The change in noise level was a bit jarring.

I'd never been to this station before, but the majority of individuals I saw were Marper, so I could only assume this was a Marper station.

Marpers were a giant species with light gray, hairless skin. They were massively round, but I knew the fat on them hid a lot of muscle. I'd watched one of them pick up an entire maintenance bot charging station

without any help. The Massocs I worked with had been as shocked as I was and watched with wide eyes as the Marper carried it onto her ship. She'd been cheerful and talking the entire time, as if it wasn't heavy at all!

Despite the giant tusks jutting out of their lower jaw, they didn't have any issue talking clearly and showed it with how loud they liked to talk to each other, even in enclosed, quiet spaces. The Massoc had been very happy when the Marper had left Bright Star Station.

That Marper had been friendly. I could only hope she was representative of her species.

Edging around a corner, I made my way to an interactive display that allowed me to look up the businesses on the station.

I wasn't surprised to find they didn't have any kind of service for commercial travelers. Stations that weren't major hubs of trade usually didn't bother with that kind of thing. There wasn't enough work for companies to have dedicated ships for passengers instead of goods.

Thankfully there was a travel broker on the station. Ships hauling cargo might have a spare bunk and decide to make a little extra wealth on the side by allowing someone to ride with them to their next destination. These were called low-luxury accommodations and usually meant one meal a day, bunking in the same room as the crew, and were limited to no access to cleansing facilities.

This wouldn't be the first time I'd traveled like this. I could only hope that there was a ship going close to Bright Star Station. The closer I got, the easier it would be to arrange a quick jumper flight home.

Memorizing the route, I turned to face the crowd. It was intimidating to see a wall of slowly moving Marpers, talking loudly and gesturing wildly to each other with boisterous laughs.

Tightening the strap on my bag, I watched for a gap and slipped in. The Marpers were so big they didn't notice me, and I was forced to practice defensive walking or risk being stepped on.

"What are you?"

I startled at the deep voice and looked up to find a curious Marper staring down at me.

"I'm human," I said, then gasped and jumped to the side when another Marper nearly squished me against the curious Marper.

The curious Marper reacted swiftly and with violence. She grabbed the unaware individual and tossed him. Several other Marpers broke his fall.

They didn't get upset, only laughed and moved away.

The individual stood up, glaring until he realized the curious Marper was much larger. With a grunt, he stormed off, pushing several smaller Marpers out of the way.

It seemed that among Marpers, bigger was dominant.

"You're tiny," she said, as if she hadn't just done that. "Are you a juvenile?"

"No, I'm fully grown," I said.

"That's unfortunate," she said, patting me on the head. She was probably being gentle, but she put enough pressure on me to make my knees bend. "It's bad to be little but done growing. Bigger is better. Do you have a keeper?"

"I've never been on a Marper station before," I explained, ignoring the keeper question. "I didn't know you were so very large and impressive."

That was the exact right thing to say. "Yes, we Marpers are very impressive."

"Yes, especially you!" I said.

The Marper stood tall, preening. "I'm very large. My lineage has some of the largest and most important Marpers in this sector."

Suddenly she grabbed me, lifting me up and setting me on the top of the box strapped to her back. "Where are you going? I will take you there so you don't accidentally get hurt."

"That's very kind of you," I said. "I was going to the travel broker."

She grunted and shifted in place. The traffic was against her, the same issue I'd been dealing with, but instead of jumping around trying to avoid tree-trunk-sized legs or massive swinging hands, she simply shoved other Marpers out of her way.

A few grumbled and some laughed, but none of them challenged her.

"See," she said. "I'm biggest."

"You are," I agreed. "My name is Opal."

"I'm Pelrow," she said. "I'm sorry you're not going to get any bigger. You should really find a keeper, like we do with our children."

A keeper must be a type of babysitter or caregiver.

"I'll look for one," I said.

"That's good," she said. "Do humans form family groups?"

"We do," I said. "But it's hard for us to stay together. My parents are gone, and I haven't seen any of my cousins for many years."

“That’s very sad,” she said. “I could put you into my child's growing group. Their keeper is excellent. They’ve already learned all about this station and the Laws of Orbits. Of course, my child is the biggest one in her growing group.”

Was Pelrow trying to adopt me? That was cute and made me want to pat her on the head. It was rare for any species to give humans a fair chance, but this Marper was going out of her way to be kind.

“Thank you for the offer, but I'd really like to get home,” I said.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “It would be good practice for the youth to have you around. It’s important we learn how to handle delicate things when we’re young.”

And suddenly the offer didn’t seem as sweet.

“I have a job waiting,” I lied.

“Then that’s very important,” Pelrow agreed. “If the job doesn’t work out or they are too rough, come back and I’ll take care of you. I plan to have at least three more offspring, and you can teach all of them and the other youths about being gentle.”

“That’s kind of you,” I said to Pelrow. “Only a truly big Marper would offer me such kindness.”

“That’s true,” she agreed, her stride getting a little longer and her next shove sending a fellow pedestrian crashing into several others.

It wasn’t long before we got to the travel broker’s office. Pelrow didn’t set me down until we were inside the office and safe from foot traffic. Before leaving, she crouched down in front of me.

“Be safe, Opal. If you change your mind, contact Pelrow of Pelshun here, on Outer Moon Station. I will fetch you, yes?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Repeat the contact name and place,” she demanded, as if I was a child who might forget.

“Pelrow of Pelshun on Outer Moon Station,” I said.

She gave a little grunt of satisfaction and patted me on the head again, this time with much less force. “Good.”

I guess our conversation was over because she turned and left without another word. I faced the only Marper in the office.

“Do you have anyone offering passage to Bright Star Station or any nearby station?” I asked. “Or anywhere in Massoc space?”

The Marper grunted, but it wasn't a friendly sound like Pelrow's. "What are you?" he asked.

"Human," I said. "I can pay in advance and have a job, I simply need to get to it."

Saying I had a job waiting made it more likely for me to get passage. It was rare, but occasionally individuals would buy passage to help pirates capture and steal a ship.

"Show me your wealth," the Marper demanded. I felt uneasy, but I didn't have a choice but to dig out my information square and show him. He grunted again and went to the only workstation in the room. After tapping at the display with heavy fingers, he looked back up.

"You said human?"

"Yes, human," I said. "We're a rare species, but we're quiet, skilled, and don't cause trouble."

"I have the perfect ship for you," he said, standing up and pulling on the same type of square, box-like pack that many of the Marpers wore.

"How much?" I asked.

"We'll find out when we get to the ship," he said, walking up to me. I thought he was going to lead me, but instead he grabbed me and placed me on his box like Pelrow had, except with a lot less gentleness.

This had to be how they carried their children.

He moved with the crowd, and soon we were in a busy bay full of ships. The moment he could, he broke into a jog to cover ground faster. Soon we were at the far end of the bay and standing next to the ramp of a ship.

When I saw an insect-like Vicpor come down the ramp, I got a bad feeling about this. Vicpors had a reputation of avarice to the point of enslaving and selling their own children.

Even if the price was good and they were going straight to Bright Star Station, I wasn't riding on one of their ships. The risk wasn't worth it.

"No," I said loud enough that I knew the broker must've heard me. "I'll wait for another ship. I won't travel in this one."

"That's a human!" the Vicpor said, chittering with excitement.

"Yes," the broker said. "I want price and a half for her, or I'll sell her to the next merchant that comes here."

God damn it! Meeting Pelrow had made me complacent. I should've known my luck wouldn't last.

“I’m a free individual!” I screamed, trying to get down off the broker’s back. “I’m not his to sell.”

The Vicpor ignored me. “I’ll give you price and a quarter, but no more.”

“Done,” the broker said, grabbing me as I tried to jump off.

He held me with one beefy hand, his fingers almost able to circle my waist. He tugged my bag away from me, then slammed me down on the ground. The breath left me and pain radiated up my left foot. When he let go, I crumpled to the ground, pain making it hard to see straight.

“You broke her!” the Vicpor snarled. “I’ll only give you price now.”

“She’s fine,” the broker insisted and grabbed me under the arms and tried to stand me up. I cried out in agony and fell to my knees. When he reached for me again, I scrambled away. The Vicpor caught me by the hair to hold me still.

“Price or nothing,” the Vicpor insisted.

“Fine,” the Marper snarled and shoved his information square at the Vicpor. I heard the familiar chime of wealth being exchanged and then the Vicpor was picking me up.

“Please, I’m not a slave,” I begged, trying hard to hold back my tears.

“If you weren’t before, you are now,” he declared, carrying me into his ship.

I struggled, but it was useless. Soon he was dumping me in a dimly lit room. The sound of the door sliding shut sounded loud in the empty space.

I knew it was pointless, but I got to my feet and limped to the door. There wasn’t even a display on the inside.

“I’m going to die soon. Do you want me to help you die before I’m gone?”

The voice startled me and I fell on my ass. Staying down, I looked around until I saw the woman huddled in a corner, hidden by the shadows.

“I have no intention of dying,” I said.

“Death might be better than whatever they have planned,” she whispered. My eyes were adjusting to the dim light, and I was able to make out details.

She was human and looked to be about my age, with light tan skin and light brown hair only long enough to cover her eyes. There were bruises on her face, neck, and what I could see of her arms. She looked much too thin, and her clothes were worn and dirty.

Much worse than all of that was the dull look in her eyes. If she hadn’t already talked about her own death, I’d know she’d given up after one look

at her eyes.

“What do you know about this ship and the Vicpor?” I asked.

She closed her eyes, and for a moment I didn’t think she was going to answer. Then she let out a soft sigh and spoke.

“He mostly trades in Vicpor slaves, but he makes an exception for humans.”

“Why us?” I asked, feeling confused. Most didn’t even know we existed.

“A species called the Talins will pay a huge amount of wealth for us,” she said. “I also know Talins don’t keep slaves. That can mean only one thing. They think of humans as food.”

Despite the pain in my foot and the dire situation, I snorted. “Trust me, they don’t eat humans. At least not in that way.”

I felt my face get hot at the double entendre, then shook it off.

“How would you know?”

Her eyes were open and looking at me with interest. That was much better than her dull acceptance.

“Because I escaped from a ship full of them,” I said. “I was never on the menu. They think we’re of low intelligence and keep us as pets.”

“Like they keep us in cages and shit?” she asked. “Great. We’ll probably become brood mares.”

I hated to admit that might be possible. Who knew how other Talins might treat us? Tolly and the guys had been open to realizing I wasn’t dumb. They’d been patient, kind, and gentle. The next Talin who bought me might be cruel.

No, there had to be a way to get us out of here. Maybe not right at this moment, but in the future. The moment someone wasn’t paying attention, I’d make my move.

Although it was going to be hard to make any move now that I didn’t have an information square and my foot was rapidly swelling.

“What’s your name?” I asked, crawling over to her. In an effort to relieve the pain, I lay on my back and propped my leg up against the wall. It helped a little, but not much.

“Sloane,” she said.

“Hi, Sloane, I’m Opal. I was trying to buy passage home and that damn broker decided to sell me instead. What happened to you?”

“I’m tired,” she whispered.

That's when I noticed the sheen of sweat covering her body and the strange color in the whites of her eyes. I didn't know what was wrong, but it was clear this woman was very ill.

"Okay, you rest," I murmured and watched her close her eyes and rest her head against the wall behind her.

I closed my eyes and thought about what I knew about this ship. There had to be knowledge of a weakness buried somewhere in my brain. I'd start looking once my foot stopped hurting so much.

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Chapter 14

Tolreum

It took much longer to unload the fuel, mostly because the Marpers kept getting in our way. They were a friendly and talkative species, and the two other times we'd delivered to them I hadn't minded the extra time it took while they chatted, even after the work was done.

This time it was much harder to be patient with them when I knew Opal was waiting for me in the cabin.

"Can you lift one of the fuel boxes?" the Marper in charge of the off-loading asked for the fifth time. "I can lift one. I think I could lift two. No, I know I could lift two."

I held back an annoyed rattle. Marpers enjoyed shows of strength. I didn't think either one of us could pick up even one of the boxes, but I didn't say it. Instead I said what I knew he wanted to hear.

"I think perhaps I could pick up one, but I'm sure you could pick up two. Of course, picking them up would be much too dangerous."

"Yes, you're right, we can't pick them up," he agreed. "But as long as you know I could if I wanted to."

We were almost done, and I couldn't wait to be finished. Normally Narmuna would be here and trying to talk the clients into contracting with us again. Without him, I should've been the one talking to the Marper in charge of our exchange about another contract.

Not this time.

My patience was at an end, and Narmuna hadn't come back yet. He was trying to get the final forms approved so we could present Opal with ownership of herself.

The Marper was talking about the way he managed to lift and throw thirty other Marpers who were all bigger than him in the last strength competition. I let him drone on until I saw Narmuna striding across the bay.

"Please consider renewing our contract in the future," I blurted, interrupting the Marper. The last of the crates was disappearing down the reinforced passageway to the fuel-storage area. Without waiting for his reply, I jumped onto the loading ramp from the side and rushed into the ship, slapping the display to close the ramp the moment I was inside. I didn't need the friendly Marper following me onboard to continue his one-sided conversation.

I wasn't the only one who saw Narmuna, because by the time I got to the entrance at the side of the ship, Mieshorum and Lexarit were already there. Narmuna walked in a micromark later.

"It worked," he said, making the rest of us sound excited rattles.

"What about the Ident?" I asked.

"We'll be able to get it the next time we're at a Talin-owned space station or colony," he said. "We need to do that anyway so we can get her registered. None of this will work if she's not registered correctly. The moment she's registered, the legalities will all become active. Our little human will own part of our company and all of herself."

"Owning oneself is complicated," I said with an amused rumble.

Lexarit didn't realize I was making a joke. "I'm sure she'll understand once we explain it all to her."

"I agree," I said. He was probably as tense and excited as I was. Our news was good, but I wasn't sure how Opal would react.

"Let me go get her," I said. "We can meet in the control room."

They all sounded rumbles of agreement. It was testament to how important Opal was to all of us that Narmuna didn't ask how the off-loading went and Lexarit and Mieshorum didn't ask me if we were going to get another contact.

There would always be more work. There was only one Opal.

I pressed on the door display, requesting entrance. Even though we'd been sharing the cabin for the last two rotations, it didn't feel right to simply

barge in.

A bad feeling built in my chest when there was no response. She could be sleeping, but she didn't tend to sleep so deeply that a door chime wouldn't wake her.

I pressed it again. And again.

Sounding a worried rumble, I ordered the door open only to find the cabin empty. The door to the cleansing unit and elimination room were open. It was clear she wasn't here.

Maybe she got hungry. I hadn't thought to leave her food or drink.

I rushed from the room to the galley. She wasn't there.

Fear was making me sound anxious rattles as I checked the ship's system. It only read Talins, no smaller Opal-sized heat signatures.

I slapped the display to connect to the command room. "Opal is gone. Meet me outside the ship."

We all got there about the same time. I was bombarded with questions I couldn't answer, so I sounded an angry rattle to quiet my crewmates.

"She wasn't taken, she ran," I said. "It's our fault. We should've told her our plans even before we were sure it was possible. We gave her no choice, and she acted."

"Marpers aren't ones to be gentle," Narmuna said. "We need to find her quickly."

Lexarit sounded a frustrated rattle. "This isn't a small station. Where should we start?"

"I wish we could ask the Marpers for help," Mieshorum said. "They would be as likely to use her to prove something about strength as they would be to turn her over to us."

"She would want to go home," I said.

Narmuna sounded a questioning rumble. "Home?"

"She considers the station we picked her up from as her home," I said. "I'm sure she would try to find passage back there."

"There aren't any passenger ships at this station," Lexarit pointed out.

"But she could work on a ship to pay for passage," Mieshorum said. "She's knowledgeable. I'm sure there are plenty of captains that would be willing to take advantage of her."

"There's a passenger broker on this station," Narmuna said with an excited rattle. "I passed by his office on my way here."

"Take us there," I demanded.

He didn't need to be asked again. He took off running, and the rest of us followed. We went as fast as we could until we hit a more crowded area and were forced to slow to a walk.

The broker's office was small with only one Marper. Even if I didn't see Opal's familiar bag sitting on a table with all of her things scattered around, I'd know her scent.

With an enraged rattled that startled the Marper, I advanced on him. "What did you do with the human?"

"What human?" he asked, trying to stand tall in the face of my anger. He might be bigger than me, but his anger and determination could never match mine.

"The human you stole," I growled. My friends crowded in around me, helping me force the Marper back against the wall.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

I didn't bother arguing, I unsheathed my claws and punched them into his round belly. Marpers had a large layer of subcutaneous fat over a massive amount of muscle. I knew I could dig my claws in deep without doing any real damage.

He yowled in pain and tried to get away from me, but my crewmates were quick to hold him in place.

"I have two hands," I warned him, waving the claws on my other hand in his face. "Where should I puncture you next?"

He let out a very un-Marper-like whimper. "No, please don't."

"Where is the human?" Mieshorum snarled.

"Tell us or we'll all take turns putting holes in you," Narmuna added.

"B-b-bay thirty-four," the Marper said, struggling to get the words past his rapid, panicked breathing. "Slip 309."

None of us needed to talk. As I pulled out my claws and let the Marper drop to the floor, Lexarit gathered Opal's things and we all rushed out of the office. There was a ring of bays running along the outside of the station, and thankfully this bay was one of the closer ones.

I could only hope the ship hadn't left yet.

We got to bay thirty-four, sprinting down the length to a ship at the very end. The ramp was still down so I didn't even hesitate to run up it and slap the hatch display. To my shock it opened.

The ship was old and not well maintained, so the few areas that were lit flickered or went dark unexpectedly. For a human it might be nearly

impossible to navigate, but there was enough light for our eyes.

“Tolreum and Mieshorum, go aft and search the storage and bays,” Narmuna ordered. “Lexarit, find the command room and make sure this ship doesn’t leave. I’m going to search the fore and belly areas.”

We all rumbled in agreement and set off.

“Opal!” I shouted, hoping she was conscious and could hear me. Mieshorum joined me in shouting. Every door we came to was closed but not locked, except for one.

“She has to be in here,” I said when I found a door that wouldn't open.

Mieshorum tried several things to the display, but the door remained stubbornly closed.

“It’s only a grade-four door; we can open it,” I said, digging my claws into the seam. Mieshorum joined me and we strained, but it didn’t budge. It might only be a grade-four door, but that was still too much for the two of us to get open.

“What do you think you're doing?” a Vicpor-accented voice cried out. I looked up to see Narmuna and Lexarit carrying a Vicpor between them.

“We found him then heard you shouting,” Narmuna said. “So we dragged him to you.”

I focused on the Vicpor. “Is my human in here?”

“The humans in there belong to me,” the Vicpor said, struggling against Narmuna and Lexarit.

“I know she doesn't, because she was stolen from me,” I roared, filling the hall with my challenging rattle. “Give her back!”

The Vicpor seemed to wilt as his first and second sections folded down to make him look smaller. A clear sign of fear.

“Yes, yes,” he whispered, keeping his eyes down.

I moved out of the way so Narmuna and Lexarit could push him to the door. He tapped on the display, releasing the door. It slid open to reveal a room empty except for Opal lying on the floor and another human huddled in a corner next to her.

“Opal!” I cried, rushing in and sliding to my knees next to her. “I was so scared I wouldn't find you in time.”

“Tolly? You found me,” she said, blinking rapidly and moving to sit up. She moved awkwardly, probably because she'd been laying on a hard floor. “You’re amazing and wonderful and brilliant and all the incredible adjectives.”

"I wish I'd been faster," I said and she wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Except this is all my fault," she said, her voice small. "I'm sorry I ran."

I pressed my cheek against the top of her head and purred. "This is entirely my fault; you have no reason to be sorry."

She let out a startled sound. "What?"

"We were planning to talk to you, but we waited too long," I said. "I understand why you left. This is entirely on me. I promise I'll make it up to you."

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide. "Uh, sure."

"Can you talk, human?"

I looked past Opal to see Mieshorum crouched down next to the other human. I'd been so focused on Opal I'd forgotten about her.

The human's eyes were open, but it didn't seem like she was focusing on anything.

"Her name is Sloane," Opal said. "She needs to come with us."

"Of course," I said.

Mieshorum sounded a rumble of agreement. "I'm going to pick you up, Sloane. Are you hurt anywhere?"

Again, Sloane remained silent. We looked to Opal, but she lifted her shoulders in the movement humans called a shrug. She didn't know either.

"Don't be afraid of me, Sloane," Mieshorum said. "I'm your safety now."

I refocused on Opal. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Only my ankle," she said. "When that damn broker brought me here, he wasn't gentle."

"I'll go back and finish putting holes in him," I said, putting my arms under her knees and behind her back. Standing up, I cradled her to my chest.

"Does that mean you already put some holes in him?" she asked.

"I stabbed him in the belly with my claws," I said.

"Good!" she said with a grin, then winced and shifted her leg a little. Her ankle must be causing her a great deal of pain.

"Everything's going to be fine," I murmured, pausing to rub my cheek against the top of her head. The scent of my bonding oil soaking into her mane made something deep in my chest relax. "I'm going to find you a healer. I'm going to show you all the things we did. I'm going to make everything right."

She closed her eyes and rested her head against my shoulder. She let out a soft sigh and nuzzled her face into the strip of exposed skin at the base of my neck.

“I believe you.”



Opal

By the time I was twelve years old, I was working part time. One day I spent several hours stuck in a maintenance tube when one of the doors wouldn't open. After panicking for a while, I'd figured out how to test all the tube panels until I found a weakness. I worried at the weakness until I was finally able to pop a section open and wiggled between the ship's inner hull wall and the tube until I could get access to another panel.

Eventually I took a painful drop from high in a wall to the floor. I'd been so relieved to be free I didn't even feel it.

Even after a few hours my parents didn't realize I was missing. They'd still been at work themselves.

Despite the scare, I had finished my shift. I repaired the damage I'd done and went on to finish my maintenance work. We needed every bit of money to keep our living space with the high taxes they charged on that station.

Thankfully we were able to move a few years later, but that moment stuck out in my mind as the instant I'd known I was on my own. No one was there to rescue you because they were too busy trying to survive.

This was different. Tolly was different. Not only did he care, but he had the resources to actually follow through with his promise to protect me. Even from myself.

“Take the bigger female, but leave the smaller human,” the Vicpor said, trying to sound tough as he followed us through the ship. “I didn't know that one belonged to you, but I bought the other one from a reputable dealer.”

I opened my eyes and looked up at Tolly. “Don't leave her!”

“We won't,” Tolly said.

We were at the top of the ramp when the Vicpor pushed past us and stood at the center of the ramp, waving all his insect arms and addressing the Marpers on the dock.

“Thieves! Thieves are stealing from me. I need help!”

Narmuna moved past us to push the Vicpor down the ramp. “Stop the theatrics.”

Unfortunately the Vicpor’s loud voice brought a lot of attention to us. By the time we got to the bottom of the ramp, a dozen Marpers had gathered around.

“What is going on here?” one of them asked.

The Talins were quick to gather together. Narmuna and Lexarit stood in front while Tolly set me down in a sheltered spot next to the ramp. Mieshorum set Sloane down next to me.

“We’ll protect you,” he and Tolly said at the same time, then turned to face the crowd that had swelled to twenty.

“They’re trying to steal that human from me,” the Vicpor declared to the crowd. “They didn’t even let me explain. They invaded my ship and forced me to open my storage door. That dirtier creature absolutely belongs to me. I have the paperwork to prove it.”

I studied Sloane’s face as the Vicpor talked. She didn’t react to his words at all. No anger, no fear, nothing. It was as if she’d retreated deep inside herself and refused to come out.

“Is that true?” I asked. “Were you a slave before?”

She moved her eyes to meet mine, then closed her lids. “It doesn’t matter.”

It did matter because if the Vicpor had a sale contract, we were going to have a harder time leaving with her.

“Sloane, I need to know if you were legally purchased by the Vicpor.”

She closed her eyes and didn’t answer. I guessed I wasn’t getting anything else from her. I grabbed the edge of the ramp and pulled myself up. I wobbled on one leg, but by holding on to the ramp I stayed standing. I ignored the throbbing pain in my ankle and addressed the crowd.

“This Vicpor stole me from my...uh....” I struggled to think of a word. I didn’t want to call Tolly my master. Actually, he was my kidnapper, but he had still managed to endear himself to me.

“Keeper!” I screamed, remembering the word Pelrow had used. I pointed at Tolly. “That Talin is my keeper and is only trying to get me back.”

The Marpers all began looking at each other, grunting and grumbling. I only caught a few words here or there, but it seemed there was a dilemma because they didn’t think children of any species should be bought or sold.

If I had a keeper, that meant I was a child. I'm sure my smaller size helped confuse them.

"Do either of you have proof of age, ownership, or assigned keeper?" one of the Marpers asked. She was wearing a band across her chest that scrolled several languages. One was Universal and identified her as the bay controller. That probably made her the highest rank of everyone here.

I focused on her and made my voice small. "Please, I want to go home."

My emotional plea helped turn her to our favor. She looked at the Talins lined up, ready to fight.

"The one standing obviously sees you as her trusted keeper, but what about the other one?"

I nudged Sloane with my hurt foot, instantly regretting it. "Tell them Mieshorum is your keeper," I whispered. She opened her eyes but didn't speak. "Sloane, say it!"

"If the other one won't claim a keeper, she must belong to the Vicpor," the bay controller said. She sounded reluctant and stared at Sloane, as if waiting for the woman to speak up. "Are you very sure you can't name your keeper?"

We were so close to getting her free, all she had to do was talk. I dropped to my knees and put my mouth to her ear. "Sloane, say Mieshorum is your keeper. Please!"

My words did nothing.

The Vicpor made a happy chittering sound. "See, she's mine and knows it."

"No wait," I said, moving in front of Sloane to block her from the Vicpor. I didn't need to bother, Mieshorum and Lexarit moved to block him.

"She's a child," I lied at the top of my lungs. "He's going to sell her, and she's only a child!"

That didn't stop the Vicpor from trying to push past the Talins. When the Talins shoved him into the Marpers, they didn't react except to push him away. The Vicpor ended up on the floor, clearly furious.

We were at a stalemate. This was good. Given a little more time, I was sure I could convince the Marpers to let us take Sloane.

Our good luck didn't last. Ten more Vicpors pushed through the crowd.

"My brothers!" the Vicpor on the ground shouted. "Make these Talins leave!"

The ten didn't hesitate to jump into action. The stalemate was over, and ten against four wasn't good odds.

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Chapter 15

Tolreum

We spent so many years in the military, training and working side by side, that we didn't even need to talk, the four of us simply started moving.

I went low and bowled the first two Vicpors over, sending them crashing to the ground. They tangled together and had to move limbs apart before standing again. While they were distracted, I grabbed the first limb I could get hold of and snapped it over my knee. The plating made a loud crack, and the Vicpor screamed.

I didn't think I needed to worry about him any longer, so I reached for the other Vicpor I'd knocked down. He was scrambling back, making scared chittering noises. He only stopped when he came up against several stocky sets of Marper legs.

Moving my gaze up, I saw the excitement on all the Marpers' faces. They weren't going to come to the Vicpor's aid, which was the only help we needed from them.

I turned my attention back to the melee. The humans were still safely tucked at the side of the ramp, but I saw a Vicpor break free and make a run at them.

With a roar and a war rattle, I charged up the ramp. Leaping off, I landed on the Vicpor, sending us both tumbling.

Before we even stopped moving, he was jabbing me with one of his sharp mid-appendage claws. It would take many stabs before he'd be able to get through my hard keratin plating, but it didn't feel good.

Lifting my legs, I brought them down hard to give my upper body the momentum I needed to sit up, despite the weight of the Vicpor on me.

The move freed my arms and allowed me to grab his head and twist. I'd never be able to pull it off, but I was able to cause enough pain that he let out a high-pitched chitter-scream and stopped trying to skewer me. He clawed at my arms but stabbed himself on my quills. Several of them broke off in his arm, and goo dripped out.

It wasn't blood; it was the fluid they used to control their arms. Their body moved using a hydraulic system instead of muscles. Letting go of his neck with one hand, I grabbed hold of one of the quills impaled in his arm and pulled it out. Goo spewed out, and the arm dropped uselessly to his side.

He stopped fighting and went limp. I turned his face to mine to see that he was catatonic. Vicpors did that when they experienced intense pain.

Letting go, I tried to get to my feet, but something hit me from behind. At the same time, I heard one of my crewmates make a sound of pain. None of us voiced our pain unless it was dire.

Worry made me act hastily and clumsily. The Vicpor's weight was mostly on my back. I tried to do a push-up so I could roll him off, but he went for the vulnerable section of exposed skin at my neck.

He missed the first time, scraping his stabbing claws up the overlapping plates on the back of my neck. I needed to extract myself before he was able to do damage, but he'd wrapped several of his lower limbs around me to secure his weight on my back.

"Get off him!" Opal's enraged cry was followed by the Vicpor jolting. He'd stopped going for my neck, so I reached back and grabbed hold of the first thing my hand encountered. It was one of the stabbing limbs. I pulled hard, putting everything into it. I felt something pop, and the Vicpor screamed and fell off me. I rolled over, but before I could sit up, he went back to trying to stab me with his still working mid-arm.

As I dodged his attack, I saw some kind of substance had been rubbed over his face right where his eyes emerged. It took me a moment to realize it was the goo from his hydraulic sacs.

Unfortunately, this Vicpor was trained. Despite being distracted and injured, he didn't stop fighting. He kept me so busy blocking his blows I didn't get a chance to act offensively.

"Stop! Stop or I'll fire!" a voice yelled. The Vicpor I was battling suddenly withdrew. I jumped to my feet and turned to see the original Vicpor we'd found on the ship standing halfway down the ramp.

He had a clear view of all of us and was holding a weapon. By the way he was handling it, he wasn't very experienced, but it wasn't the kind of weapon you needed much knowledge or skill to fire. With one round he could kill me, the Vicpor near me, and both humans.

This was bad.



Opal

With so many opponents, I thought it would be impossible for the Talins to win. I thought about trying to sneak onto the ship and fire up the small maneuvering thrusters to create a distraction. It might even be able to draw some of the Vicpors on board.

I didn't get a chance.

To my absolute shock, the Talins didn't seem to need my help. They took on the Vicpors with incredible skill. Did Talins even feel pain? If I was to judge by the way they shrugged off what the Vicpors managed to do to them, I'd say they didn't.

That all ended when the Vicpor that bought me from the broker stepped out of the ship brandishing a weapon.

The way everyone froze told me everything I needed to know about the deadliness of the thing he held.

"Put that down," one of the Marpers commanded. "We don't allow weapons like that for a fight. That doesn't show bigness."

"I don't care about bigness," the Vicpor snarled. "I want both the humans and for us to leave. Brothers, grab them."

At least half the Vicpors were basically incapacitated. Several had broken or disabled limbs. One wasn't moving at all, and I couldn't tell if he was knocked out or dead.

The ones that could get up turned to help the fallen ones instead of coming for us.

“We are hurt, brother,” one of them said, both his mid-arms limply dangling at his side. He used one of his working upper arms to help another Vicpor to stand and assist him to walk. All of them slowly and painfully made their way up the ramp and past the Vicpor with the weapon.

“We’ve already fought on your behalf, but you are safe now. The humans were your investment, brother,” another one said. “You will have to collect them.”

I hoped the Vicpor would retreat now that he didn't have his brothers to help. Instead he stepped to the side of the ramp and pointed the weapon at us.

“Get up and walk back in here or die,” he threatened.

For the first time, Sloane reacted. She turned her face up and smiled at the Vicpor.

“Thank you,” she whispered and closed her eyes as if waiting for him to fire.

“Worthless,” he said with disgust.

Tolly moved close to us. “If you discharge that weapon in the bay, you could cause a chain reaction and kill us all.”

“You lie. You're liars and thieves!” the Vicpor said. He looked at the crowd of Marpers. “I'll leave if you give me that one human. The other one can stay.”

The Marper in charge looked at several Marpers next to her and talked quietly. She finally looked up.

“We accept this.”

Suddenly multiple Marpers grabbed each Talin, dragging them away from us. The Talins tried to fight, but they were overwhelmed by having four Marpers holding onto a limb each.

The Vicpor lifted the weapon and rested it against his shoulder as he walked down the ramp. The Talins were struggling against the Marpers and making all kinds of loud rattles but couldn't get loose.

I stood up and put myself between the Vicpor and Sloane. It was hard to stay upright when I couldn't put any weight on my injured ankle, but I managed not to fall to my knees.

“Don't do this,” I begged. “She won't survive the trip. You'll end up with a dead body to dispose of. Leave her with me.”

He hesitated. "Is she sick?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "She's very sick."

For a moment I thought this was going to work, but he moved closer. "I'll put her in a hibernation tube. She'll survive long enough to be sold."

"No!" I yelled. With nothing else to do, I turned and dropped down next to Sloane. I grabbed hold of her, hugging her tightly. "You can't have me, and I won't let go of her."

For the first time, Sloane's eyes were fully open, focused, and terrified.

"No hibernation tube," she whispered. "Don't let them do that!"

I knew why she was scared. Hibernation tubes weren't designed for smaller species, and I'd heard some horror stories from humans put in them. They lived in a half-sleep and suffered through constant full-body pain from the medications used. That wasn't the worst part.

The medication also caused endless, unrelenting nightmares.

"Tell them Mieshorum is your keeper. He's the orange one," I said. "Stand up and yell it out. Do it now!"

I let go and fell back on my butt. Sloane stood up, her entire body shaking from the effort. Her clothes hung off her thin frame and her body looked ready to collapse at any moment.

She pointed to Mieshorum and spoke. "He is my keeper."

Her voice wasn't very loud, but it was so quiet around us that we all heard her. Even the Talins had quieted.

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"You heard her," the controller said, sounding immensely relieved. "She doesn't belong to you. Go into your ship, leave, and never come back here again."

"No, she's mine," he said, stepping closer.

The Talins broke out in loud roars and rattling again.

Sloane shrank back as I grabbed hold of his leg and tried to climb up the Vicpor's body. I thought maybe I'd get hold of the gun while he tried to drag

Sloane away. If I could get the weapon I was sure the Marpers would directly intercede, or at least let go of the Talins.

I steeled myself for the Vicpor to hit me as I pulled myself onto his back with only the strength in my arms.

“What is going on here?” a familiar voice roared, making everyone go silent. I let go of the Vicpor and looked over to see Pelrow pushing through the crowd. “I was told all movement has halted here. Why is no one working?”

Before the controller could speak up, I yelled at the top of my lungs.

“Pelrow!”

She turned and dropped her eyes to the floor where I'd landed. “Opal, what are you doing down there?”

I pointed at the Vicpor. “He hurt me.”

She scowled, and I could've sworn her tusks got bigger. I thought she'd yell at the Vicpor, but she stomped up to him. He fumbled with the weapon but didn't get a chance to point it at her before she was there.

“No,” she said, grabbing the weapon and tossing it away. It arced past the crowd and someone yelled with surprise when it probably hit him.

“You are not big,” she rumbled, her voice deep with anger.

Without his weapon, the Vicpor shrank back, then bumped into me and fell over. He landed on Sloane. She cried out in pain.

“Another human?” Pelrow said. She reached down, grabbed the Vicpor with one hand, and launched him up onto the ramp.

Ignoring him, she focused her attention on Sloane. “You don't look good, human. You seem extra small.”

Predictably, Sloane didn't answer so I spoke for her. “Sloane doesn't feel well.”

That was probably an understatement.

“Do you need help standing?” Pelrow asked me, even as she reached for me.

I flinched back. “No, I don't. I can stand or walk. My ankle and foot hurt.”

Pelrow's frown was fierce. “I left you without pain or injury at the broker. Now you're broken! This is small business.”

I heard a scuttling sound and looked up to watch the Vicpor disappear inside the ship. I thought he'd gotten away with everything, except Pelrow looked at the crowd.

“He brought a weapon onto my station and injured children,” she announced to the crowd. “I give you permission to make him and his brothers the smallest.”

A bunch of Marpers with eager expressions and growing tusks crowded each other to rush up the ramp. No sooner did they disappear into the ship than I heard the sounds of fighting.

Justice was rare in this universe, and that was probably the most satisfying thing I'd ever witnessed.

“What about the broker?” she asked me. “I've heard he isn't as big as he should be.”

“He's the one who brought me here,” I agreed. “He's definitely small.”

“I'll take care of him,” Pelrow promised with a gleam in her eyes.

The Talins yelling to be released reminded me that they were still being held by Marpers.

“Pelrow, could you release the Talins?” I pointed to Tolly. “That one is my keeper. I'd like him back now.”

She grunted and made a gesture to the Marpers holding him. Tolly tried to rush over to me, but Pelrow blocked him.

“Opal has a body-small,” Pelrow said, then she thumped her chest. “But she's a big-small, you understand? She might be physically tiny, but she contains a big spirit. She walked through our station even though she could've been hurt by accident. Even without a keeper, she had no fear. She is very big-small.”

I was putting that on my next job application: Opal, the biggest small human.

Tolly sounded a rumble of agreement. “She is extremely brave.”

“Good. I'm glad you understand,” Pelrow grunted. “It's good she found a keeper, but you can't let her be alone again, yes?”

“Never again,” he agreed.

Pelrow turned and looked down at me. “Mind your keeper, yes? It's important he's able to do his job.”

“I will,” I promised. I would've said anything to get us all out of there mostly in one piece.

“Good,” she grunted, bending down to grab me under my arms. Lifting me, she turned and handed me to Tolly. He took me and cradled me against his chest. Purring, he rubbed his cheek against my hair. His familiar scent filled the air, making me relax into his embrace.

Pelrow frowned. "That is not how you should carry Opal. Where is your backbox?"

"We don't have one," I said. "But this is fine."

Pelrow looked around and then pointed at one of the Marpers standing around. The individual stepped forward, and she said a few words that didn't translate.

I could still hear sounds coming from inside the ship, but it didn't sound like they were fighting anymore. It sounded more like they were simply destroying things and having a lot of fun doing it.

Good for them!

The individual Pelrow had talked to disappeared for a few moments then returned with two of the backpack boxes so many of the Marpers wore.

"This is a gift," Pelrow said, taking one and presenting it to Tolly. "If you turn around, I'll put it on you."

He turned and she placed the padded hooks over his shoulder and then buckled the chest strap. After that was done, Pelrow took me from his arms and set me on the box. I was quick to move my leg so there was no pressure on my ankle and foot.

I didn't like it as much as being held, but I wasn't going to complain. As long as Pelrow let us leave, she could do just about anything she wanted.

Pelrow looked down at Sloane. "Who is your keeper, human?"

Wordlessly, she pointed at Mieshorum. All the Marpers holding him let go. With a loud purr he rushed up to her, but Pelrow made him put the backbox on before he was allowed to pick her up.

"I don't think Sloane can balance on the box," I said.

Pelrow grunted. "You're right. You can show her how to ride the box after she isn't so sickly." Pelrow stepped up to Tolly's side so she could look at me. Sitting on the box mounted high on Tolly's back made us the same height.

"Come back in the future," she demanded. "We'll drink and I can show you all the ways I'm big. You can meet my men and children. They are all big."

"I'd like that," I said, surprised that I meant it.

"Could you tell the others to release Narmuna and Lexarit?" Tolly asked. "We need to take the humans home and assess their injuries."

Pelrow looked to where the men were being held and made another gesture and they were freed. "Yes, of course. Goodbye."

I guessed Marpers weren't ones for long farewells because Pelrow turned and left, disappearing quickly into the crowd.

The Marpers who'd all rushed into the ship were leaving. They were covered in goo and one of them was carrying a leg. They were grinning and chatting as if they'd just finished a good meal.

I looked away with a shudder.

“Time to leave,” Tolly said. I couldn't agree more.

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Chapter 16

Opal

“Follow me,” Narmuna said. Tolly and Mieshorum got behind him and Lexarit took the position at the back.

The caution wasn't really needed. Everywhere we walked, the Marpers cleared a path for us. What happened in the bay must've spread across the station with the speed that gossip always moves.

It wasn't long until we were back on the ship. Tolly went straight to our cabin, and I saw Mieshorum disappear into his cabin with Sloane. I should've said something. I felt responsible for Sloane. Even though I knew she was better off here, she didn't know that and I should be there to reassure her.

Concern for Sloane was pushed out of my head by the pain in my foot. Even though Tolly tried to be gentle, I cried out when he lifted me off the box and set me in the nest.

Before I could ask for drugs, Tolly was ripping open a package and shoving a wafer into my mouth. It barely took the edge off.

“I need something stronger,” I said.

He made an agreement sound as he searched through the medication box that was still in our cabin. He pulled out several vials and held them out to me.

“Which one is appropriate?” he asked.

I saw a familiar one and plucked it from his grasp. Popping the cap off, I downed the contents and then slumped back against the nest's fluffy rim of pillows.

There was a chime, and Narmuna's voice sounded over the ship's open comm system. "We are next in the queue to leave. I've already input a course to the nearest station with a reputable medical facility that has open docks. We'll be there in less than a rotation."

"A rotation is a full day, right?" I asked.

"It's one full day-night cycle," he explained.

That shocked me. "We're going to get to another station in only a day?"

"Narmuna is probably going to use a private gate," Tolly said.

My jaw dropped. Everyone used space-time gates, but the large public ones cost only a minimal amount. Using a smaller private gate was prohibitively expensive for almost everyone but the most luxurious of yachts, exclusive cargo, or militaries with a big expense account and small fighter ships.

While I was distracted by calculating the wealth they were about to spend on me, Tolly gently pulled off my refurbished slipper. All thoughts of gates and cost left my brain when I got a look at my poor foot.

"That's bad," I said, wanting to cry even as the pain killer from the vial was taking effect.

My foot and ankle were red and badly swollen. I didn't think they could get that big without bursting.

"I wish I'd killed them when I had the chance," Tolly growled.

I let out a watery chuckle. "I think the Marpers took care of that for you."

The medication was muting the pain and making me feel sleepy. I relaxed into the soft nest and let my eyes fall closed, careful not to move my leg off the stack of pillows Tolly had placed it on. I felt the bedding shift a little, and then Tolly's warm heat was carefully curled around me, his purring filling my ears.

"I'm sorry you're in pain," he whispered.

I opened my eyes and tilted my head on the pillow to meet his eyes. "In a way, I did it to myself. But I don't regret it. I found Sloane. She wasn't going to survive a trip with the Vicpors. At least now she has a chance."

He sounded a rumble of agreement before going back to purring.

"I don't understand why you're not angry with me," I murmured, reaching up to touch his cheek. Running my fingers over his scent glands

was comforting.

“You're not to blame. This was all my fault,” he said, repeating his words from earlier.

That really didn't make sense. “Because you abducted me?”

He sounded a short rumble of amusement before going back to the purring. “In a way. Much like you don't regret today because you found Sloane, I can't regret running away with you. The mistake I made was not telling you about our plans sooner.”

The pain medication was making my thought process slow so I wasn't sure I understood him. “What plans?”

“You are as worthy as any Talin to freedom and independence,” he began, then launched into a plan where I'd pretend to be their pet but I'd actually own myself. On top of that, they were going to give me an equal portion of the ship!

“That's...that's...good,” I whispered, no longer able to keep my eyes open. The medication had been more powerful than I expected. I couldn't hold my arm up any longer. I let it fall onto my chest covered in his scented oil. “I'll think about it, if you promise to give Sloane the same choice.”

Then I was out.



Tolreum

“I promise. Sloane and any other human we find will receive the same offer we gave you.”

It was clear Opal was fast asleep. I wasn't sure she'd heard me, but that didn't matter because she was right. Sloane deserved the same treatment.

I didn't want to leave, but I needed to talk to Narmuna and check with Mieshorum about the other human. I also needed to make sure he knew I'd promised Opal that Sloane would be offered the self-ownership deal. I wanted everyone to be in agreement when Opal woke up.

“Rest, I'll be back very soon,” I whispered, getting out of the nest. I tucked a few pillows where my body had been in case she needed to cuddle while I was gone.

After that, I left our cabin and went straight to Mieshorum's cabin. I tapped the door display and waited. When it pinged to allow entrance, I

ordered it to open. The door slid into the wall to reveal Mieshorum sitting on his bunk, still holding Sloane and purring. Lexarit was busy putting the finishing touches on a nest. It wasn't as nice as Opal's because I'd claimed most of the best bedding for her.

When she woke up, I'd ask her if we could transfer some of her pillows and blankets to Sloane.

I looked at the new human. "How are you, Sloane?"

She didn't respond, only stared into the middle distance.

"She hasn't spoken yet," Mieshorum said. "I think she's in a kind of mental shutdown."

"I can't imagine what kind of trauma she's experienced," I said. "I'm sure she'll begin interacting once she feels safe and secure."

Mieshorum interrupted his comforting rumble to sound a rumble of agreement. "I hope that's the case. I think she's ill also. Her body feels warmer than she should be."

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"We'll be at a station soon," I said. "Narmuna will find a medical facility that can treat our humans."

Lexarit finished spreading out the last blanket on the nest and stood up. "Should I bring something for her to eat and drink?"

"I worry that she hasn't eaten recently and too much rich food might make her sick," Mieshorum said. "Maybe we should start with broth and blended foods."

"Yes, I'll fetch some," Lexarit agreed and hurried out. He passed Narmuna standing in the hall. Narmuna's hand dropped from where he was about to press the door display and stepped inside.

"I'm glad you're here," he said to me. "I need to discuss something that will impact Sloane and Opal."

"What?" I asked, fear making me want to rush back to Opal.

“The closest station we could reach by private gate that had acceptable medical facilities is Ortheema.”

I was silent for a moment as I processed the name. It was familiar, but I couldn't place it. Mieshorum was faster than me.

“That is a Talin station inside our empire,” Mieshorum said. “There was no place outside the empire?”

Narmuna let out a negative rattle. “There was another station within range of the nearest gate, but it was another Marper station with limited medical facilities. What if Opal's injuries require procedures? I'm also scared they won't have the necessary knowledge. We know the Healers on a Talin station will be skilled and know how to treat humans, or at least have access to the necessary knowledge.”

I rumbled with agreement. “It should be fine. We need to get Opal registered anyway so she can own herself.”

“What about Sloane?” Mieshorum asked. “Narmuna won't have time to do the same things. Sloane will have to be registered with one of us as her owner.”

“Or we can register her as owned by Opal,” I said. I watched Sloane's face as we talked, but she didn't react to any of it. Not a single eye movement, facial twitch, or slight body shift.

“If she can't answer by the time we get there, then we'll ask Opal to decide,” Narmuna said.

“I find that acceptable,” I said even as Mieshorum sounded a negative rattle. I sounded a questioning rumble. “You disagree?”

“I don't have a logical reason to object,” he admitted. “But this human feels different to me. I can't explain it, but it's important that I care for her.”

I'd been so preoccupied with my concern for Opal, I hadn't thought about who would take charge of Sloane. Because Mieshorum had carried her onto the ship, it wasn't strange that he'd automatically taken her to his cabin. But it seemed there was more to this action.

I knew better than any of them that emotional attachment could happen quickly. Could attachment happen in less than a mark?

Narmuna sounded a soothing rumble. “We have a little time before we get to Ortheema Station. Perhaps Sloane will be able to decide by then.”

Considering the state of her, I doubted it.

“This feeling isn't going to go away,” Mieshorum warned us as he stood up and stepped into the nest.

“None of us can be a registered owner,” I stated firmly.

Mieshorum was silent for a moment, then sounded a rumble of agreement. “Yes, you’re right. I’m being selfish.”

“You’re being protective,” Narmuna said. “I would be also.”

I noticed how filthy Sloane was. “You might want to take her into the cleaning room and run a sterilization cycle. That will eliminate any parasites on her skin or clothes.”

Mieshorum straightened back up with a rumble of agreement. “You make a good point. It will rid her of anything undesirable, and the sonic cycle will clean the dirt off without the need to remove her clothing. I don’t want to strip her. Humans don’t like to be naked around strangers.”

“Her clothes are barely better than rags,” Narmuna said.

“When she wakes up, I’ll ask Opal if Sloane can have some of her clothes,” I said.

“That would be kind,” Mieshorum said, carrying Sloane into the cleansing room. When the door shut behind them, Narmuna and I turned to leave the cabin.

Once we were in the hall, I could smell food. I didn’t think we had any broth suitable for humans, so Lexarit was probably having to create something from some raw ingredient packets.

“I’m going to send a message and data packets to Ortheema Station with all of Opal’s medical records that Twin Star Station’s medical team gave us,” he said, turning to go back to the command room.

I put a hand on Narmuna to keep him from walking off. He swung around to face me and sounded a questioning rumble.

“You aren’t jealous of Mieshorum?” I asked. “Or that I have Opal?”

“No, not at all,” he said.

I sounded a questioning rumble at his confidence. “Not even a slight amount?”

He hesitated a moment before speaking. “I can’t explain it, but I know there’s a human waiting for me. Remember when we talked about how having one human might make it easier to acquire more? Opal’s been on board our ship for less than ten rotations, and now we have a second human. Opal chose you. I don’t think Sloane has the ability to pick, but if Mieshorum feels a pull, then I won’t fight him. I know, deep inside me, that there is another human out there for me.”

“What about Lexarit?” I asked. “Will we defy all odds and find a fourth human for him?”

“Yes,” Narmuna said. “I’m sure. It might not be exactly in the way we want. I don’t like that Opal was selling her body and risking injury or that we’ve found Sloane traumatized and sickly. But we will find more humans.”

His conviction was so strong that I found myself sounding a rumble of agreement. “Let the ancestors hear you.”

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Chapter 17

Opal

By the time I woke up, I was in pain again and starving. The moment I made a sound, the body laying next to me sat up and spoke quickly.

“What do you need?” Tolly asked, then didn't give me a chance to answer. “What can I do? Should I—”

I held up a hand, and he stopped talking.

“Medication,” I croaked out, keeping my eyes closed. Not only did my foot hurt, but the pain had spread up my leg all the way to my knee. I was too scared to look.

Tolly moved, and soon I felt something press against my lips. I opened my mouth and swallowed down the small amount of liquid from the vial.

“You feel hot,” Tolly said. He sounded as worried as I felt. It wasn't until he commented that I noticed I felt feverish.

Great, I probably had an infection or some weird complication.

I heard the familiar soft chime of Tolly's Ident. He shifted a little, and I heard him unclip it from his belt before speaking. “We'll be docking soon.”

“Docking where?” I asked. I knew we'd talked about it, but I couldn't remember if he said we were going back to Twin Star Station. I hoped so; they had my records and knew how to treat humans.

“It's a Talin station within the empire,” he said.

I was in enough pain that I wasn't going to argue, but I did give him a quick, hard stare. "I'm not wearing a damn collar."

"Not right away," he agreed. "But probably by the time you're all healed. It will only be a formality."

I frowned. "But it means I'm a pet. An owned creature."

Tolly sounded a negative rattle, then a rumble of agreement.

"That was a confusing mix of sounds," I said, feeling amused despite the pain.

"All the forms have been filled out and approved," Tolly said with a purr. "You'll own yourself the moment you're registered as a human pet. If we're ever separated, you'll be able to give instructions for your care through the fake entity that officially owns you but you control."

"What?" I said. "Explain it as if I'm on drugs that make my brain process slowly."

He sounded a rumble of amusement and explained a complex ruse that included a shell company and a network of message delivery systems that would eventually lead back to me.

"Clever," I said.

"It was Narmuna's idea, and he's the one who made it possible," Tolly said.

"I'll have to think of a way to thank him," I said, most of my apprehension about being inside the Talin Empire gone. "What's the name of the company?"

"Precious Mineral," I said.

It took me a moment then I smiled up at him. "Because my name is Opal?"

He sounded a rumble of agreement.

"What if I can't get my hands on any tech to send a message as Precious Mineral?" she asked. It was a good question that Narmuna had thought of.

"Narmuna set it up so you'll be sent to live with my sister until the company answers," I explained. "She works as an agriculturalist on Galik Colony. She is kind and honorable. She'll take good care of you. While you're there and able to get your hands on an information square, you'll be able to send a message as if you were the company and guide what happens to you."

I cupped his cheek. "That better not happen."

He sounded a questioning rumble. "Being with my sister? I promise, she's a good individual."

"No. I better not end up separated from you while inside your empire's borders," I said.

I felt the ship shake a little and then the familiar sound of docking bots grabbing hold of the ship to shift it into place.

I pulled off the covers and tried to sit up but hissed and fell back as pain shot up my leg. I was still wearing my clothes from yesterday, so pants covered everything but my feet. I looked down at my body to see my injured foot looked as swollen as yesterday, but it had also turned an alarming purple color.

This was the first time I'd ever been injured so severely that I was scared I might end up with permanent damage.

Tolly leaned over me, purring. "The healers will know what to do."

Like many humans, I grew up hearing horror stories about humans being treated by medical personnel that didn't know how to deal with us. Most humans traveled with detailed medical information on human physiology, but mine was back on Bright Star Station.

"I'm scared," I whispered.

His purring got louder. "I can't take your fear away, but you can borrow my courage if you need it."

"I don't think that's how it works," I said, but his sweetness made me smile.

The ship made a last thudding movement and then was still. We were docked.

"It's time," Tolly said. "I'm going to pick you up. I'll be as gentle as I can."

"I know," I said.

He lifted me up, and I did my best not to react. I couldn't help the whimper that slipped out of me. It hurt so badly I was ready for them to cut it off if it would only stop the pain.

I kept my eyes closed and focused on my breathing as he carried me out of the cabin and down the hall. I was concentrating so hard on breathing I didn't realize we'd exited the ship until several strange voices filled the air.

"Set the human down here."

"Is she conscious?"

"Which human is this, Opal or Sloane?"

“It’s Opal; didn’t you notice her injured foot?”

I opened my eyes as Tolly laid me on a mobile medical bed. This one was the fanciest I’d ever seen. It even had a clear shell to cover the patient and infuse the air with medication or enhanced air.

There were six Talins, all wearing the same dark green, sleeveless tunic that went all the way down to their knees. They all moved their heads to look at something beyond me. I craned my neck to see Mieshorum carrying out Sloane. How was it that she looked even more pale?

“Hulmorum, Jastura, and Tisorum, go care for Sloane,” one of the Talins said. “Puresea and Dominus, stay with me to care for Opal.”

Three of the Talins rushed over to Mieshorum and Sloane, one of them guiding a second mobile medical bed. Not only had the medical staff met us in the bay, but they’d assigned three individuals to each of us!

“Are you rich?” I asked Tolly.

He sounded a worried rumble. “That’s an odd question. What’s going on in your mind?”

“All this medical care is going to be expensive,” I whispered. “Can you really afford so much?”

One of the healers purred. “Essential medical care doesn’t cost anything for citizens and pets of the empire. You’re not out in the universe alone any longer, little human. You’re owned by a Talin now, and you’re forever safe.”

I blinked up at the Talin, but before I could think of a response, Sloane started screaming.

Despite the pain, I sat up. She was clinging to Mieshorum and refusing to be put in the bed. It took me a moment, but I realized the mobile medical beds looked a little like a hibernation tube.

Tolly’s hand was resting on my bed next to my hip. I grabbed it to get his attention. “They need to take the shell covering off the bed. Sloane thinks you’re trying to put her in a hibernation tube.”

I thought Tolly would have to tell them what to do, but one of the other Talins heard me and issued orders to the three trying to help Mieshorum and Sloane. The shell was slid off the bed and put off to the side on the floor. Sloane stopped screaming and kicking but still refused to let go of Mieshorum.

“Get into the bed with her,” the Talin in charge ordered. “The human is tiny, and these beds are designed to hold a Marper if necessary. You’ll both

fit.”

“Healer Grifforum, what if he accidentally hurts her?” one of them asked.

“I think that’s a distant secondary concern,” the healer said with an annoyed rattle.

Mieshorum climbed onto the bed. Even while laying down, Sloane kept hold of him to the point that she was almost curled around his head.

Grifforum turned to address several Talins I hadn’t noticed standing a little way off. “Maven Hilsorum, please lead us back to medical and Maven Nomrus can follow us.”

Tolly sounded a surprised rattle. “Why are there mavens here?”

“An entire committee from Talarian is visiting our station,” he explained. “They allowed us to borrow several of their mavens to help keep everyone safe. Our station’s law keepers are busy keeping the corridors clear for us to travel to medical without delay.”

Tolly sounded a rumble of agreement but didn’t comment. He might understand, but I didn’t.

“Is there some kind of threat to the crew of the Ever Secure?” I asked.

“No, Human Opal,” Grifforum said, sounding a purr as he spoke to me. “Humans are so hard to find that everyone is eager to meet you and Sloane. Some are so eager it might overtake their common sense. They wouldn’t mean to scare or hurt you, but crowds and excitement rarely mix well. Now lay back, Human Opal.”

One of the other healers guided the bed as Grifforum walked at the side, talking to me in a soft, comforting tone. The world moving around me, on top of the pain that the medication was barely helping, made me feel dizzy and nauseated. I bit my lip and closed my eyes.

I was still holding Tolly’s hand so I squeezed it tight. “Tell them to take the whole leg off if they have to,” I whispered. “I don’t want to live with this pain.”

He didn’t say anything, only purred and squeezed my hand back.



Tolreum

Fear for my delicate human made it hard for me to hear what Healer Grifforum was saying as we made our way swiftly down a network of

corridors. Sloane sobbing behind us didn't help.

"...so there is no reason to worry, Human Opal," he said, also purring. "We will make the pain go away."

Doors, faces, and signs all passed in a blur until we were finally passing through double-sized doors into the medical facility.

"Jastura, take Human Sloane into section three," Healer Grifforum said as he guided Opal's bed into an area labeled four. There was supposed to be a wall between the sections, but it had been removed.

"Tisorum, run all basic diagnostics on Human Sloane," Healer Grifforum said. "Dominus, do the same on Human Opal. Puresea, bring the pain medication for Opal."

As the other healers rushed around to do Grifforum's orders, he looked at me. "We need to assess Human Opal's leg. Can you remove her pants? We can keep her shirt on and add a blanket for modesty."

"Opal, the healer needs me to take off your pants," I warned her. "I'll be as gentle as I can."

"Cut them off," she whispered. "Don't make me move my leg."

I sounded a rumble of agreement, and as Healer Grifforum accepted some medication vials from Puresea I unsheathed one of my claws and carefully ran it down the outside seam of the pants on her left side. Then I repeated the process on the right side. I cut a few more places and was able to remove everything easily except for the spots where Opal's weight was resting.

The important part was that her injured leg was completely exposed. I couldn't believe how bad it looked. Her foot, ankle, and much of her lower leg were swollen, but even worse was the color; blotchy purple and red. That area also radiated intense heat. None of those were good signs.

Now I understood why Opal was prepared to lose the leg. It was probably good that she'd slept the entire way here. She had to be in so much pain!

"Human Opal, I want to give you two vials to drink," Healer Grifforum said. "That means I need you to open your mouth."

Opal parted her lips but didn't open her eyes. Healer Grifforum poured one vial in, waited for her to swallow and part her lips again, then he poured the other vial in.

"One of these medications will make you sleepy," he said. "Don't fight it."

“Tolly stays,” she whispered, holding up her hand. I grabbed her hand with both of mine and she sighed with relief. “Don’t leave.”

“Never,” I promised.

“You’re Tolly?” Healer Grifforum asked. “I thought your name was Tolreum?”

“My proper name is Tolreum,” I explained. “But humans like to give nicknames as a sign of affection.”

Healer Grifforum sounded a rumble of agreement. “Yes, I remember reading about that now. It seems Human Opal has formed an emotional attachment to you. That’s excellent.”

“Yes,” I agreed, thankful he didn’t know the full extent of it.

Within a submark, Opal succumbed to the medication. Her breathing evened out and her hand went lax in my grip. I didn’t let go. I held Opal’s hand through the process as the healers scanned, assessed, and discussed.

At one point they were forced to infuse her foot with nanos and run a constant scan to shut the nanos down the moment they were satisfied with the results. Over the course of several marks they did this twice, along with giving her more medication.

“You should sit,” Dominus said, pressing a stool to the back of my legs. “This process will probably go on for most of this rotation.”

“You have my gratitude,” I murmured, sitting down.

Grifforum and several of the other healers were standing at a countertop, working on programming the next set of nanos. They were all so confident that I wasn’t worried Opal would lose the leg. Even better, the swelling was going down, although the skin still looked red and irritated.

“What’s it like?” Dominus asked.

I looked up at him and sounded a questioning rumble.

“What’s it like to have a human?” he elaborated. “They are fascinating creatures, but I’m curious if they’re as wonderful to own as everyone thinks.”

“When given freely, human affection is unparalleled,” I murmured without thinking.

“Is it?” he asked, sounding a curious rumble.

I worried for all the humans already in captivity among Talins who didn’t realize how smart they were. The only thing I could do at the moment was encourage patience and kindness.

“It can take time to earn their trust,” I warned him. “They are nearly powerless in this universe. It means that, despite their fragility, they have a strength of will that’s unmatched. Living in a harsh universe means they won’t be won over by some food and a soft nest. They need to be handled with tenderness and spoken to with compassion.”

“That sounds like a great deal of effort for a pet,” he said.

“The effort makes the prize,” I reminded him. It was something we all learned growing up in the cresh.

“Yes, that’s true,” he agreed. “I will reserve judgment until these two are healed and can better represent their species.”

“Opal was hurt attempting to save Sloane,” I said. It wasn’t the full truth, but it was enough that I didn’t feel guilty. “She’d only met the other human that day. They can be fiercely loyal, despite how long they’ve known someone.”

“That’s a quality to admire,” Dominus agreed. “There must be more to them than I realized.”

More than you'll ever know, I thought.

Chapter 18

Opal

Whatever they gave me did a good job of knocking me out. When I woke up, there was no pain, and I felt like I was floating. It was similar to being high.

This was nice!

Instead of only the bare, utilitarian medical mat that was on the bed before, there was a soft pad under me, fluffy pillows all around, and cozy blankets covering me.

The only parts of me uncovered were my head and one hand. That one hand was being held. I slid my gaze over to see Tolly sitting next to my bed. He was holding his Ident with one hand and reading a holo document. His other hand was resting on the bed and gently gripping my hand.

“You’re so cute,” I murmured, feeling happiness bubble up in me.

At my words his eyes shifted to mine. “You’re awake.”

“Unless this is a dream,” I said. “Wait, is this a dream? Oh no, this isn’t real. I’m asleep and in real life I’m dying!”

By the time I got to the end of the last sentence, I was wailing. My happy, floating feeling burst, followed by overwhelming sadness.

“You’re not asleep,” Tolly said, purring. He squeezed my hand. “I’m real. Can’t you feel me?”

“That’s exactly what dream you would say,” I told him. “Dream you wouldn’t want me to wake up and face the truth.”

“What’s going on here?” Grifforum said, appearing on the other side of my bed.

“She woke up and went into emotional distress,” Tolly said. “She thinks she’s dreaming and is actually dying in the real world.”

“Dreaming?” Grifforum sounded a questioning rumble, then sounded one of agreement. “Ah, yes. The act of hallucinating while sleeping. Poor humans, it must be so confusing not to know what is real or not.”

As they talked, my misery eased and a little bit of the floating feeling came back. Drugs. I was on drugs and had to remember that.

“You’re real,” I said, trying hard to sound calm and collected. Unfortunately I’d started crying, and now the tears didn’t seem to want to stop.

“Yes, I’m real,” Tolly agreed. “Do you remember where you are?”

It took me a moment. “Ortheema Station?”

Grifforum sounded a rumble of agreement. “Yes, very good, Human Opal. I need to uncover your leg to check your progress.”

“I still have a leg?” I gasped. “That’s great news! Did I get to keep my foot too?”

“Yes, you have your foot,” Grifforum said, sounding a rumble for agreement. “Your body is responding well to treatment.”

He pulled the bottom of the blanket to my knees. I tried to sit up, but dizziness got me. Tolly let go of my hand and put his Ident down so he could help me sit up.

I got to see my perfectly whole leg!

“My foot and ankle look so skinny,” I cheered. The sight made the tears stop flowing. “And my legs match again.”

I wiggled my toes experimentally and found it didn’t hurt to move them. Feeling brave, I flexed my entire foot. It felt stiff but not painful.

“Can you bend your knee too?” Grifforum asked.

I was getting a little dizzy sitting up and thought I’d done enough exercise. “Do I have to?”

Was that my voice sounding so whiny? That wasn’t like me.

“If you bend your knee, I’ll give you a treat,” Grifforum said.

“What kind of treat?” I asked, then realized how rude that was. “Never mind.”

I stared at my knee and told it to bend. It did, though it was even stiffer than my ankle. Weird.

“Does that hurt?”

“Nope,” I said, even as another wave of dizziness washed over me. My stomach had been neutral until now, but it protested by making me nauseated. “I want to lay back down.”

Tolly purred and lowered me back down. The nausea disappeared, making me sigh with relief. “That’s better.”

My body relaxed, and the floating feeling tugged at me.

“Do you want...”

There was no reason to refuse, so I floated back to sleep even as Tolly tried to talk to me.

The next time I woke up, my brain felt much clearer. I wasn’t in pain, but my dry throat and grumbling stomach told me I’d been asleep a long time.

When I opened my eyes, the lights were dim. Tolly was still holding my hand and resting his head on the bed next to my hip.

He looked sound asleep, making me hesitate to sit up. Still, I really needed to drink something.

Using my free hand, I pushed myself up and looked around. My movement woke Tolly, and he sat up with a grunt.

“Opal, is there something wrong?”

“Could I have some water?” I asked, not surprised to hear the croak in my voice.

“I’ll get that for you,” one of the healers said, making me startle. I hadn’t noticed her there.

As she turned to rush away, another healer stepped into view.

“You’re awake; good,” he said. It took me a moment to remember his name was Grifforum. He stepped close and looked down. I followed his eyes to see my uncovered leg looking back to normal. “We’re finished with the nanos, and by this time tomorrow you’ll be done here.”

“You’re amazing,” I murmured, thrilled with the results. I moved my toes, ankle, and then the whole leg. Everything felt fine, only a little sore.

“I am,” Grifforum agreed. “When I heard you were coming, I studied extensively and came up with many different treatment plans to accommodate almost any injury or sickness. My work was rewarded by your health. I’ve also been able to enter new data in our files regarding human health and treatment.”

It was clear he was almost as proud of what he got to write as saving me. "I'm sure everyone who reads it will be impressed."

Grifforum sounded a rumble of agreement, then moved to the side to allow the other healer to walk in with a tray. The bed was so big she was able to set it down next to me, opposite from where Tolly had been resting his head.

There were several canisters of liquids, bowls of food, and a stack of the black flat bread Talins seemed to serve with every meal.

The moment I saw the food, my mouth started watering.

"Are you sure all of that is safe for humans?" Tolly asked.

"Yes," the healer who brought it said, then left.

Grifforum reached past me. I twisted my neck to see him pull pillows off a shelf and stack them behind me. "There, now you can rest while you eat."

I relaxed into the fluffy mound with a sigh. This was nice.

Tolly reached across me to pick up one of the canisters, and he opened it before handing it to me. I took a sip, surprised to find that it wasn't water. It was something cold, mildly sweet, and it tasted faintly of fruit.

It was one of the most refreshing drinks I'd ever had. I took several long swallows before setting it down on the tray. It was only then I remembered I wasn't the only human here!

"How is Sloane?" I asked.

No one spoke for a moment. I tried to look past Tolly, but the lighting was too low for me to see anything past the ring of light around me.

I grabbed hold of Tolly's hand. "Tell me!" I demanded.

"She's very ill," Grifforum said.

I felt tears welling in my eyes. "Is she going to die?"

Both Talins sounded rattles of surprise at my question.

"No, of course not," Grifforum said. "I only need to warn you that you'll be well long before her. We're going to need to keep her here for at least another five rotations. Even after we're finished with her treatments, she'll need to be closely monitored."

I almost snapped at Grifforum for scaring me. I pulled in a deep breath, forcing my annoyance down, before speaking.

"I only care that she gets better," I said.

"Try to eat," Tolly urged, tearing off a piece of flat bread, scooping up some food, and holding it to my mouth.

Grifforum continued to talk about my condition and prognosis as Tolly fed me half the contents of the tray. By the time I refused any more food, I was stuffed and sleepy again.

One of the other healers came over to ask Grifforum a question, and they both went off to look at data on a display.

My belly was full, my pain was gone, and I wasn't high on drugs, meaning I had an important question to ask Tolly. But first I wanted to know more about Sloane.

"What's wrong with Sloane?"

"Many things, but the worst was that she had an infection in her kidneys," Tolly said. "Grifforum might be confident now, but there was a short window of time that he wasn't sure they'd be able to save her life. They even talked about removing her kidneys and attaching her to a machine while they attempted to grow her new ones."

My eyes went wide with horror. "Those machines never work on us. You can grow our organs well, but none of the medical machines are designed for us. That would've killed her."

"That's what Grifforum was afraid of, but he was running out of things to try," Tolly said. "Jastura came up with a novel way to use the nanos, and it's working."

"Jastura should get to write the articles," I said.

Tolly sounded a rumble of amusement. "I think she's planning to. Grifforum is very intelligent and methodical, but she's excellent at improvising. They both worked extremely hard and between you and Sloane, they have a lot to write about."

I gave him a brief grin. "Glad I could help." I slid my eyes over to where Sloane was hidden by the dark. "Has she talked at all?"

"She's come out of her catatonic state occasionally and whispered to Mieshorum, but nothing else."

I shook my head sadly. "I'm glad they were able to save her body, but I'm worried about her mind."

"You're not the only one," Tolly said. "There's been a lot of talk about whether she's capable of regular thinking or speech."

I went silent, thinking about my next question. Maybe I could ease into it. "Where are Narmuna and Lexarit?"

"They rented quarters on the station," he said.

That surprised me. "They're not staying on the ship?"

It was common, on stations that allowed it, for crews to sleep on the ship to save money.

“While we’re docked here, they decided we might as well have our maintenance done a little early.”

Now it made more sense. No one was allowed to stay on a ship while it was being worked on.

“Where are we going from here?” I asked, moving closer to what I wanted to demand.

He answered with hesitation. “We can't decide that until you're well enough to contribute.”

The answer to this next question would tell me if I really was an equal member of the crew or if it was all an act.

“I need to go back to Bright Star Station,” I stated, then waited as my heartbeat kicked up and I felt my body get warm. I felt like I was challenging him.

He sounded a questioning rumble. “Is there a reason?”

Annoyance made me frown. “I wouldn't ask if there wasn't a reason.”

“Can you tell me more?” he asked after almost a minute of silence.

“Well, my stuff is there,” I said. “Items I don't want to part with.”

I wished I could tell him everything, but I couldn't yet.

“I can't make this decision alone,” he said. “This is something we need to discuss with the rest of our crewmates. Going back there brings the risk of us being charged with a crime.”

I shook my head. “I'll make sure everyone knows it was all a big misunderstanding. At most they'll give you a fine, and I'll pay for that.”

“We pay for fines or anything else involving all of us through our communal ship fund,” Tolly said. “I can't promise anything except that, if the others decide against going back, I'll rent us a small ship and the two of us will return.”

Relief made me ecstatic. I wasn't going to die, I saved another human, I owned part of a ship, and I was going home.

“Perfect!” I said and brought his hand to my mouth and kissed the palm.

A soft, excited rattle pulled our attention to the foot of my bed.

“That's a lip press!” the healer said. “I’ve read about them but haven't seen one. It's a sign of human affection. Your human adores you!”

I kept Tolly's hand pressed to my mouth and whispered, “Yes I do.”

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Chapter 19

Tolreum

Our conversation wore Opal out, and she soon drifted back to sleep. I wasn't surprised at her fatigue. Her body was working hard to heal itself. The next time she woke, I needed to remember to encourage her to eat.

When the hand holding mine went lax, I gently pulled free of Opal's grip. Standing up, I pushed the stool out of the way and took the few steps necessary to reach the next bed where Sloane and Mieshorum were resting.

He was lying on his back with Sloane mostly laying on top of him. She was hugging one of his arms to her chest. Every time he tried to move, she'd tighten her hold. The one time Mieshorum had to use the elimination room, she'd fought the medical workers until he came back.

I'd asked if they could give her calming medication, but they were so worried about the fragile state of her health they didn't want to add anything to her system that wasn't strictly necessary.

I touched Mieshorum's shoulder. His eyes popped open and fixed on me.

"Yes?" he asked in a whisper.

I told him about Opal's request. It was only after I finished that I realized I forgot to tell her that we registered Sloane's ownership to Precious Mineral, the company we'd created for Opal. Everything happened so quickly we'd been forced to make a decision even though neither human was able to discuss it. We'd done what we thought the humans would want.

I hoped neither of them would be angry. Of course, if Sloane was angry at us, that meant she survived with her mind intact. In that case, I might welcome her negative emotions.

Narmuna was proud that no one questioned the company ownership of the humans. He'd done an amazing job of legal and property subterfuge.

After I finished explaining that Opal wanted to return to Bright Star Station, I outlined three options and went quiet.

Mieshorum didn't need to think about it for long before he replied. "If the others are willing, you can all leave and come back later. Sloane won't be ready for a trip any time soon, and it sounds like Opal is determined to go as soon as she's well."

I sounded a rumble of agreement. "I respect your decision and agree."

"What decision?" Narmuna asked. I hadn't heard him walk up behind me, and his voice made me jump despite the low volume.

Mieshorum sounded a rumble of amusement. He must've seen Narmuna but decided not to say anything.

"I'm going to make sure your tlash tea is always cold," I threatened, which only made him rumble with amusement again.

Lexarit was standing behind Narmuna and was also rumbling with amusement. "I thought Opal was the one taking sedatives, not you," he teased.

"If you're done being entertained, I need to talk to both of you in the hall," I said.

Narmuna and Lexarit led me out into the hall, and I gave them the same breakdown as I had Mieshorum, then included Mieshorum's wishes. After I was finished I expected questions or a request to think about it.

Instead, Lexarit and Narmuna exchanged a look then both rumbled in agreement.

"We'll go," Narmuna said. "We talked about it before. We need to make amends to Opal. Returning to Bright Star Station to get her things seems like an acceptable way to do that."

"I only have one concern," Lexarit said. "If we get there and Opal decides to press charges instead of saying it was a misunderstanding, we could find ourselves incarcerated."

"That is a possibility," I said. "If we do this, we're going to have to trust her."

“This feels like the ultimate test to prove our sincerity,” Lexarit murmured.

He wasn’t wrong.



Opal

I was shocked at how tired I was after only two laps around the medical facility. The lights were all on bright to mark it as the daytime portion of the day-night cycle. Tolly was next to me and there were healers in front and behind me, all focused on my movement.

It felt a little weird to be the center of attention. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say my leg was the center of attention.

They’d pulled out area three’s walls so Sloane and Mieshorum were tucked away and not bothered by all the brightness and movement. It was a little weird that there weren’t any doors, but then I watched the front wall sink down into the floor to allow a healer access.

I admired the clever design. I’d only ever seen that once on a very expensive yacht that docked on Bright Star Station for repairs.

Because my legs were shaking, I decided I’d do one more lap. I was used to working all day; walking around a room shouldn’t be an issue.

But it was.

Halfway through the lap, I gave up. “I need to sit down.”

Tolly was quick to scoop me up before my legs gave out and dumped me on the floor. Healer Grifforum said once I could do four laps I could leave. I didn’t even make it through the third. I guess I wasn’t leaving today.

Purring, Tolly carried me back to bed. All the healers that had been walking with me followed us. The moment he set me down, they pushed him out of the way. One held my leg up and another ran a scanner over it while a third studied the results on a display over my bed.

It wasn’t long before they were all done and discussing my health as if I wasn’t there. I loudly cleared my throat.

“How is it?” I asked, flexing my leg a little.

“Your healing is going as planned,” Healer Tisorum said, setting my leg back down on the bed. “Later you can try walking again.”

I really hoped I could make it because I was tired of the medical facility. All the healers were nice, and Tolly rarely left my side, but I missed my big, fluffy nest. More than that, I missed being able to touch him without having to worry about how it would be interpreted.

“Thanks,” I said, scooting further up on the bed. Tolly was quick to tuck some soft blankets around me. I plucked one up and rubbed it between my fingers. “Can I buy one of these?”

Healer Tisorum sounded an amused rumble and pointed to the travel boxes stacked high against a wall. “You don’t need to. There’s a box of four of them over there.”

I looked up at Tolly. “Did you order those?”

He sounded a negative rattle at the same time Tisorum spoke up. “They’re gifts from Talins on the station.”

My jaw dropped. “But why?”

“Humans are precious among us,” Tisorum said. “All those boxes contain gifts from Talins that hope your owners will let you meet them.”

Greed pushed the next question out of my mouth. “What’s in the other boxes?”

“Clothing, pillows, food packets, sweets, and toys,” Tisorum said. “At least that’s what is on the labels.”

“Lexarit checked them all; the labeling is correct and accurate,” Tolly said. Of course one of them checked, they wouldn’t want something to slip through and accidentally cause me harm.

A wave of affection for my new crewmates went through me.

“We should send it all back,” I said. “I really don’t need anything. Tolly already bought me lots of clothes, and we have plenty of blankets and pillows on the ship.”

“Only half those items are for you,” Tisorum said with an amused rumble. “You can’t send back the half that is meant for Sloane.”

I looked over at the closed-off section where Sloane was hidden away. “How is she doing?”

“Her last scans showed the same steady improvement,” Tisorum said.

“I want to talk to her when I can,” I said.

“I’ll tell her,” Tisorum said. “But so far her responses to us have been limited. We have better luck when Mieshorum asks or suggests something.”

I shrugged. “Then could you ask him to ask her?”

Tisorum sounded a rumble of agreement, then moved off to speak to Grifforum.

I looked up at Tolly. "I really need to get back to Bright Star Station, but I'm scared about leaving Sloane."

"You don't need to worry about Sloane," Tolly said. "She's being well cared for. Besides, your separation will be temporary. We'll return for her and Mieshorum."

"When she's well, we need to explain everything and give her some choices," I insisted. "We can't make her stay with us if she doesn't want to."

"We wouldn't, but she's not going to be able to get rid of Mieshorum," he said. "Even if she wants to leave the ship and empire, he'll go with her."

"That was fast," I said, but then doubted those words. Was it really fast or was it that these Talins were so starved for affection that they were ready to grab onto it the moment they saw it? "Or maybe not for you guys," I murmured.

"I had a strong feeling the first time you touched me," Tolly said. "When we were lined up and you put your hand on my chest. The moment your small fingers pressed against me, I felt a profound connection."

"I liked the way you smelled," I whispered. "That was why I picked you, because you smelled good."

"You did? I do?" he said, sounding thrilled, then leaned in close so he could whisper because several of the healers had moved closer to us. "I've read that, back when our species scent bonded, they knew the person was meant to be their mate because they were immediately attracted to the smell."

"Then I guess we were meant to be together," I said, wishing badly we could kiss. I was going to do the four laps this afternoon, damn it! I needed alone time with Tolly.

"I have something for you," Tolly said, sitting up and fussing with my blankets and pillows and not meeting my gaze. His tone and actions made me suspicious.

"What?"

"You're not going to like it," he said. "But I need you to accept it."

Was I going to need to wear a brace for the rest of my life? No, that couldn't be it. The healers would've said something.

"Then you better show me," I said, preparing myself for something unpleasant.

Tolly opened the pouch on his belt and pulled out something round and slim. It took me a moment to figure out what it was.

“Is that a collar?”

“It's your collar,” he said, then leaned in close to whisper again. “I know you don't want to wear it, but after I bought it, Lexarit modified it so it will latch but not lock. You can take it off at any time. I didn't want to press the issue while you were still recovering, but the staff here is upset that you're not wearing one, and you'll be leaving soon. They consider it important that all humans wear a collar.”

I took the collar from him and examined it. Using his body to shield my movements, I clicked it open and closed a few times.

“It has a tracker so if you're ever kidnapped we'll be able to find you,” he said, then pointed to the glyphs inscribed on the side. “That says *Of The Empire*. We have the same thing written on all our ships. It means that if a non-Talin tries to do anything to you, they risk the wrath of the Talin Empire.”

It was a collar, but it was also a shield. This item made me safer than any weapons I could ever carry with me.

That change of perspective made it much easier to secure the collar around my neck. The moment the clasp clicked shut I expected to feel some kind of unease or anxiety.

It didn't feel too tight or constraining. Was I crazy that it felt comforting?

“Thank you, Tolly,” I whispered.

He purred. “I should thank you. You've changed everything for the better.”

Chapter 20

Opal

Four laps left me sweaty and lightheaded, but I made it! Leaning against my bed, I looked up at Grifforum.

“I get to leave now, right?”

Grifforum hesitated and I knew he wanted to say no. “You need to stay on the station for another rotation. I want to do one more check before you leave.”

I was so eager to get out of the medical bay that I agreed without hesitation. “Okay.”

Tolly sounded a rumble of agreement. “The maintenance on the ship should be done by then, so that is acceptable.”

I looked over where Sloane was hidden from sight. “I want to talk to Sloane before leaving.”

“Today isn’t going to work,” Grifforum said, sounding a negative rattle. “She was in a lot of discomfort, and we had to heavily medicate her.”

“Tomorrow?” I asked.

“It depends on how her reassessment goes,” Grifforum said. “At the very least we can let you see her, but I won’t know her state of consciousness.”

“Yes, I will want to see her,” I agreed. I could only hope she was able to talk. I wanted her to know she was safe from being bought or sold, although

telling her that wouldn't do any good if she couldn't process what I was saying.

Now that I could go, I was desperate to get out of here. I looked up at Tolly. "I'm ready to leave, please."

He sounded a rumble of agreement. "As soon as Narmuna and Lexarit get here."

"I need to contact the station's law keepers to escort you," Grifforum said, moving to a display on the wall to tap on it.

At the same time, Tolly unclipped his Ident and tapped it. While they were busy, I pulled myself back up on the bed, letting out a soft, relieved sigh. I didn't understand why both my legs felt shaky when my left leg was the one that had been injured. It was annoying!

I didn't get to rest long because soon Narmuna, Lexarit, and several Talins I didn't recognize arrived. Narmuna had a cargo bot following him, and after saying hello to me, he got busy loading the boxes stacked against the wall onto it.

"Human Opal," one of the strangers said. "I'm Maven Nolus. I'll be escorting you today."

Another one of the strangers stepped close to Tolly and spoke in low tones, but they were standing right next to me so it was easy to hear their words.

"I'm Maven Dulsrum," he said. "A more formal request is being sent to you, but the Committee of Stations and Travel would like to meet your pet. They're planning to hold a formal meal this evening."

Although Dulsrum used the word "request," it felt more like a demand. I knew it wasn't optional when Tolly stiffened.

"I'm not sure it would be healthy for Opal to attend. She's only now being released by the healers," he said.

Dulsrum's next words were spoken with care, as if to emphasize his point. "You could refuse, but I don't think that would be wise. Their committee oversees the Bureau of Ship Licensing."

I heard the clear threat; if I didn't show up, the Ever Secure might lose her license. Since she was partly my ship now too, I felt protective.

"I can go," I said, touching the back of Tolly's hand. "As long as I don't have to sing or dance, I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Nothing but visiting will be required," Dulsrum said.

Tolly purred. "Thank you, Opal."

Dulsum sounded a rumble of agreement. "This is very brave of you, Human Opal." He looked back to Tolly. "If your pet were to fall asleep during the meeting, I'm sure the committee wouldn't be bothered if you left. Everyone knows both the humans came in sick and injured. Unfortunately, I hear it's a common issue when we find wild humans. They can't take care of themselves very well."

I bit my lip to keep from voicing a snarky reply.

"Everything's ready," Lexarit said. "We can leave."

Not only was the cargo bot full, but both Lexarit and Narmuna were carrying a few boxes each.

Dulsum walked to the door to the facility. "Tolreum will carry Human Opal. Lexarit, walk on their left. Narmuna, walk on their right. Maven Nulus will follow. If a crowd forms, remain calm. We'll handle anything that happens, and if I need you to do something, I'll give orders."

All the Talins rumbled with agreement before Tolly picked me up and cradled me against his chest.

It felt good to be held by him. Even better, we were leaving and would soon be alone together. I couldn't wait.

Dulsum turned and led us out into the hall. I didn't know why he was so worried; the hall seemed empty. It was only when we stepped out into an area that was open to several levels that I noticed a crowd.

They were gathered everywhere but our path. The moment we came into view, the crowd started purring and talking. It was a lot of noise, and it made me jerk a little in Tolly's arms.

He put his mouth close to my ear. "It's going to be fine. The mavens are here. Our crewmates are here. I'm here. You're not alone."

I nodded and wrapped my arms around Tolly's neck and tucked my face against the patch of bare skin. Pulling in a deep breath, I tried to ignore all the voices calling my name.

"Opal, I have some toys!"

"Look up, Opal, look up. I have something pretty for you."

"Human Opal, show us your face."

"I have great wealth. I can buy her."

The voices kept up no matter that no one responded to any demands, questions, or requests. It was only after everything suddenly went quiet that I looked up.

We were in a large room with multiple doors. By the look of the utilitarian furniture and bare walls, it was a rented suite.

Narmuna, Lexarit, and the cargo bot were all inside. Dulsrum was standing with his back to the closed door.

“I’ll be guarding your door until it’s time to escort you to the committee’s dinner,” Dulsrum said. “Rest, Human Opal. You are well protected here.”

“Thank you for your gift of time and skill,” Tolly said. I remembered him saying the same thing to the healers. I tucked it away to use for later as a goodbye.

Dulsrum hit a fist to his chest with a loud smacking sound, then turned and walked out into the hall. I saw him take up position with his back to the opposite wall before the door slid shut again.

“That one,” Narmuna said, pointing to one of the doors in the suite.

Without another word, Tolly carried me into the room. The room also had bare walls and standard-looking furniture, but colors had been added, mostly in the large nest.

I couldn't be sure, but this one seemed even larger than the one he'd made for me on the Ever Secure.

After he laid me down on it, I tugged at my top. “I need this off.”

He helped me out of the rest of my clothes. I felt better the moment they were gone. I'd been wearing them for days, and although Tolly had carried me into a cleansing unit to use the sonic cleaner several times, I could've sworn they smelled odd.

“I know it's wasteful, but you can throw those away,” I said. “I never want to see them again.”

Tolly rumbled in agreement and shoved them in a waste receptacle. “Do you want other clothes?”

“No,” I said, holding out my arms. “I want you.”

He sank down into the nest next to me with a purr. “You can have all of me.”

I started by rubbing my face against his, spreading oil all over my cheeks and lips. It felt so good to have his oil on my skin.

Flopping back, I smiled up at him. “Cover me in your scent.”

He didn't hesitate to lower his face to my torso. With soft pressure, he rubbed his cheeks all over my belly, chest, shoulder, and my neck. His oil soaked into my skin and filled the air with the scent of sage.

I felt myself relax so thoroughly I felt like I was sinking into the nest.

“Opal?”

I thought I responded, but, in reality, I fell asleep to the sound of Tolly's purring.



“Opal, you need to wake up,” Tolly said, gently tugging at the sheet I'd curled around myself.

“No,” I mumbled. I was having the best dream. I was back on Bright Star Station, and it was busy like it had been when I first went to work there. Tolly, Narmuna, Lexarit, Mieshorum and Sloane were all working with me in the same repair bay. We were talking, teasing, and helping each other. I knew when we finished there were more smiles waiting for us at home.

I wasn't ready to give up the happy image.

“I'm sorry, Opal, you must rise now,” Tolly instead, tugging harder. “We need to attend a meal with the Committee of Stations and Travel.”

With a huff, I gave up my hold and let him pull the blanket away. “Stupid dinner interrupting my sleep,” I grumbled, then yawned wide enough to make a popping sound come out of my jaw.

“We have enough time for one of the hot showers you like so much,” he said. “Would you like that?”

“If I ever turn down a hot shower, have the healer check my brain,” I said with a cheeky grin. The evening was looking up a little.

“I'll make a note of that,” he agreed as he pulled off a blanket, then another blanket, and finally a few pillows. “I feel like I'm excavating.”

“Excavating a human from her nest,” I said with a chuckle as he finally freed me from the nest.

He picked me up and carried me into the cleansing unit, then set me down on an inbuilt bench. He must've planned this because he'd covered the bench in a towel to keep me from having to sit on cold metal. He fiddled with the display, and soon there was water pouring from half the ceiling.

Scooting over, I put myself in the hot waterfall, letting out a little moan of appreciation.

Picking up a box, he walked over to me then knelt at my feet. I leaned over to see what was inside. He opened it and revealed bottles, scrubbers, combs, and brushes.

He pulled out a few bottles until he found the one he wanted. Holding it up, he sounded a questioning rumble.

"I think I should start with washing your mane; is this the one I should use?"

The label was in Talin glyphs, so I opened the top and tested it with a finger.

"It feels like shampoo," I said.

Setting the bottle aside after he poured some in his hand, he stood up and began massaging it into my hair.

I moaned. Being in this cleansing unit, with hot water pouring down on me and Tolly working the suds through my hair and scalp felt beyond decadent.

If he'd done this the first day we'd met, on top of the amazing sex, I probably would've forgiven him for the kidnapping right away.

Yeah, I was exaggerating, but only a little.

He shielded my head with his body to keep the water off until he was happy with the suds in my hair. Stepping back, he let the water wash over my head. As water poured over me, he went back to massaging my scalp and hair to help wash out the soap. When that was done, he worked in the conditioner.

"I never want this to stop," I whispered.

"We can do this again tomorrow," he said.

"Maybe not every day, but definitely often," I said.

When the conditioner was applied, he knelt in front of me again. He pulled out another bottle, poured some on a cloth, then picked up one of my feet. I swear, he began washing me between my toes.

When he got to the sole of my foot, I giggled and pulled out of his grasp. He paused and sounded a questioning rumble.

"My feet are ticklish," I explained.

"Ticklish," he repeated, as if searching his memory. "Oh yes! An involuntary reaction to certain stimuli that causes laughter and physical movement."

"Exactly," I said. "Maybe don't touch the bottom of my feet."

He sounded a rumble of agreement then focused on the top of my foot and worked his way up to my thigh.

He washed every part of me, moving me around on the bench so I didn't have to stand except for a few brief times. I'd never felt so pampered in my

life.

When he was finished and turned the water off, he dried me as best he could with my hair still dripping.

"I have to use the sonic cleaner," I murmured. "Or my hair will stay wet for a while."

He sounded a rumble of agreement and lifted me up and carried me to the corner where the section was marked for sonic cleaning. It only took about a minute for it to cycle through, and my hair and the rest of us were perfectly dry.

Taking me back into our room, he laid me on the nest. I was sad that bath time was over, but then he went back into the cleansing room to retrieve the box. He pulled out a bottle of lotion and began lathering it all over my body.

"I'm going to become so spoiled," I said with a happy sigh.

Tolly purred. "I hope so."

After he was finished with that, he sat me up and combed out my hair. The sonic cleanser was great for a fast dry, but it tended to tangle hair. I was tense at first, ready to take the comb from him, but he never caused me pain. He was patient and gentle, carefully working out each knot without any harsh tugging.

"I'm impressed," I said. "I'm not even that careful with my hair."

He purred and sat down in front of me. "If I promise to do all of this to you again whenever you want, will you go to this meal? I know you don't want to, but if we don't, there could be consequences for all the crew."

"I'm crew too," I reminded him. "That means if I have to act like a dumb human for some annoying Talins, I'll do it."

He leaned forward to rub his scent gland in my hair, filling the air with sage. I pulled in a deep breath, feeling at peace.

"It's going to be fine," I murmured, "It's all going to be fine."

Chapter 21

Opal

“...and this is Servant Citizen Osluma,” Dulsrum said, naming the last of the six Talins in the room that I hadn't met yet. “They make up the Committee for Stations and Travel. It's an extremely important committee that makes sure all ships, stations, outposts, and trade agreements meet exacting standards.”

“We don't normally all travel together,” Halmoris said. “But this is our annual off-Talarian meeting. We pick a different station to visit each time.”

“It's fortuitous that we chose the same station that your owners came to seek care for you and Human Sloane,” Milsorum said.

“I heard Human Sloane is still very ill,” Osluma said. “I'm sorry your companion is unwell.”

“It does make me sad,” I said, making an exaggerated sad face.

“Is that a frown?” Milsorum asked. “Are you angry, Human Opal?”

Before I could say anything, Halmoris spoke. “I think it's a variation on a frown, indicating unhappiness.”

“Don't be unhappy,” Osluma said. “Your friend will be better soon. Talin healers are the most skilled in all the universe.”

I tried hard for a natural expression. “They are very good. I'm sure you're right.”

“That is a very pretty outfit, Human Opal,” Jorlis said, interrupting whatever Osluma was about to say. “Is it the one I sent?”

“No,” said Bomorum. “It’s orange, so it was from me. I sent her all orange items because I knew it would look good with her dark brown mane.”

“I’m not sure who gave this one to me,” I said, tugging at one of the sleeves. “But it’s very nice.”

Jorlis sounded an irritated rattle and faced Bomorum. “I also sent orange items. That could be one of the ones I gave her.”

Bomorum’s quills straightened out, as if preparing for a fight. “Statistically, if I sent all orange items, then it’s more likely she chose one of my gifts.”

This was the strangest argument I’d ever witnessed.

Before those two could go further, Gislorum stepped between them.

“You’re both being juvenile. She’s pale, she needs to sit down,” Gislorum said.

They both jumped into action at Gislorum’s words.

“We’ve created a soft spot for you,” Bomorum said.

As he stepped to the side, he forced the other Talins next to him to move away, giving me a clear view of the rest of the room. Strangely, there wasn’t any furniture in the room. The floor was covered in rugs, similar to the way Tolly and the crew had used in the ship, and a mound of pillows covered in a bright blue blanket.

Tolly walked me over to the pillow. My legs weren’t shaky, but I let Tolly help me sit and let out an exaggerated sigh once I was sitting.

All the other Talins remained standing, making me uncomfortable, but thankfully they all sank to the floor once Tolly sat down on the pillows behind me.

The mavens remained standing near the door. Narmuna and Lexarit walked over to sit on either side of my pillow throne.

Now that everyone was seated, they all started talking at once.

“Why are you wearing pants with your wrap garment?” Bomorum asked. “That’s unusual for a human.”

“Do you like the rugs?” Jorlis asked. “We tried to find similar ones to what is on your ship.”

“Where is your omni?” Halmoris asked. “You should have your omni in case you become chilled. Maybe one of your owners should go get it.”

“The food should be here soon,” Gislorum said. “I personally talked to the chef about what you could safely consume.”

Milsorum pulled something out of his pouch and rolled it to me. “I thought you might like this.”

I was overwhelmed by everyone talking over each other but the ball was a solid thing I could touch, so I automatically reached out and picked it up. Everyone went silent, and I looked around to find all the Talins in the room, including the mavens, staring at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, dropping the ball back to the floor.

Purrs and rumbles of amusement filled the air.

“It’s a gift for you,” Milsorum said quickly. “It can’t hurt you.”

I picked the ball back up. “Um, thank you.” When Milsorum and everyone kept staring at me as if expecting something, I looked over my shoulder at Tolly. “Is there a different way I should be saying thank you? You guys say thank you for your gift of time and skill. Does that apply here?”

He sounded a soft negative rattle. “No, that response isn’t appropriate for these circumstances. You’re holding a puzzle toy. The goal is to separate all the pieces.”

They were waiting for me to do a trick; that’s why they were staring. I turned my attention to the ball in my hand.

I could see several obvious seams but didn’t try to pry them apart. Instead I watched the light pattern appearing across the surface. It took me a few minutes before I figured out the timing. Counting off, I touched in the same spot and pattern as the lights. That did the trick, and a slice popped off.

Pulling the slice free, I looked at the new area for the next clue. It was a simple progression puzzle. To complete the progression I pressed on each of the remaining slices six times, one at a time. It worked on the fourth slice. Now that I had two slices free, I noticed another pattern.

With gentle pressure, I moved all the slices together. That made them all fall apart to reveal the core that held them together. The core unfurled to reveal a piece of candy.

Huh, that was interesting.

“Well done!” Milsorum cheered with a loud, excited rattle.

The sudden sound made me jump, and I dropped the core and the candy into my lap.

“Don't be so loud!” Gislorum snapped at Milsorum. “She's still delicate. She only left medical earlier this rotation.”

Milsorum sounded a rumble of agreement. “I apologize, Human Opal. I was simply thrilled you figured out the puzzle so quickly. You're a very clever human.”

I was sure the puzzle was a child's toy. Maybe a Talin child could've done it faster, but they'd be familiar with these types of puzzles.

Okay, now I was feeling defensive about a nonexistent child. I had to remember these guys thought I was an idiot, but Tolly and the crew knew the truth.

“That was fun,” I said, which wasn't a lie. It had been entertaining until I got the demeaning verbal pat on the head.

Picking up the core, I fit it all back together. Once it was in a ball shape, I rolled it back over to Milsorum. “That was fun, thank you.”

He sounded a rumble of amusement. “Do you wish to play now?” he asked and rolled it back to me.

I bit back a sassy retort and rolled it over to Osluma. She sounded an excited rattle and rolled it back to me.

After the ball had been passed around, I thought one of them would end the game, but they seemed eager to keep it going. They gave little excited rattles every time I received the ball again, as if cheering me on.

“Do you guys play like this with your kids?” I asked. That would explain why they were having so much fun.

Bomorum sounded a negative rattle. “We don't raise our own children; that would be barbaric for a species as advanced as we are.”

His words caught me by surprise. “What?”

“Humans take great pride in raising their children within their community. They wouldn't understand trusting child-raising professionals,” Jorlis said to Bomorum. “You should explain.”

Bomorum sounded a rumble of agreement. “Millennia ago, our leadership realized it would be much better if we had our children raised in a cresh, surrounded by highly trained staff. It allows us to focus on pursuing our careers during the solars when children are at their most needy.”

I spoke before thinking. “That's so sad.”

“Why would you say that?” Jorlis asked.

“Because they're your kids,” I said. “You create them, they're part of you.”

“Ah, I see the misunderstanding,” Jorlis said. “Our species doesn’t procreate as we did in our past. We contribute genetic material and the cresh uses an artificial womb to grow the child. Of course, we visit once every few solars to check on the child’s progress, but it’s actually unnecessary. Cresh staff are highly skilled and diligent.”

Halmoris spoke to Jorlis. “Not all creshes are created equal. Did you hear about that cresh on Rora Colony? The authorities found out the caregivers were letting the children make up stories and even record them.”

“I read about that,” Bomorum said. “Disgusting.”

“I heard they even found out that two of the staff had scent bonded and the rest of the staff was covering it up,” Halmoris said. “Of course, those two were dealt with, but all new staff had to be hired.”

“Well, it was a colony,” Bomorum said. “They’re never as diligent as the creshes on our homeworld, Talarian.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Every time they said something bad, I would think they couldn’t go further. Except they did.

I could understand why they didn’t have to give birth to their own kids; it was inconvenient at best and dangerous at worst. I knew of several species that used artificial wombs, although I’d also heard there was a high failure rate for the growing fetuses.

What I couldn’t wrap my head around was the idea of not raising your own kid! And then punishing cresh workers for letting kids use their imagination?

The cresh sounded physically safe but also like a place of emotional neglect. How did any of them survive such a harsh childhood?

And what did Halmoris mean when he said the scent-bonded cresh workers had been dealt with? So many questions and emotions hit me all at once that I didn’t realize a tear had slipped free until Jorlis sounded a worried rumble.

“What’s wrong with Human Opal?” she asked. “There’s clear liquid leaking from her eye.”

“I read it could be caused by physical or mental pain,” Osluma said. “Does something hurt, Human Opal?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. Sometimes my eyes water a little because, um, I get overwhelmed.”

It sounded dumb to my ears, but all the Talins accepted it with purrs.

“It’s because we’ve spoken about complicated things,” Milsorum said, tapping the floor. “Let’s return to playing, Human Opal. You enjoyed it so much before the discussion started.”

“Sure,” I said, and rolled the ball to Milsorum. He sounded an excited rattle and rolled it back.

I think I finally understood why these Talins were so eager to have a human of their own. We were the surrogate children to fill the missing spot their own should be. Even more, we were the children they were never allowed to be.

I was both sad and enraged.

“Are you well?” Tolly whispered in my ear. I paused with the ball in my hand to look back and give him a small smile.

“I’m fine,” I murmured, then returned my gaze to the surrounding Talins. “New game. Every time the ball comes to you, you have to name something you like.”

“Something we like?” Milsorum asked.

“Yes,” I said, and realized they were all listening very carefully so as not to mess up the new game. “A drink I like is sopa.” After I said that, I rolled the ball to Milsorum.

“I like it when all my reports are submitted on time,” he said and rolled the ball back to me.

I chuckled and shook my head. “I’m thinking more about fun things you like,” I said. “And you can’t roll the ball to the person who rolled it to you.”

“But timely reports are enjoyable,” Milsorum said, making me bark out a laugh.

I rolled the ball to Jorlis, who understood the game better. “I like it when the flat bread is freshly made. I’m sure I can taste the difference.”

“That’s a good one,” I praised, and her chest puffed out in pride. She rolled the ball to Bomorum, who was quick to name his favorite type of ship to travel in.

We kept this game going until the food arrived. Halmoris was holding the ball and looked up and sounded a loud negative rattle at the Talin who walked in followed by a food service bot.

“We’re busy, come back later,” he snapped at the server.

The poor guy froze. “I thought you wanted the food as soon as it was ready.”

“Human Opal enjoyed this game,” Narmuna said before I could think of what to say. “But she should eat. It's past time for her evening meal. We can play more after.”

Halmoris opened his mouth, paused, then closed it and sounded a rumble of agreement. “Yes, humans do require many meals a rotation. I’d forgotten.”

He set the ball down and pointed to the space in the middle of the circle. “Set the food down there. We’ll dine human style tonight.”

Human style was sitting on the floor? I know some human cultures sat on the floor, but just about everyone who left Earth adopted the eating customs of whatever species they settled among.

The server opened the bot and pulled out tray after tray. There was enough here to feed at least thirty individuals. The moment the fragrant food hit my nose, I realized how hungry I was.

I reached for a round of flat bread, tore off a piece, then used it to scoop up some food. I popped it into my mouth and almost moaned.

“This is really good!” I said, reaching for more of the same dish.

“We’ve had it on the ship, but this is fresh,” Tolly murmured. “It’s impossible to get the full flavor when it has to be processed for food packs.”

I ate another two bites before I realized everyone was staring at me instead of eating. I swallowed what was in my mouth and sat up.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Purrs hit me from every direction and everyone said some version of no. Feeling self-conscious, I nudged one of the trays.

“Everyone needs to eat,” I said. “It’s bad luck to sit in front of food and not eat.”

They all dug in, making me smile. I’d ordered them to eat, and they did it. I bet I could get them to sing and dance.

Who was the pet now?

Chapter 22

Opal

“Don’t be sad if she doesn’t respond to you,” Grifforum said with a worried rumble. We were standing outside the section they’d partitioned off for Sloane, and I was waiting impatiently to go inside.

“Yes, I understand,” I assured him. “I won’t push if she’s having a hard time talking.”

“Can’t you wait a little longer?” Grifforum asked. “She’s in a fragile mental state. Her body seems to be healing much faster than her mind.”

“We’re leaving today,” I said. “I need to see her before we leave.”

“You’re coming back,” Grifforum reminded me. If Tolly was here I’d let him explain, but he was in the hall talking to one of the station staff.

“Yes, but I’m not sure how long we’ll be gone,” I said. “There are, um, things that might take a while. I don’t know how soon we’ll be back. There are things I need to tell Sloane before I go.”

“Be gentle,” he said, then finally sounded a rumble of agreement. He stepped out of the way and let me touch the door that slid up into itself to let me in. It was quick to slide closed the moment I was inside.

The room was a little different than the last time I’d seen it, when it had only been an alcove. There was a softly glowing bowl of crystals on a table pulled out from the wall. The display in the wall monitoring Sloane’s vitals was set so dim it was barely visible.

Mieshorum was standing next to the bed, helping Sloane sit up. Both of them looked over at me. I ignored Mieshorum; all my attention was on Sloane.

"You look better," I said, although it was a lie.

She looked clean and her hair was combed, but she was still unbelievably pale. I couldn't be sure, but she also looked thinner and even more fragile. Her eyes were red and swollen, as if she only recently stopped crying.

She was a pitiful sight.

I waited for her to respond, but she didn't answer. She stared at me with a completely unreadable expression.

"I'm not sure Mieshorum has told you, but in a weird, roundabout way, I own both of us," I said.

One of her eyebrows raised fractionally.

"It's important you know I'm ready to advocate for you," I explained. "When you're better, you can join the crew, or we can take you home."

Without responding to me, she looked up at Mieshorum.

"Leave." Her voice was a painfully hoarse whisper.

He sounded a negative rattle. "I don't think that's wise."

She didn't respond, simply kept her eyes locked on his. He gave in and finished tucking a pillow behind her back.

"I'll be right outside," he said. There wasn't a lot of space in the little room, so I squished myself against the foot of the bed so he could get out the door.

"You might regret this," he whispered before leaving.

I really didn't like the sound of that.

Sloane hissed out a breath and shut her eyes as the door opened and closed, briefly flooding the room with bright light.

I walked around the bed to take the spot where Mieshorum had been. I opened my mouth, unsure what I was going to say, and words vomited out.

"The Talins think we're not very smart, but Mieshorum and the guys know we're their equals. You just have to ignore everyone else if they talk to you like a little kid. I literally played a child's game at dinner last night with a bunch of important Talins. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, but when we were walking back later, we were almost mobbed. It's weird. They really think we're special. It's kinda nice considering most of the universe don't like us much, if they know we exist at all."

I slapped a hand over my mouth to force myself to stop talking. I wasn't normally like this. What was it about Sloane's inscrutable expression that made me want to jabber?

"I haven't forgiven you yet."

I thought she'd ask me more about the pet thing or how the ownership worked. Maybe even a request to be taken somewhere. Where did that come from?

"Forgiven me?" I said, thoroughly confused. "For what?"

"I was close to death," she whispered, her hoarse voice failing. Her next words were more air than sound. "I was almost there."

"You're upset with me because you're alive," I stated with a slight nod of my head. Honestly, I wasn't surprised. Still, she was getting better, I thought maybe her attitude would've changed a little.

She didn't say anything further, only watched me with expressionless eyes.

"I guess you're stuck in the world of the living," I said, falling back on the dark humor I was raised with. "I've heard the food is better here, so I wouldn't be that upset if I were you. I mean, what would you even eat if you were dead? Rotting food?"

I could tell my words surprised her because her eyes widened slightly. That was all the encouragement I needed.

"Other than the food, you can't die yet because you looked horrible. You would make a nasty looking ghost. That's simply rude. You should take advantage of all the nice things the Talins are offering, get all nice and healthy. When you look good, then off yourself. Be different from everyone else and be a gorgeous ghost."

This time she smiled. It was brief and small, but I saw it!

"You're odd," she whispered.

"Old news," I said. "Wait till you get me drunk. I like to teach everyone to yodel."

She blinked. "Yodel?"

I snorted and patted her leg. "After you're all better, I'm going to show you a good time."

She tilted her head a little, as if trying to figure me out. Good luck with that. I didn't even know what I might say next!

"I'll think about it."

I didn't understand why she said that. It took me a moment to figure out that by saying she might be willing to spend more time with me she was considering living instead of waiting to die.

It was a step in the right direction.

"I'll make it worth your while," I promised.

She went back to staring at me with those inscrutable eyes. I was going to give up and say goodbye when I thought of something.

"Um, just so you know, if you're interested," I lowered my voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "Talin dicks vibrate when they do this special purr thing. Mieshorum would never make you, but if you've got an itch, he can definitely scratch it. I mean, when you feel better and want some horizontal exercise."

This time I got a full laugh out of her. It was almost soundless and led to a coughing fit, which made me feel guilty. I looked around for a drink to give her, but the door opened and Mieshorum rushed inside.

"Easy," he murmured, pushing me aside to get close to her. I slid out of his way.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," I said as Sloane wheezed a little, trying to get her breath back. "Look at the bright side, maybe my next joke will kill you outright."

Mieshorum sounded an angry rattle, but both of us ignored him.

Sloane laugh-wheezed and waved me away. "Out," she mouthed.

Grinning, I blew her a kiss and left the room.



"What happened in there?" Tolly asked as the door shut behind me.

"Nothing," I said.

"I heard an angry rattle," Tolly said.

I shrugged. "Mieshorum doesn't get my humor." When he sounded a questioning rumble, I added a little more. "I said something that made Sloane laugh, and that made her start coughing. Mieshorum wasn't happy about that."

"I should go talk to Mieshorum," Tolly said. "There's no reason he should be making that sound at you."

I waved a hand, brushing the issue away. “Nah, don't worry about it. He's dealing with Sloane. That's got to be stressful enough already. She's got some bad trauma to deal with.”

Before Tolly could respond, Lexarit stepped through the main doors of the facility. “Narmuna said all final inspections and checks are finished and we have an assigned departure window.”

Tolly sounded a rumble of agreement then spoke to me. “The mavens are in the hall waiting to escort us to Ever Secure.”

“They'll be gone by the time we return for Mieshorum and Sloane,” Lexarit said. “I'm sure the station's law keepers will be as competent, but I appreciate the mavens' thoroughness.”

“I agree. We'll have to be on our guard when we come back,” Tolly said. “Are all the boxes on the ship?”

“Everything except for what Opal sent here for Sloane,” Lexarit said.

Tolly sounded a questioning rumble and looked at me.

“I put together a bunch of outfits I thought Sloane might like,” I said. “I debated about what would be the most comfortable and easy for her to wear, but I think most everything will work.”

“Mieshorum can buy her anything else she might need,” he said.

We all moved out into the hall. The maven in charge was quick to arrange us as he wanted, and we began the short trip to the ship.

As with the previous times, anywhere Talins had the ability to observe us from another level, they were packed shoulder to shoulder. Some purred, some rattled with excitement, but they all talked as we walked by.

It was unnerving, and I was glad I was walking next to Tolly with Narmuna on my other side.

“I can carry you,” Tolly reminded me.

I shook my head, even though I was half tempted to let him pick me up like a child so I could bury my face into the bare patch of skin at the base of his neck.

If I was going to be spending more time on Talin stations, I needed to human-up and get used to being a spectacle.

We were about halfway to the ship when something came flying down at us. Lexarit noticed it first and pushed us forward and out of the path. I would've fallen if not for Tolly.

I turned around to see an omni land over Lexarit's head. A blanket covered one of the mavens, and a pillow bounced off Narmuna's head.

It was raining textiles!

When I looked up to see where it was all coming from, there were three Talins waving frantically. The moment they saw me looking, they began tossing things again. More pillows, clothing, and small packets of candy.

“Stop that!” one of the mavens roared.

The three stopped, but I heard distinct angry rattles. Then the rattles spread and the crowd grew agitated.

“We were only trying to give the human some gifts,” one of them yelled.

“Humans shouldn't be hoarded by one crew,” another one shouted down at us. “They should be communally owned so we can all interact with them.”

A scary number of Talins made sounds of agreement with that statement.

“Thank you for the gifts,” I yelled. I know I startled Tolly because he jerked his head down to look at me.

“You don't have to talk to them,” he said.

“Let me see if I can calm this down,” I said, pointing at the Talins that had gathered on our level. “They're not supposed to be there, right?”

Tolly looked over then sounded a negative rattle. “No, this level was supposed to be cleared.”

“This crowd is on the brink of acting on emotion instead of rules or logic,” I said.

“We aren't that kind of species,” Tolly objected. “We don't act on impulse.”

I copied Sloane's technique by remaining silent and only raising an eyebrow. Tolly didn't last long. I'd have to remember this for future arguments.

“Perhaps in rare instances we can let our emotions take charge,” he allowed. “Being tempted by a human would be one of those instances.”

“Right, so let me see if I can calm everyone down,” I said.

“I believe Human Opal's idea has merit,” a maven said. “I'd rather not have the law keepers be forced to deal with this. They need to live and work on this station, and making enemies of the crew and staff would make their lives harder.”

“Very well,” Tolly said, sounding a rumble of agreement.

While we'd been talking, the crowd had gotten louder.

Letting go of Tolly, I brought both my hands up and cupped them around my mouth. “Thank you for the gifts,” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

The rattling and talking died down, and one of the Talins who'd thrown everything replied. "You're welcome, Human Opal. We wanted to make sure you had plenty of soft things."

"My, uh, owner," I said, pointing to Tolly and making a circle with my arms to indicate something very large, "made sure I have a nice big nest. It's very soft."

That seemed to make everyone purr and garnered a few rumbles of amusement.

"How old are you, Human Opal?" another Talin asked.

"You seem so small," another one called out. "Are you an average size or small for a human?"

I answered any question they asked, if the question made sense. There were a few that didn't translate well, so I ignored them.

"Some humans like to be in a crowd," I said when someone made noise about humans being collectively owned. "Other humans, like me, can be upset when we don't have a clear person to, uh, own us. I'd be scared right now if I didn't have Tolly."

That led to another round of questions about how many Talins constituted a crowd and what humans did when they were upset.

When a few of the Talins asked Tolly if he was going to find a male to "breed" me with, I decided that was a good time to end the impromptu question-and-answer session.

I pretended to sway and need to lean against Tolly.

He sounded a worried rumble and picked me up. Purring, he cradled me against his chest as a wave of worried rumbles came from the crowd. Suddenly I went from pretending to be tired to honestly fatigued. I closed my eyes and rested my head against Tolly's shoulder.

"She's overwrought," Narmuna said. "She needs quiet and rest."

All the rumbles abruptly stopped, and the dead silence was unnerving.

"I've got you," Tolly whispered. "You did so well."

"We need to move swiftly or you'll miss your exit window," a maven said. "Can you move quickly?"

"We can keep up," Tolly promised, and we set off at a jog. Soon I felt him run up a ramp and heard the hatch close behind us.

I let out a relieved breath. We were home.

Chapter 23

Opal

The trip back to Bright Star Station seemed to take forever. The guys attempted to keep me occupied with tasks, learning, and quizzes, but my anxiety kept making me restless.

By the time we finally docked, I'd probably lost weight from all the pacing, despite Tolly constantly trying to feed me.

"Scowling at the door won't make the docking tunnel pressurize any faster," Tolly said with an amused rumble. Instead of docking in a bay this time, we were docking the ship to one of the outside clamps. I was sure there was room in a bay, but I think the guys picked this because it was the fastest way to dock.

They were as eager to get me on the station as I was to be there.

"Finally!" I exclaimed when the door display blinked to indicate a seal. After another few seconds it hissed, and the hatch opened.

"Let me get—"

I didn't wait to hear what Tolly was going to say. I took off running down the ramp. I heard his surprised rattle but ignored it. He'd be fine, but I needed to get back to my quarters. I didn't even acknowledge all the Massoc gathered around the station end of the tunnel as I barreled past them.

"Opal!" one of them yelled. "You're alive!"

“Yes!” I called back, not slowing my pace at all. There was some kind of shuffle behind me, but I didn’t pay attention. My entire focus was on making my way through the familiar halls and corridors.

I was out of breath by the time I got to my quarters. Gulping air, I slammed my hand on the door display.

The main area was still full of familiar items but empty of any life. Fear shot through me, and I forced myself to walk into the room instead of rampage.

“Opal?”

I swung around to see my very pregnant sister-in-law step out of the elimination room. She was pale, with dark marks under her eyes and a bruise on her cheek.

The yellowing bruise made my eyes bug out. “Cleo, who hit you?”

She blinked as if confused. “You were abducted, and I thought I’d never see you again. Then almost a month later you reappear and that’s the first thing you say to me?”

“I’m back and no one is allowed to abuse you!” I shouted.

A grin spread across her face. “Then I guess you better beat up the corner where corridor thirty-seven turns sharply because I wasn’t paying attention and ran right into it.”

My anger evaporated, making way for concern. “You don’t look good.”

“And you look like you’ve been on vacation!” she said, throwing up her hands. “How is that possible?”

Then she was rushing and falling on me. I grabbed hold of her and managed to keep us both on our feet. She was shaking and breathing hard.

“I was so scared,” she whispered. “First I lost Jasper, and then you were gone. I can’t do this alone.”

“You don’t have to. I’m here,” I said. Then I remembered the guys would be right behind me. I moved us to a chair and urged her to sit down.

Leaving her sitting there looking distraught, I locked the door then rushed to sit on the short stool she often used to put her feet up.

“There’s a lot I have to tell you, but I don’t have much time,” I began, but stopped when tears began pouring out of her eyes.

“You’re w-w-wearing a collar,” she sobbed. “You’re a slave and you ran away. Oh god, are they hunting you? We need to talk to the station regulators before your owner demands that you be returned.”

"I'm owned, but there's a twist. I own myself," I said. "I also own another human named Sloane. I'm also an equal owner of a fuel transport ship that's doing well."

"You...what?"

"A lot has happened," I said. "But my boyfriend and crewmates don't know you exist. That means I can send you money and you can be independent and won't need to wear a collar, but you have to decide now."

She slowly shook her head, her eyes wide. "That makes no sense."

I was making a mess of this!

Taking a deep breath, I tried again. "There's this species called Talins. They think humans make great pets. The guys that kidnapped me thought they were saving me. It didn't take long before they realized I'm not a pet."

"They think we make good pets?" she repeated, brows furrowed.

"It's complicated, but my guys know I'm their equal. That's why they made me a partner," I said, talking fast. I reached up and unlatched my collar. "See, I can take it off any time I want. It's all pretend."

I offered her the collar, and she took it. Just like I'd done when Tolly first gave it to me, she closed and opened it several times.

"A collar that doesn't lock is jewelry," she said, handing it back.

"You're not wrong," I said, putting it back on. I explained about the Talin laws regarding humans, then more detail about how Narmuna figured out how to get around it.

She was silent for a moment after I was done, then finally summed everything up pretty well.

"What you're telling me is I can stay with you, but only if I wear a collar and go places where I'm considered a pet. But, if I want, I can stay here by myself living on your earnings."

I nodded. "I'm sorry I can't give you much time to decide, but if the guys see you, they won't want to leave you behind. They'd be scared you wouldn't get proper care. Honestly, I'm worried too."

"Justa left," she whispered.

Justa was the last medical technician that had stayed behind even after they'd closed the medical facility on the station. She still saw patients in her quarters, but we all knew that wasn't sustainable.

With her gone, there was no one to help Cleo when she went into labor. That's when I realized that even if I sent plenty of funds and Cleo moved to

a better-equipped station, she'd be alone. Even with the best medical care available, I couldn't let her navigate birth and then a newborn without me.

I was about to tell her there was no choice, she had to come with me, when she spoke up.

"I don't care what I have to wear," she said, eyes swimming in tears. "I want to stay with you."

"Thank fuck!" I muttered, making her laugh. "When the guys get here, I'll introduce you to them. They're going to be thrilled to meet you."

"Yeah, because everyone wants a weepy and hugely pregnant woman as company," she said, wiping her tears away. "Are you hungry? I have those spicy food packs you like. Maglia felt so guilty after they left with you that she gave me the entire fee instead of only your portion. Oh, and some packages arrived addressed to you, but I haven't gone to the administration offices to collect them yet."

The packages had to be all the items I sent. If Cleo had opened them, she would've found a note from me and a bunch of items she could've sold. I shook my head. It had been a good idea but was hampered by Cleo's complete lack of interest in walking anywhere when she was this pregnant.

I snorted. "Maglia should feel guilty. That subduer she gave me didn't work at all."

Cleo shook her head. "What were you thinking, going on their ship?"

"You're not upset that I contracted with Maglia?" I asked.

"Not at all. I would've done it, but..." her voice trailed off as she pointed to her belly. "I'm only upset that you didn't tell me. My mom did sex work before she married my dad. She was very blunt about my sex education, and I might've been able to give you some advice."

My jaw dropped. "Why am I only learning about this now?"

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Cleo shrugged. "Mom only did it for a few years. Honestly, I'd forgotten about it until Maglia came to talk to me."

“Did Jasper know?” I asked, desperately curious to know what he'd said.

“Do you remember that expensive comms session Jasper and I did last year?” she asked. I nodded my head. “She warned him then that she knew just about everything there was to know about sex and if he didn’t make me happy in bed, she'd be forced to give him a lecture.”

I barked out a laugh. “I bet Jasper loved it!”

Cleo giggled. “He did. Dad and I were super uncomfortable as the two of them talked sex.”

“I can picture it,” I said. “I wish I could meet your mom.”

“If we're going to be traveling around on a ship, then maybe we can stop by Ki-mora. That's where she and Dad are working now.”

I nodded. “I'm sure we can do that, after the baby is born and you're all recovered. Is he doing well?”

Cleo rubbed her belly, her smile turning serene. “Healthy, kicking, and giving me all kinds of indigestion. Justa gave me a thorough exam before she left and said we were both in perfect health.”

“Can I?” I asked, pointing to her baby bump. She nodded and leaned back. I put my hands on her belly, feeling the odd bumps of life growing inside her. When the baby boy kicked, I let out a long breath.

I loved Cleo, and we would've been friends even if she and Jasper hadn't met and fallen in love. Now that Jasper was gone, she and the baby were the only parts of Jasper I had left.

The only real family I had left.

“I can't wait to meet you, big fella,” I murmured at her belly. “I'm going to be your most favorite aunt ever.”

“You're his only aunt,” Cleo reminded me.

“My earlier statement still stands,” I said, giving her belly a little pat and straightening up. That's when I realized it had been a while and the guys still hadn't shown up. I must've lost them.

Then I remembered I never told them my quarters number. If they lost sight of me, they had no ability to know my destination. They were probably wandering around the station looking for me.

“I'm faster than I thought,” I said with a laugh.

“What?” Cleo asked.

“I was in such a rush to get to you I took off and didn't tell the guys where I was going,” I explained. “I need to go back to the outside docking ports and find them.”

I stood up, and Cleo held out her hands. I helped her to her feet.

"I'll come with you," she said.

I eyed her. "Are you sure? Maybe you should be resting."

"I haven't walked yet today, and moderate movement is good for me and baby boy," she said. She linked her arm with mine. "Tell me about these Talins."

"They're big and scary looking," I said as we walked out the door. "And they make all these sounds instead of having facial expressions. They even purr."

Cleo shot me an intrigued look. "Purr? Like Old Earth cats?"

"Yes, it's kinda wonderful," I said. "They are amazing cuddlers. They think humans like to sleep in big fluffy nests. Honestly, after having a nest, I can't go back to a regular bed. You're gonna love it."

"Nests?" she repeated with a laugh. "That's cute. Tell me more."

I talked about all the security we'd needed on Ortheema Station and all the gifts they'd literally tossed at me. It was clear by the end of my story that she had doubts.

"No one likes humans," she argued. "At best we're tolerated."

"I've heard there are some thriving human communities in the Ilgorian Federation," I said.

"But we don't have any firsthand evidence," she said. "The idea that the Ugarians let us live among them might be a myth."

"I know," I said. "But I'm firsthand evidence that Talins like us."

"As pets," she pointed out.

"Sure, as pets, but highly valued pets," I said. "Even if some Talin owners don't realize their humans are smart, they still want to shower them with gifts. I had dinner with a bunch of important Talins in their government. All six of them were enthralled by a simple game of rolling a ball back and forth with me."

"That's weird," she said. "When you first said pet I thought it was some kind of weird sex-slave thing, but they really think of us as pets?"

"They aren't encouraged to have sex with each other," I said. "I can guarantee that having sex with us wouldn't even cross most of their minds."

"But you've had sex with them?" she pressed.

"One of them," I corrected. "Tolly. His full name is Tolreum, but I call him Tolly. They all have long names. Lexarit, Mieshorum, and Narmuna are the other members of the crew and equal owners of the ship and business."

Mieshorum is back on Ortheema Station taking care of Sloane. We'll be going back there next."

"Sloane sounds like a human name," Cleo said.

"About that," I said with a shake of my head. "I might have tried to run away on a Marper station, got sold to a Vicpor, met a human woman named Sloane, then was rescued by Tolly and the guys."

Cleo burst out laughing, then groaned. "Damn it, Opal, don't make me laugh like that. My bladder is the size of a pea, and I just peed myself a little."

"Sorry about that," I said with a grin.

"Now explain that whole story with a lot more detail," she demanded.

"Opal!"

We both turned to see Irga hurrying down a perpendicular hall toward us.

"Irga! it's good to see you," I said.

"I heard the news that your captors came back and you escaped them," he said "I'm so proud of you. They returned here to kidnap Cleo next, didn't they? Don't worry, they'll be punished. You're both safe."

Cleo started laughing as I cursed under my breath. Damn it, this was all my fault.

"Come on," I said, tugging on our joined arms. "Change of plans. We're heading to the brig."

Chapter 24

Tolreum

“We should’ve planned for this,” Narmuna said. He was sitting on the only bench in the cell with Lexarit sitting next to him. They were both surprisingly calm, but I couldn’t stop pacing.

“This is all a misunderstanding,” Lexarit said. “When Opal finds out we’re here, she’ll explain to the authorities and we’ll be set free.”

I turned to face them, sounding an angry rattle. “Except we stole her! Even if she has forgiven us, it was still a crime. This could ruin us!”

“You’re being dramatic,” Narmuna said. “This is an inconvenience, nothing more.”

Horrible images of being incarcerated here filled my head. How long until I succumbed to the Ending because I couldn’t get access to my scent-bonded partner? I’d heard it was an excruciatingly painful death. Would I need to beg Narmuna or Lexarit to kill me?

After I was dead, who would protect Opal? Mieshorum was all the way on Ortheema Station and Narmuna and Lexarit would likely remain incarcerated.

She’d be all alone again and vulnerable. Another Vicpor might try to sell her to the highest bidder. She could end up with a Talin who would abuse her because she was clever and outspoken. What if they hit her? It would be easy to accidentally kill a human with one blow.

We were all doomed.

“Stop it,” Narmuna snapped.

I turned to face him. “Stop what? Pacing?”

“Stop thinking,” he demanded. “I swear I can hear your fear and panic growing. If this situation requires it, I'll contact the Committee of Stations and Travel. They would be more than eager to come to our aid. I'm waiting to see if it's necessary because I'd rather not owe them a favor.”

Narmuna's words helped pull me out of my spiral. “Yes, they'd have the authority to get us released. It might take some negotiating, but I'm not going to die in here.”

“Of course we're not going to die in here,” Lexarit said. “Even if we're found guilty, there's a strict limit to Massoc punishments.”

“He didn't say we,” Narmuna said, his eyes fixed on me. “He said *I'm not going to die in here*. Why would you die and not us? Is it because you've scent bonded to Opal?”

Narmuna's question made Lexarit sound a rumble of amusement.

“Are you only now figuring that out?” he asked Narmuna. “I think he scent bonded the first night Opal was with us.”

I jerked and looked at Lexarit. “You knew?”

He sounded another rumble of amusement. “It was hard to miss.”

“I didn't know,” Narmuna said.

“You didn't want to see it,” Lexarit said, “so you didn't.”

An annoyed rattle burst from Narmuna. “What do you mean by that?”

Lexarit sounded a soothing rumble. “Nothing really, only that you tend to overlook things you find distressing. I'm sure it's a coping mechanism you developed in the crash.”

“I do not,” Narmuna said. “It is not.”

We could both hear the defensiveness in his voice. That made me rumble with amusement.

“It's true,” I confessed. “I scent bonded with Opal.”

I thought Narmuna would be frustrated with me, but instead he relaxed a little. “That's good. That means there's no worry that you'll start Fading again.”

Relief made me slump against a wall.

“Do you think Mieshorum has scent bonded with Sloane?” Narmuna asked.

“Probably,” I said. “It's a nearly impossible urge to resist.”

“Interesting,” Narmuna murmured. “That explains why you're constantly rubbing your scent glands in her hair. I thought it was for Opal, but it's for you.”

“She enjoys it too, so it's for both of us,” I said, touching my face. My scent glands were overfull and aching.

“I'm sure they'll let Opal visit us once she explains everything,” Lexarit said.

“But why did she run away?” I asked. It was hard to say the next part. “Do you think it was all an act so we'd bring her back here and she could run away?”

Narmuna and Lexarit spoke at once.

“No, she wouldn't have done that.”

“She has no reason to run away.”

Even though both men were quick to assure me, I couldn't help the fear growing inside me like an unrelenting, thorned weed.

What if she didn't feel for me what I felt for her?

“You know how humans can make friends with everyone,” Lexarit said. “She was probably eager to tell one of her Massoc friends that she was fine. She wouldn't want anyone to worry about her.”

“That's true,” I agreed, feeling a little better. Perhaps she hadn't been running *from* me, but *to* someone else. This station had been her home for solars; she probably felt perfectly safe here and didn't think she needed us to keep her that way.

There was a loud conversation in the next room. We were in one of only two cells in the small brig they had on the station. They'd brought us in through a front administrative area, down a short hallway, and then shoved us into this cage.

We couldn't see the front area, but there were no doors so we heard everything. So far we'd heard a lot of conversation. Right now they were talking about transporting us to a station with a fully staffed justice service.

It would be so much worse if we were transferred away from our Opal and our ship.

More horrible scenarios filled my head.

Before I could work myself up into a panic, there was a commotion in the front area. Narmuna and Lexarit stood up and joined me at the front of the cell, curious about what was going on.

Then I heard Opal's voice. Relief hit me so hard that, for a moment, my legs felt weak.

"She's here," Lexarit said. "Thank the ancestors."

His relief made me think he hadn't been as confident as he pretended.

We all went quiet to listen. Opal kept repeating that it was all a misunderstanding, but the Massoc continued to insist that we couldn't simply be released.

A Massoc walked down the hall, but there was no sign of Opal yet, and I couldn't hear her talking any longer.

"I'm going to allow Soul Opal to come back here," the Massoc said. "If you threaten her in any way, I will increase the charges to include intimidation and implied threat of violence."

"We understand," Narmuna said before I could snarl at the Massoc.

The Massoc eyed us for a moment, then turned and left. When he walked back, Opal was at his side. Instead of leaving, he leaned against a wall, watching us.

Opal rushed to the bars but stopped when the Massoc made a warning sound. "Remember our agreement, Soul Opal," he said.

"Right, sorry, Soul Eegruf," she said, stopping several arms' lengths away from the front of the cell. There was still an argument going on in the front area, but I ignored it. Opal had all my attention.

"I'm so sorry about this," Opal said, hugging her arms around herself. "This is my fault. I shouldn't have run off before making everyone understand that you guys didn't do anything wrong."

"Do they not believe you?" Narmuna asked. I couldn't think of words while she was so close, but I couldn't touch her.

"It's complicated," she said. "They think I've been so traumatized that I'm not thinking straight. I have to take a bunch of tests to prove I'm not being manipulated."

"Then they'll release us?" Lexarit asked.

"Yes, after you pay a hefty fine," a new voice said. We all looked past Opal to see a heavily pregnant human walk into our area.

We all sounded rattles of surprise, but our noises stopped when the Massoc banged the wall.

"Stop that!" he snapped.

The new human came to a stop next to Opal and put her arm around Opal's shoulder.

Opal pointed at me. "That's Tolly. The guy next to him is Lexarit, and the next one is Narmuna. Guys, this is my sister-in-law and best friend, Cleo."

"Cleo," Lexarit whispered with deep reverence in his voice. "You're absolutely beautiful."

"You're pregnant," Narmuna said, sinking to his knees. "I'm going to protect you and the child. Nothing bad will ever happen to either of you."

"Whoa," Cleo said. "You guys are intense."

"I told you," Opal said with a smirk.

"Sister-in-law?" I said, finally processing Opal's words "Does that mean you're married to Opal's brother?"

How many humans were tucked away on this little, out-of-the-way station?

"Yes, I married Opal's brother, Jasper," Cleo said, then her smile disappeared. "He died about half a year ago."

I understood Opal's actions so much better now.

"You ran away to talk to Cleo without us," I said, watching Opal's face closely.

She frowned and nodded. "I knew you guys would insist she come with us once you knew about her. It was important for me that she had options."

I could see why she did it. There was no way I would've let her go anywhere alone. It would've been nearly impossible for her to have any conversation with Cleo without me seeing the new human. I didn't like it, but I understood.

"What did she say?" Lexarit asked.

I was confused by Lexarit's question, but Cleo chuckled.

"She can speak for herself," Cleo responded. "I've decided I want to stay with Opal, so I guess you guys get a new shipmate." Then she looked down at her stomach. "Or two."

"We'll do everything to the ship that you need to be comfortable," Lexarit said.

"Are you eating enough?" Narmuna asked. "It's important you consume enough nutrients for you and the growing pup."

"You don't look well," Lexarit said. "Is it because you were alone after we took Opal away? We promise you'll never need to be separated again."

I watched Cleo's expression go from a confused frown to amusement. She turned her head to address Opal. "You weren't exaggerating."

Before Opal could answer, an expression of pain furrowed Cleo's face.

“What's wrong?” Lexarit asked, his voice frantic.

Narmuna looked at the Massoc. “Get her to the station's medic or whatever passes for a healer here!”

The Massoc moved away from the wall and stood next to Cleo.

“Do you need me to get you a chair bot?” he asked gently.

Cleo puffed up her cheeks then blew the air out with force. “I'm fine; it was an uncomfortable moment.”

“Only uncomfortable?” Lexarit asked.

“Baby boy is doing backflips,” she said, rubbing her stomach. “It's nothing.”

Opal was rubbing Cleo's back, concern making her frown. “It was a long walk here, and I made her walk too fast. I'm sorry, Cleo. Let Eegruf call for a chair.”

Very much like Opal, Cleo was stubborn.

“It's silly to pay for a chair bot when I can walk,” she said.

“Wealth isn't an issue for you any longer,” Lexarit said. “Hire the chair bot. Go home and rest. Once we're released, we'll see to your every need.”

“You need to think of the pup,” Narmuna said. “Please, take the chair and let Opal care for you. We will be at your side soon.”

“Uh, okay, I guess I'll use a chair bot,” she agreed, looking amused again and letting Opal lead her to a bench against the wall. The two women sat down.

“I'll go call one,” Eegruf said, and went back into the front area. The moment he was gone, Opal rushed up to the front of our cell. Unlike me, she was able to slip her slim arms between the bars. She gave me an awkward hug, pressing her head against the bars.

“I'm so sorry, Tolly,” she said. “I'll fix this. The tests shouldn't take long. It's a standard mental wellness test. The Massoc use them for anyone who works around vital systems. I've taken a lot of them over the years.”

“But you'll make sure Cleo is comfortable before you go to take the test, right?” Narmuna asked.

“You should make her a small meal,” Lexarit said.

“Make sure the temperature in your domicile is comfortable for her,” Narmuna ordered.

“Guys, I've been taking care of myself for a long time,” Cleo said from her spot on the bench. “I'm much stronger than I look.”

Neither male said anything, but I knew they didn't agree with her.

Opal ignored Cleo and answered Lexarit and Narmuna. "I'll take her home first."

Reaching up to my face, Opal rubbed her hands against my scent glands. Bonding oil coated her hands, and she drew back to rub it into her mane.

We all heard Eegruf returning, so she jumped away to sit next to Cleo. "There was a chair bot not far away. It's almost here. You should meet it in the corridor."

"Thank you, Soul Eegruf," Cleo said.

Opal cast me a last look before helping Cleo stand then putting an arm around Cleo's back and guiding her out.

"Did you see her?" Narmuna said the moment we heard the main doors to the brig close. "Isn't she a lovely human?"

Lexarit sounded a rumble of agreement "She's so very small. Even tinier than Opal."

"But still strong," Narmuna said. "She lost her mate, and then we took Opal away. It's amazing she survived."

"The ancestors have blessed us," Lexarit said. "We must look after our blessings."

"You were right," I said, looking at Narmuna.

"Right about what?" Lexarit asked.

"I knew we'd find more humans," Narmuna said. "I just didn't think it would be so soon."

Chapter 25

Opal

"I've thought of a name," Cleo said, rubbing her stomach as the chair bot moved us back to our quarters.

"That's great," I said. Cleo had changed her mind on baby boy's name so many times, I didn't take this announcement seriously.

I wasn't paying much attention because I was impatient to get her home. Once she was there, I could go to the station wellness manager's office so I could go through all their tests and prove there wasn't anything wrong with my thinking.

Cleo looked up at me. "You're not going to ask?"

"What name are you thinking about?" I asked.

"Jasper Junior," she said. "We could call him JJ for short."

I stumbled, then had to fight back tears. "I think that's a great name."

Cleo gave me a knowing look. "I miss him every day. "

"Same," I whispered.

We traveled in silence until Cleo spoke again.

"Lexarit and Narmuna were very concerned about me," she said.

"We're all concerned about you," I said. "Growing an entire human isn't a small thing."

"But we're related," she pointed out. "They saw me and started talking about protecting me."

"I told you Talins are crazy about humans," I reminded her. "A pregnant human is probably even more important. Be prepared for a lot of insisting you eat and sleep. And they like to carry us around. They're going to be very focused on you."

"I'll try not to distract everyone too much," she said with a laugh.

"You think that's funny, but if we run into a random moon or comet, it'll be your fault," I said.

We talked and teased each other until we got back to our quarters. I helped her out of the chair bot and into her favorite chair. I put the stool close and helped her put her feet up. Then I draped her in a blanket.

"Go!" she said when I worried about fixing her a snack before I left. "JJ and I will be fine by ourselves. Go take the stupid tests so the guys don't have to spend the night in a cell."

"Love you," I said, then rushed out the door.

The wellness manager knew why I was there before I even said anything. She led me to the small testing room, went through the instructions, then left me to answer questions for the next several hours.

Although I'd told Tolly this wasn't a big deal, I hated these tests. They asked the same questions over and over again but worded slightly differently each time. There were questions I had to read several times before answering because they were so complicated, with too many double negatives.

Was there such a thing as a triple or quadruple negative?

By the time I was done my neck was stiff, my eyes burned from not blinking enough, I had a mild headache, and my throat was sore from talking so much. Sitting back with a sigh, I slapped my hand down on the display to end the test with my biosignature.

It chewed on all my answers for a few minutes, then spat out the result.

Past trauma is not salient to the current situation. No new trauma detected.

Yes! That was the answer I'd always gotten. Relief made me slump.

The door opened and the wellness manager stood there. "It's good to know you haven't been mentally injured by your recent experience. I'll forward your results to Soul Eegruf. Once the fine is paid, they'll be released."

I thanked her and left her office. I set off at a fast walk back home. As much as I wanted to go straight to the brig, I needed to get access to my

accounts. Massoc had strict protocols about wealth transfer. You had to have the correct type of expensive information square or Ident to do a transfer. Mine was tucked safely in a hidden spot in the kitchen area at home.

Home? No, that wasn't right. It wasn't home any longer. Ever Secure was home. Now that Cleo was coming with us, I felt like I could finally be eager for the future instead of scared.

"I'm going to need to clean out our account to pay the fine for the crew," I said as I walked into the cabin. "Don't worry about it because—"

I came up short and stopped talking as the door shut behind me.

Narmuna and Lexarit were kneeling on either side of Cleo. Then Tolly rushed over to me and picked me up in his arms, purring loudly.

"How did you get here?" I asked, relaxing in his hold.

"We paid the fine and they released us," he said. "I can only assume you passed whatever test they assigned you."

Carrying me to the only other chair in the room, Tolly purred and rubbed his scent glands into my hair.

"I missed you," he whispered, sitting down and settling me in his lap.

"Same," I said, feeling every bit of tension leave my body.

"What's wrong?" Narmuna's loud, worried question made both of us look over to where Cleo was sitting. "You're shifting around as if you're in pain."

She looked both amused and annoyed. "I have to pee, that's all."

Lexarit scooped her up and walked her the short distance to the elimination unit. He carried her inside, and we couldn't see either of them, but I could hear them clearly.

"No, you're not staying in here," Cleo said.

"What if you fall?" Lexarit said.

"I'm not going to fall," Cleo said. "Out."

Lexarit stepped out and the door shut, but he didn't move away from the door. Narmuna joined him and they both stood there, staring at the door until it finally opened again. I heard Cleo's surprised exclamation to find the two large Talins blocking her exit.

"I'm going to carry you back to the chair," Narmuna said, and Lexarit sounded a rumble of agreement.

"You don't need, oh fine," she said, giving up. Narmuna disappeared into the room and emerged with her cradled in his arms.

I was doing my best to keep from laughing, especially when she saw me biting my lip.

Lexarit settled her back in the chair, and Narmuna sat on the stool in front of her. As if they'd coordinated this before, Lexarit lifted her feet and settled them in Narmuna's lap.

"What are you doing?" Cleo asked.

"Caring for you," Narmuna said as he tugged off her slippers and began massaging her left foot. I snickered when Cleo's eyes rolled back in her head.

"Oh, okay," she murmured, relaxing her head against the back of her chair.

"We should leave as soon as we can," Lexarit said, standing behind Cleo and petting her head.

"Sure," she whispered, eyes closed and body relaxed. It was wonderful to see her like this.

"I'll pack your things," Lexarit said. Cleo hummed in agreement. I wasn't sure she even heard the words, she was too busy enjoying herself. Lexarit focused on Tolly. "Can you secure Opal's belongings?"

Tolly jumped to his feet, jostling me slightly. "Yes, if we're done within the mark we can leave before the next work-rest cycle employee exchange."

Narmuna stopped working on Cleo's foot and unclipped his Ident. She made a protesting sound, and he purred in response.

"I'm going to order shipping crates and hire a few cargo bots. Then I'll go back to touching you," he assured Cleo.

As he spoke, Tolly carried me past them and paused at the two doors in the back of our quarters.

"That one," I said pointing. When he got close I tapped the door display, and we walked in. He sat me down on the bed and looked around the compact space. Having him in here made it feel even tinier.

"This is unacceptable," he said.

I frowned. "Hey, I know I'm a little messy, but it's not that bad."

"No, that's not what I meant," he said with a purr. "This abode is much too small and dull for you. I can't believe you did so well in a space like this."

Honestly, this was better than some places I'd worked. When Jasper and Cleo got together, the three of us had to share a room even smaller than this

one. We'd slept in bunks, with me in a top bunk and Cleo and Jasper in the bottom one.

Occasionally I'd wake up to their muffled sounds and have to stay still and quiet while they enjoyed themselves. Talk about awkward!

Moving to Bright Star Station and getting separate rooms had been the biggest relief for all three of us!

I kept that to myself so I didn't make Tolly retroactively distressed. Standing up I looked around, mentally cataloging everything I wanted to take with me.

"Most of this can be donated to the Mental Wellness Department," I said.

"What? Why?" Tolly asked.

"When you don't have much, you hoard everything," I said and pointed to a pile of boxes in a corner. "Those boxes are full of broken items I've been using for parts. I don't need them now. Your ship is so new, most of that wouldn't even be compatible. Might as well feed it into a reclamator."

"That seems like a wise decision," Tolly agreed.

"And all those clothes are old and can be fed into a tailor machine to be turned into something else," I said. "The bedding is standard for the bunks on this station, but the bunks on Ever Secure are wider. So now all of it can go to the Mental Wellness Department."

"Why would they want your discarded items?"

"Oh, they're in charge of redistributing wealth and items to individuals and families who are struggling," I said. "That's how we were able to have food for the last few months. Everything I earned went to pay for our quarters, and there wasn't anything left over for food. The Mental Wellness Department kept us from having to pick between having a home and being able to eat."

"I'll make a donation to them before we leave," he said.

The door to the room opened and Lexarit was there, his arms full of travel boxes. Tolly took them, and together, we packed everything up. In the end there were only two boxes I was taking with me, mostly full of sentimental items I'd managed to hold onto despite all the moving around.

When we were done, Tolly insisted on carrying all the boxes except for the small protective case where I kept all my precious data crystals. Those data crystals held all the books, vids, and image captures I had from Old Earth and our family.

It only took him one trip to load my stuff into one of the cargo bots waiting in the hall.

It took him four trips to fill the second cargo bot with donations to the Mental Wellness Department.

By the look of the cargo bot going to Ever Secure, Cleo had been almost as brutal as I had been in taking only essentials.

There wasn't anything in the communal area I wanted to keep, so it all went with the donation cargo bot. By the time we were all done the place was as empty as when we'd all first moved in.

Cleo was standing in the center of the communal area with a stunned look on her face. "I can't believe this is happening."

"I know," I said. "It's a lot of change."

Cleo nodded and leaned against me. I wrapped my arms around her, and we stood in silence for a bit.

"I'm scared that we're leaving Jasper behind," she whispered.

"Jasper will always be with us," I said, working hard to hold back my tears. "We are Jasper, not this place."

"I know," she murmured. "It's only that I lived here longer than any other place."

"Hopefully we'll be living on the Ever Secure for a long time," I said.

She let out a long breath and straightened up. I let go and gave her a moment to rub her eyes before speaking.

When she was looking at me again, I pointed to the food preparation area. "I'm excited to get away from the possessed reconstitutor. I pity whoever moves in here next."

She chuckled. "You're the only one that had issues with the reconstitutor."

"It's out to get me," I said, pretending to be paranoid. "I swear, it tries to get me even when I'm not using it."

She laughed again. "You cussed at it when we first moved it. After that it never forgave you."

"I will speak nothing but pleasant words to Ever Secure," I vowed.

It wasn't that funny, but we both cracked up anyway. It was probably because neither of us wanted to cry anymore.

"Everything is finished," Tolly said, interrupting our laughter. "Are the two of you ready to depart?"

"Sure, but we need to pick up a few things," I said, thinking about all the items I'd shipped to Cleo from Twin Star Station. I wasn't leaving them

behind.

It didn't take long to do that last few things and soon we were heading to the ship to leave. I was walking slow and without a word, Tolly picked me up to carry me. I was suddenly exhausted and didn't ask him to put me down. I snuggled against him and watched Narmuna lift Cleo into his arms. She rested her hands on her belly, her head against his shoulder, and closed her eyes.

I grinned. In less than a few hours she was already getting used to being cared for by Talins.

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Chapter 26

Tolreum

I wasn't surprised to find the healers waiting for us in the bay with two medical beds. Narmuna didn't hesitate to set Cleo down on the bed, but Opal refused to lay in the other.

"I'm fine," she said. "I want to walk next to Cleo. She's never been here before. I need to be close so I can explain things to her."

That wasn't a bad idea. None of us wanted Cleo to be taken by surprise by what she experienced here.

Opal had spent several marks telling Cleo about Ortheema Station and what to expect from the Talins there, especially the crowds. I was thankful for that because we'd been forced to send a message about Cleo. If two adult humans had caused a fuss before, a pregnant human might create a riot!

All of Opal's descriptions couldn't truly prepare Cleo for a station full of eager Talins.

I was relieved to see six law keepers standing nearby. I left Opal to argue with the healers and walked to the nearest law keeper.

"Greetings," I said, hitting my chest with my fist. He returned the gesture.

"I'm glad to see both humans look healthy," she said. "I'm Law Keeper Moreum. The rest of my law keepers are maintaining a clear path for us to reach medical."

“I don’t think either of them will be there for long,” I said. “Neither is sick, and Cleo only needs to be monitored.”

“That’s a surprise,” she said with a startled rattle. “I was expecting that the pregnant human would require extensive time in medical. Your suite is large enough to accommodate all of you, so we can take you there when the healers are finished.”

I sounded a negative rattle. “We will be staying on the ship. Acquiring these humans has been expensive, and we need to be more conservative with our funds for now.”

“You’re not being charged for the suite,” Moreum said. “You can use it for as long as you wish to remain on the station. Even though no one can see Sloane, there’s been more travel through this station than ever before. The station is producing a lot of wealth and wishes for all of you to stay.”

“That’s helpful,” I said, feeling a little shocked.

“Your docking fees are also being waived,” Moreum continued. “You have a daily stipend to spend at any of the restaurants on this station. That doesn’t include the daily food pack delivery that will be brought to your suite.”

This was all too generous. “Even if we’re bringing in wealth by drawing in visitors, there must be a price.”

Moreum sounded a rumble of agreement. “The station director will speak with you about this later, but she has one request in exchange for all this.”

“Please tell me so I’m prepared,” I said.

Moreum hesitated for a moment, then rumbled in agreement. “To keep a mob from forming and causing trouble, the station director has started a raffle. Anyone who wants to meet the humans enters it and has an equal chance of having a dinner with Opal.”

“No,” I snapped with an angry rattle. “This should’ve been discussed with me first.”

Moreum didn’t react to my aggression. “You can say no, but I suggest you don’t. The station director is an honorable female who’s only trying to do what’s best for everyone. She set aside a great deal of resources to keep station crew and visitors away from medical while Human Sloane healed. She is only requesting that Opal attend one dinner every eight rotations with a Talin who wins the lottery. It’s a simple meal and interaction. You’ll be there, and at least two of my law keepers will be with you. Many are upset that the Committee of Stations and Travel was able to meet with her but no

one else. If we are truly an egalitarian society, we need to give everyone the hope to meet Opal.”

I could see the logic of it, but I wasn't happy. “Let me discuss it with Opal.”

“Opal needs to agree,” Moreum pressed. “My law keepers are running double shifts right now. If there's unrest on the station, I could be forced to take drastic measures. No one wants that.”

I rumbled in agreement. “If necessary, we'll all leave.”

“With a healing human and a pregnant one?” Moreum questioned, the implication clear. They would receive excellent treatment here, but we were on the edge of Talin-controlled space. The closest gate would take us further away from needed healers and resources instead of closer. A gate that would send us further into the Talin Empire would require weeks of travel.

Moreum was right. I needed Opal to agree to these dinners.

“Fine, both of you can ride on this bed,” Healer Grifforum said with an amused rumble, catching my attention. I turned to see Grifforum lifting Opal onto the bed where Cleo was already sitting.

Opal wrinkled her nose, as if smelling something she didn't like, before forcing a smile on her face. “Thank you.”

The healer gave a little purr then began instructing the other healers about how to best move the bed through the station. Lexarit and Narmuna took positions on either side of the bed, each of them finding excuses to touch Cleo.

Cleo looked unsure, but with Opal on the bed she didn't seem as worried.

“I'll speak to her as soon as we get to medical,” I said, then left Moreum to stand next to Lexarit at the side of the bed.

“This is a lot,” Cleo murmured as one of the healers guided the bed. “I mean, you told me, but I didn't really believe you.”

“I know,” Opal said with a chuckle.

Cleo shook her head as if having a hard time believing what she was experiencing.

As when we'd left, there were crowds gathered on upper levels in all the open spaces. They spoke quietly among themselves, but there was no shouting and nothing was being thrown. I was sure Moreum was responsible for that. I was thankful. This was already overwhelming for Cleo. I couldn't imagine how much worse it would be for her if the crowd acted out.

When we got to medical, I was surprised to see all the alcoves open and empty.

"Where's Sloane?" Opal and I asked at the same time.

"She's in the suite the station provided," Healer Grifforum said. "One of us goes there every rotation to check on her. She is healing well, and we decided being in a larger and quieter place would be beneficial."

I highly doubted he'd let her go without a fight. Healers didn't like to release their patients until there was absolutely nothing they needed to do. Mieshorum must have insisted she be allowed to leave.

That couldn't have been easy. I was proud of Mieshorum.

"That's good," Opal said.

"Suite?" Cleo said. "Fancy! I can't wait to see it."

"You might need to spend a day or two here," Healer Grifforum warned Cleo.

She frowned at him. "Why? A scan and a few tests shouldn't take that long."

"We need to be thorough," Healer Grifforum explained. "We can't be too careful with you and the pup's health."

Cleo snickered. "I can't believe you guys call babies pups. I'm not having a litter."

"Would you rather I used cub?" Healer Grifforum asked. I noticed he didn't offer to call her child a baby. Baby was what we called our own offspring, so I thought it might be too close for Healer Grifforum to feel comfortable. With my eyes open to what humans truly were, I could see all the word layers we built to separate us from them.

"Where is the cub's sire?" Healer Jastura asked

Cleo looked at Opal, who answered, "Jasper died."

"Do you know what caused his death?" Healer Jastura asked. "If it was genetic we could look for the same markers in the pup."

"I don't think that's going to be an issue," Opal stated dryly. "I don't think dying in a poorly maintained station to ship corridor can be inherited."

"Poor humans," Healer Jastura said. "I wish the Ever Secure had found you sooner."

Opal looked over and met my eyes. "I agree."



Opal

The healers reluctantly let Cleo leave after only a few hours. She looked exhausted, and the winning argument came from Narmuna who pointed out she needed to rest and would do better in the suite than in medical.

I thought we'd be in the same suite as before, but the law keepers escorted us to an entirely different section.

"This is where employees and station residents live," Moreum explained.

It was hard, but I kept my expression pleasant. On most stations, the employee and resident units were smaller and not as well cared for as the guest rooms. We were expected to pay as much but get less.

My gasp was genuine when we walked into a luxurious suite. The communal room by itself was larger than every place I'd ever lived put together.

Okay, that might be a slight exaggeration, but only by a little.

The food preparation area was as big as the galley on the ship, and all the furniture looked brand new.

Tolly set me down, but I didn't rush anywhere. I walked to the center and took everything in.

Mieshorum came out of one of the rooms and smacked his fist to his chest. "It's good to see all of you."

"We missed you too," I said and pointed to the room he came out of. "Is Sloane in there?"

"Yes, that's our room," he said. "I can ask if she wishes to speak with you."

"Tell her there's another human for her to meet," I said.

Mieshorum turned his attention to where Lexarit was setting Cleo on her feet.

"Hello, Cleo," he said. "I read about you in the message Narmuna sent. I'm delighted that you're here."

She gave him a little wave. "Hi. You're Mieshorum, right?"

"Yes, you're correct," Mieshorum said. "But Sloane has given me the name Papa Bear, so I'd like to go by that now."

Cleo choked on a laugh. "Sure thing, Papa Bear."

I shot her a warning look, then addressed Mieshorum. "Papa Bear is a great nickname. But it's the kind of nickname you want only Sloane to use."

"But I want everyone to know Sloane gave me a nickname," he argued. Apparently getting a nickname from a human was a big deal among the Talins.

"We often have multiple nicknames for the same individual," I said. "How about we call you Bear, and Sloane can call you Papa Bear?"

"Are you giving me a second nickname?" he asked, sounding an excited rattle.

"I guess so," I said.

He slapped his fist to his chest again. "Thank you for the honor, Opal."

"You're welcome," I said, working hard to keep from laughing.

"I'll go see if Sloane would like to converse," he said and went back into the room.

"I guess we get to choose from the other rooms," I said.

"Each room has its own elimination unit and cleansing unit," Moreum said. "The station supply clerk asks that you send all requests directly to him."

"All these doors are rooms?" I asked, floored. There were seven doors in the suite!

"No, that one is storage," Moreum said, pointing to the one closest to the food preparation area. "Right now it's full. Gifts keep coming for the humans. We've had to utilize one of the storage lockers in bay four to accommodate everything. When you are rested and ready, we'd like to start bringing the items up here for you to go through."

"I hope there wasn't anything edible in those gifts," I quipped.

Unsurprisingly, Moreum didn't hear my humor. "We checked for perishable items before we stored them. All those items were brought here for Mieshorum and Sloane to enjoy."

"This is all very nice of you," I said.

Moreum looked at Tolly. "It is."

Tolly sounded a rumble of agreement, but it was stifled. As if he was having to force it out. Curious. I was going to have to ask about all this subtext later.

Mieshorum came back out. "Sloane feels well and is interested in seeing you, Opal."

“Great,” I said and rushed across the room before Sloane could change her mind. Mieshorum followed me inside. It wasn't as dark as her room had been in medical, but the light was low enough that it took my eyes a moment to adjust.

When I could see, I almost laughed. There wasn't a bed or bunk in the room. Instead there was a giant nest like the one Tolly had made for me on the ship, but even nicer. The number of pillows making up the outside of the nest was enough that she could sit up by resting on them. All the blankets looked both colorful and plush.

“Oh, nice bed,” I said, kneeling down next to the nest and resting my elbows on the pillow rim.

Sloane was near the center, sitting up and supported by even more pillows. Talins really loved their pillows.

I took a moment to examine Sloane. We'd only been gone about twelve days, but she looked much better. I didn't think she'd put on any weight, but there was a healthy glow to her skin, and her eyes were all cleared up.

“I'm glad you're back,” she said. Her voice almost sounded normal, but her expression was hard to read and her words were toneless. I couldn't tell whether she was being sarcastic or genuine.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Better,” she said. “At least I think so.”

That was confusing. “What do you mean *you think so*?”

“Don't badger Sloane,” Mieshorum warned me. He'd walked over to a far wall to give us the illusion of privacy. Now he took a step toward me as if ready to escort me out of the room.

“I'm not badgering her,” I said. “I honestly don't understand.”

“It's fine, Papa Bear,” Sloane said, and I could hear the affection in her voice. Well this was new.

Mieshorum backed off and returned to leaning against the wall. Sloane rubbed her hands over her face, then met my gaze again.

“I'm not talkative,” she said.

I barely held back my snort. “I noticed that about you.”

She nodded. “I have some stuff going on, in my head. It's, uh, I don't like talking about it, but sometimes it's hard.”

I tilted my head. “What's hard?”

“Figuring out if my brain is lying to me,” she said.

“Lying in what way?”

She stared down at her hands, talking slowly, as if it was hard to pull the words out. "Lying about life. Like, if I should give up or keep going."

I thought I understood. "Like when you said you were so close to ending it and you were disappointed to be alive?"

"Maybe," she said. "It's hard to live with pain, and sometimes you just want it to all go away, you know?"

I didn't know whether she meant mental or physical pain, but honestly it didn't matter. They were both debilitating. If Cleo hadn't been pregnant, I don't think either of us would have survived losing Jasper. Trapped in a cold, cruel universe, Baby JJ gave us something to pour our hope into.

"But you don't think that way now?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Sometimes. Other times I'm back where I was when you found me. I guess I'm not actively dying anymore, but my brain doesn't seem to want to understand that."

I didn't know how to respond and, of course, my morbid sense of humor popped up. "Does your brain realize if you die then it dies too? That's not very survival oriented."

She blinked, processing my words before a quick smile flashed across her face. "I don't think the part of me that wants death cares."

I don't know if I'd felt this awkward in a long time. "I brought my sister, Cleo, back with me," I blurted.

"Mieshorum mentioned there was another human," Sloane said. "Does she want to be here?"

This question put me on conversationally solid ground. "I made sure she did before the guys met her. I might've gotten them in a little trouble, but it all worked out."

"Maybe I can meet her later," Sloane said.

If that wasn't a suggestion to leave, I didn't know what was. "Sure. Whenever you're ready, just tell Mieshorum."

Then I turned around and practically ran out of the room and away from one of the most awkward interactions I'd ever had.

One thing was for certain, I was never meant to be a therapist!

Chapter 27

Opal

After eight days of rest, I was going a little stir crazy in the suite. That led me to warning Tolly I needed a job to keep busy. He and the guys had plenty to do.

Mieshorum was taking care of Sloane, Lexarit and Narmuna were taking turns fussing over Cleo, and she was soaking up the attention. But I wasn't pregnant and was perfectly healthy. The inactivity was starting to get to me.

There were only so many hours I could study ship schematics and repair manuals.

I tried to rewatch my favorite Ugarian drama shows, but I'd seen them so many times I could recite every line. I even spent some time on the station's Unibase looking for something to read, but Talins didn't do fiction. They didn't even have an exciting creation myth to read about.

It made me look forward to the dinner the station director had arranged. When Tolly first told me about it, I was a little annoyed. Now I was eager.

Because I was excited for anything interesting, I took extra time getting ready. I even styled my hair in a way that had been popular where I spent a few years while growing up. After dividing my hair in half, I French braided each side. After tying them off, I made small buns with the braids at the back of my head.

Once my hair was done, I stared at my reflection in the cleansing unit mirroring display. My mom had some makeup when I was a child, but by the time I was a teenager no one had it any longer. Not only was human makeup hard to get, we didn't have spare funds to spend on luxury items.

Maybe that's what I could do with my spare time, develop a few basic makeup items. Eyeliner, blush, and lip gloss shouldn't be too hard, and I knew Cleo would enjoy it too.

"You look nice," Cleo said, making me jump. I had left the cleansing unit door open because I'd gone back and forth trying on different outfits. I'd finally decided on a deep plum wrap and black pants.

I marveled at how wonderfully soft the fabric of both items was. Honestly, all the clothing I had was simply lovely. I had more clothes now than all the humans I'd ever known all put together.

"I feel pretty," I sang, doing a twirl for Cleo.

She clapped at my show. "Perfect. I'm sorry I'm not going to the dinner with you. I feel horrible."

"I've done this once already," I said. "It's easy."

She nodded then waddled over to one of the chairs in the room. Talins didn't tend to have chairs with backs so the guys had several human-style chairs specifically made for us.

With a sigh of relief, Cleo leaned back.

"I feel like all I do these days is eat and sleep," she grumbled.

"You're growing an entire human," I reminded her, slipping on a pair of black slipper-shoes. "And you're due any day. I think you're allowed to take it easy right now."

When I straightened up, I noticed an anomaly. Cleo was alone. "Where are Lexarit and Narmuna?"

She snorted. "I told them I needed to talk to you alone."

"Do you?" I asked. "Or did you need a little time away from the guys?"

She picked at one of her fingernails instead of meeting my gaze. "I think I need to talk."

I pulled one of the chairs over to sit in front of her. "What's going on?"

She didn't respond right away. I wasn't the most patient person, but I knew Cleo. She was putting her thoughts together so I forced myself to stay silent.

"I still love Jasper," she said.

"I don't doubt that at all," I said, feeling a little confused.

She went silent again, still staring at her fingers and scraping at a raw spot on her thumb with her middle finger. I took both her hands in mine.

"Hey, what's going on?" I asked.

She met my gaze, her expression worried and a little scared. "What if I like Narmuna and Lexarit?"

"What kind of like?" I asked.

"The kind of like that could lead to love," she said. Her expression turned to one of deep guilt.

"Don't feel bad." I pointed to myself. "I can tell you from experience that it's easy to fall in love with these guys."

"You don't understand," she whispered. "It feels like I'm betraying Jasper."

"I never expected you to stay a lonely widow for the rest of your life," I said. "And Jasper wouldn't have wanted that either."

"He always teased me that I wasn't allowed to find anyone more handsome than him if he died before me," she said with a watery chuckle.

I wasn't sure what to say. "Well, the guys are big and pretty, but Jasper was definitely cuter." That sounded horribly awkward to me so I tried again. "I mean, everyone is pretty in their own way. Um, Lexarit has really nice quills, and Narmuna's coloring seems unique."

"Stop," Cleo said, with a shake of her head.

"Sorry," I said.

"You're so bad at this," she said.

"I know," I said. "That's one of the reasons I love you so much. You always took care of all the emotional conversations. Does Jasper's joke about not being with someone handsome really bother you? I promise he didn't mean it."

She rolled her eyes at me. "I know that," she said, with an amused huff.

"Then what's going on?" I asked. "Explain it to me like I'm Opal."

She blinked. "You are Opal."

"I know. That's why you need to talk slowly."

She snorted, then her expression turned serious. "I thought we'd be together forever, and when he said that, I always pictured us old and gray. He wasn't supposed to leave me this soon. Now I'm going from being in deep mourning to potentially falling in love with two other males while I'm still pregnant with Jasper's child. It feels like I'm being selfish and not honoring Jasper's role in my life enough."

“Oh,” I said, finally understanding. This was about guilt. “I’m bad at this.”

“Tell me what Jasper would say about this whole situation,” Cleo requested. “I don’t care if you think it would be negative, I need to know. Do you think he’d be upset with me?”

I bit my lip, debating about being honest.

“Talk,” Cleo demanded.

“Right, so I don’t know if you knew this, but Jasper was bi,” I said.

“What?”

“Did he tell you about his crazy ex, Wren?”

She nodded. “Of course. Wren is why he can’t ever eat jorga again.”

“Wren was a guy,” I said.

Cleo’s jaw dropped open. “What? How did I not know that?”

I shrugged “I thought you did, but then this conversation happened. If you want me to be honest, here it is. If Jasper was here, he would have fallen in love with Lexarit and Narmuna with you.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” I said, giving her hand a squeeze. “He would have soaked up all the attention. You know how much he liked to be touched.”

“Notoriously,” she said.

When we’d traveled from our old station to Bright Star Station, we’d shared a large room with the crew. After getting up in the middle of the rest period to use the elimination facility and still half asleep, Jasper had accidentally climbed into the wrong bunk and cuddled up to a Massoc. The Massoc had been amused and cuddled Jasper back. The next morning had been hilarious.

“But most importantly, he would’ve loved to know you had help. When he found out you were pregnant he was excited, but he was scared too. I know in my heart he’d be so very happy that we’re safe and cared for.”

Cleo let go of one of my hands to rub her chest over her heart. “I can feel you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” I said.

“Cleo?” Lexarit’s voice came through the room’s door display. “Are you done talking to Opal? Healer Grifforum is here to do your daily check.”

“Are we done?” I asked. “I mean, we could talk after the healer is done, or I guess we could tell him to come back later.”

Cleo snorted. “It’s fine. You did a good job.”

"I did?" I said with a grin. "I should get a treat."

"Your treat is that you don't have to talk about this anymore," she said.

"Yay," I said.

"Today," she finished at the same time I was cheering. Then she burst out laughing at my exaggerated pout.

"Cleo?" Lexarit said again, making the display chime several times. None of the guys were patient when they weren't with us.

"She's coming," I called out, although I wasn't sure if the door display transferred my voice. I helped Cleo to her feet and we walked to the door. It slid open to reveal Lexarit, Grifforum, and Tolly.

"Moreum and several other law keepers are here to escort us to the meal," Tolly said.

I went to him as Lexarit lifted Cleo up to carry her off to their room.

"I'm ready," I said. "Let's go play with some new Talins."



We went to the same room we used when meeting the Committee of Travel and Stations. It even had the same layout, with rugs covering the floor and a ring of pillows. This time there were way more pillows though.

Unlike with the committee, there were four individuals instead of six. They were sitting and talking with each other, but all conversation stopped when we walked in.

Moreum made introductions, starting with the Talin sitting closest to the door and going clockwise. "This is Uforum. She works in the Office of Commerce. Next to her is Tishora. She is here on a contract to retrofit one of the enviro systems. Then there is Gislorum. She is one of my law keepers. And this one closest to us is Pesorum. She works at one of the merchant shops."

"I own the shop," Pesorum corrected, never taking her eyes off me.

"What kind of shop?" I asked as Tolly guided me to a spot to sit. Like last time, he sat behind me. I would've liked to have Narmuna or Lexarit on either side of me, but I couldn't fault them for wanting to take care of Cleo.

"I procure hard to find foods and spices," she said. "But I also have a strong trade relation with a Ugarian colony that sends me slash tea at a good price, so now I supply the entire station."

“That’s impressive,” I said, scooting back a little so I could be between Tolly's outstretched legs.

Pesorum sounded a rumble of agreement as Uforum launched into what she did. They all took turns trying to impress me with how important or distinguished their jobs were. It was cute. It reminded me of kids all trying to outdo each other to amaze a parent.

“I think perhaps we should play some games,” Moreum said. “Opal might get bored.”

I didn't mind them talking, but the moment Moreum said that, every single one of them produced a ball. I had to stifle a laugh.

When all the balls rolled to me at once, I gave up and laughed loudly as I gathered them up.

“Do you want to play a human game?” I asked.

They all sounded rumbles of agreement.

I held up the only blue ball. “It’s called hot potato. You have to pass this to the next person as fast as you can. The person who has it when the time runs out loses.”

“What’s a potato?” Pesorum asked.

“It was an Old Earth food,” I explained.

“Who will keep time?” Uforum asked.

I looked up at Moreum. “Could you pick a number between 5 and 20 and silently count down?”

“What should I say when the time is up?” Moreum asked with a rumble of agreement.

“Uh, hot potato?” I said.

Moreum sounded a rumble of agreement. “I’ll begin counting the moment the ball is in motion.”

I nodded and rolled it to Pesorum. We played until I was the only one left. Everyone cheered, and we started again. After I won four games in a row, I realized they were making sure I won.

Right, time for a new game. Before I could think of something, the food arrived. I wasn’t super hungry, but I snacked as everyone ate and asked me questions.

“Do you know where your dam and sire are?” Gislorum asked.

Pesorum sounded a sharp rattle. “The entry on Human Opal in the Unibase says her dam and sire are dead.”

Gislorum sounded a worried rumble. "I'm sorry. I didn't know there was an entry. I'll study it carefully after we're done here. I hope my question didn't upset you, Human Opal."

"There's an entry of me?" I asked.

"You and Sloane," Pesorum said. "I hope your owners add an entry on Cleo soon."

I looked over my shoulder at Tolly. "Did you do that?"

He sounded a negative rattle. "No, it was probably one of the healers."

That made sense; they'd all seemed eager to write about us.

"The entry only mentioned your dam and sire," Pesorum said. "Do you have any other family?"

"Some cousins," I said.

"Do you know where they're located?" Gislorum asked.

I shook my head. "No. We lost contact years ago."

"Where were they the last time you saw them?" Gislorum pressed. "I might be able to track them down."

I knew that was unlikely. "Hiperk Station. We all left at the same time because it was being decommissioned. I haven't seen them since. That was about six or seven years ago."

"That had to be difficult for you," Tishora said.

"It wasn't that bad," I said, although it would've been a lot harder if Jasper hadn't found a job on the same station I went to.

Tishora purred. "You're such a brave human."

"Have you met any other humans?" Gislorum asked.

"No," I said, lying through my teeth. "The universe is vast, and there aren't many of us out there. I'm lucky to have Cleo in my life."

They all purred, and several of them spoke at once about how strong I was to have managed so long without a Talin master to take care of me.

I heard Tolly's amused rumble behind me. It was nice to have a shared joke.

The dinner was enjoyable, but by the time the food was all gone and we'd played a few more games, I was tired.

Scooting back against Tolly, I exaggerated a yawn. Tolly was quick to act.

"Opal needs to rest," he said, wrapping his arms around me and tucking me close.

Moreum stepped up. "This event is now finished. Please leave quietly and calmly. Have a fruitful rotation."

I expected some arguments, but they all got up and left without making a sound except for purring. When the four lottery winners were gone, Moreum crouched down in front of me.

“Are you in distress or truly only fatigued?” she asked. “If this went too long, I can stop it sooner next time.”

“Oh, um, no, this was fine,” I said. “I’m only a little tired.”

Moreum sounded a rumble of agreement. “You were able to converse for three marks. That was much longer than I expected. You did very well, Human Opal. Next time, if you need to end the event, do the same thing you did this time.”

“Thanks, Law Keeper Moreum,” I said. Feeling affectionate for this Talin, I reached out to pat her knee. “Can I give you a nickname?”

Moreum sounded an excited rattle. “I’d be honored.”

“Do you like the sound of Mora?” I asked.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Please use that from now on. Tell the other humans they can use it also.”

I grinned. “I will.”

“Do you need to rest here for a while, or should we make our way back to your suite right now?” Moreum asked.

I didn’t have a reason to linger in the room, but I didn’t feel like going back to the suite. While I hesitated, a new Talin walked into the room.

Moreum jumped to her feet and smacked her chest. “Greetings, Station Director Hestorum.”

Tolly moved to stand up, but Hestorum was quick to make a negative rattle. “Remain seated.”

She moved further into the room and knelt in almost the exact same position as Moreum had been in.

“Greetings, Human Opal,” she said with a purr. “I’m pleased to meet you. You’ve been an asset to this station.”

“Hi,” I said. I looked up at Tolly hoping he’d be able to guide me on what to say to the station director. This Talin had a lot of power over us, and we needed to be careful.

Thankfully Hestorum didn’t need us to say anything.

“I’ve had several in-depth conversations with Healer Grifforum about Human Cleo,” she said. “After she gives birth, they should stay here for at least forty rotations. I want to assure you that all of you can stay here also.”

“Thank you,” I said when she paused. She sounded a rumble of agreement and continued talking.

“Your owners won’t be charged for anything, and I won’t increase the frequency of these dinners. I also won’t request that Human Cleo or Human Sloane attend. I understand that breeding humans are delicate. Grifforum has also explained that Human Sloane might never truly recover.”

“That’s correct,” I said. Cleo might want to do one of these meet and greets, but not yet. She had some stuff to work out with Lexarit and Narmuna, and of course there was JJ waiting for his time to come into the world.

She sounded a negative rattle. “It’s unfortunate that the crew of the Ever Secure didn’t find all of you sooner. Still, it’s excellent that you are perfectly healthy and Human Cleo will soon have a healthy cub. We’ll be the only station with a human cub and the pride of the Stromo line of stations.”

“That’s very good,” I agreed.

“It is,” she agreed and stood up. “Have a fruitful rotation, Fuel Security Engineer Tolreum. Stay healthy and happy, Human Opal.”

Then she turned and left. After that awkward interaction I was ready to be back in the suite. I especially wanted a secure place to go over what the conversation meant and if we needed to be worried.

“Let’s go,” I murmured.

“Certainly,” Tolly said, standing up with me cradled in his arms. I loved that when he held me like this, I felt safe from everything. I nestled my face against the strip of bare skin at the base of his neck and closed my eyes, trusting that Tolly would take care of everything.

Chapter 28

Opal

“What are you doing?” Cleo asked, half sitting, half falling into my nest. Tolly and the guys were all at a meeting with the station director. I wanted to go, but they’d asked me to stay back this time.

The only thing that made me agree is that they’d taken an information square and promised to record the entire meeting so I could listen later. While I waited, I settled down in my nest with an information square, searching the station's Unibase for anything interesting.

“Do you know a Talin can’t stay on Talarian unless they have property there? Talarian is their homeworld. That law is so strict there aren't any lodgings they can pay to stay at. If they're working on a ship going there, they have to stay aboard the ship. They can’t even leave the port to walk around or anything. And there’s a limit on how many Talins can live on the homeworld.”

“That’s interesting,” she said, wiggling around a little to get comfortable.

“They have local government units, called clans. Each clan sends a representative to a city called Moravi, that’s the city on Talarian where their monarch and government reside. Those representatives gather together to form a part of the federal government called the Apogee Assembly. They have a monarch, but that individual's power is limited by the Law of Civil Duty. I guess it’s a kind of governing document that outlines each part of

the government and their duties. It turns out there are three times more Talins on colonies than on the homeworld, but they get less representation. I think they're even looked down on a little."

Cleo held up a hand. "Enough! I wouldn't have come in here if I knew you were going to give me a civics lesson."

I chuckled. "Sorry. What would you like to talk about?"

"I'm worried we'll lose out on a lot of work if we stay here for too long," Cleo said. "I know we're not paying for this suite or docking here, but we're still losing money every day we aren't fulfilling contracts."

The moment Cleo realized she really was part owner of Ever Secure, she'd demanded to see the finances. The guys hadn't hesitated to give her access. I had a feeling this conversation was partially because of that.

"There will always be contracts waiting," I said. "There will only ever be one Baby JJ. Let's be safe and do as Healer Grifforum suggests and stay here."

"I know," she said. "But I feel bad. They spent an intense amount of wealth to go through the private gate to get you here from the Marper station. It nearly emptied out the wealth they'd saved for a second ship."

"Now I feel guilty," I said. "I should've told them to just cut my leg off instead of getting treatment. Much cheaper."

Actually I had because of the pain, but I hadn't told Cleo about that. I never wanted her to know how badly I'd been hurt.

She shook her head and reached out to smack me. "You know that's not what I meant. It's only that I want us to be successful."

"This whole adventure might have been a financial setback for the guys," I said. "But it was definitely a net positive for all of us. Besides, once we start working again, we're going to make a fortune. Have Tolly show you some of the contract offers we've been flooded with. We're going to have more work than we'll ever be able to handle, at rates well over what the guys got paid before."

"I didn't know that," she murmured, looking relieved. "I guess it's okay if we stay here for a while."

"It'll be good for us to luxuriate," I said, lifting my arms up and lacing my hands behind my head. I stretched back onto some pillows with exaggerated movements. "Hmmm, nice."

Cleo shook her head and picked up the information square in my lap and waggled it in the air.

“Reading about the Talin government is relaxing?” she scoffed, “You need something to do.”

I nodded and sat back up. “I desperately need something to do. I’m not used to being idle!”

“You should write about everything that’s happened to you,” she said, handing the information square back.

“What?”

“Like a biography,” she said. “You could send it out to a few places that might have humans so, if they want to risk it, they could travel to the Talin Empire. You could include the stuff we didn’t expect, like how they don’t raise their own kids and stuff.”

I nodded. “That’s not a bad idea. I could make a serial so every time I encounter a new misunderstanding I could add another chapter. What would I call it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, something catchy like *Human Pets of Talin* or something. That’s to the point and attention grabbing.”

I liked the idea. Right now I had at least five or six chapters worth of experiences, including explaining about all the sounds they made.

“If we ever meet other human pets, I could get their stories too,” I said. “I’m sure everyone has an interesting first-contact story.”

Cleo opened her mouth, but the room door slid open before she could say anything. Tolly, Narmuna, and Lexarit all rushed in, sounding excited rattles.

“We have something to show you!” Lexarit burst out, bending over to lift Cleo into his arms.

She made an uncomfortable face but covered it quickly with a smile. “What’s going on?”

“It’s a surprise,” Tolly said. He reached down to pick me up, but I scrambled to my feet before he could.

“Can I walk?”

He sounded a rumble of agreement. “Certainly. All the law keepers and the station director are waiting in the hall for us.”

“That’s not intimidating at all,” I muttered, letting Tolly herd me out of the room behind Lexarit with Cleo in his arms. She looked over Lexarit’s shoulder and gave me a questioning look. I shrugged my shoulders.

I couldn’t guess what was going on.

“Greetings humans,” Station Director Hestorum said after we’d all shuffled out of the suite door. All the law keepers were a distance down the hall, standing at attention. Were we going to attend a ceremony?

“Hello, Station Director Hestorum,” I said. This was only the second time I’d met her, but she was a powerful presence you didn’t forget quickly.

“It’s too bad Human Sloane remains fragile,” she said, then stared at Cleo. “You look uncomfortably round, Human Cleo.”

Cleo looked down at me, and I put an arm on her leg before answering the director. “She’s both uncomfortable and round. But she’s also beautiful.”

Hestorum sounded a rumble of agreement, dropping her attention to me. “Yes, she is a very pretty human. I’m sure her offspring will be equally as lovely. You look very nice today, Opal. It’s nice to see your mane loose, although it should be longer.”

I almost responded with how nice and pointy her quills were but clamped my jaw shut in time. I’d have to ask Tolly later if there was any kind of compliment I could give Talins in the future.

“Let’s proceed,” she said. “I don’t have much time. I have to inspect the new bot installation in bay four after this.”

She turned and led us to where all the law keepers were waiting. Half of them began walking when she was almost to them. The other half waited until we’d passed before moving. Their movements were a little stiff, and none of them looked at each other or the station director.

This felt strangely formal.

“We’re going to a good thing, right?” I whispered to Tolly. “I don’t want to witness a public execution or anything.”

He sounded a rumble of amusement. “We don’t do that, but why would you think it was a public execution?”

“All the law keepers are here,” I said. “Some of them should be on their rest period and not on duty. The fact that they’re all here makes me feel uneasy.”

“They all took turns helping build what we’re going to go see,” Tolly explained. “Many staff and residents of the station donated time, skill, materials, and wealth to create your surprise. I hope you can enjoy it.”

“No pressure though,” I said, completely mystified about what they might’ve built.

It took about twenty minutes to walk to a round, open area that went up about three stories. There was a large drape hanging from one balcony to another, hiding what was at the center of the circle.

We all stopped in front of the curtain. Looking up I could see that all the balcony walkways were full of Talins. They'd been quietly talking among themselves, but when we showed up everyone went quiet.

"Greetings!" Hestorum shouted, her voice carrying well in the space. The domed ceiling probably helped. That's when I noticed the ceiling had been painted blue, with white fluffy clouds. Had that been there before? We'd taken this route a few times to visit our ship, but I don't know if I'd ever looked up.

"I'm proud of Ortheema Station; we've done something meaningful here," she said, projecting her voice like a pro. "This morning I agreed to a contract and dedicated station funds that will make sure everyone's efforts will be kept in good working condition in perpetuity."

I grabbed hold of Tolly's hand and squeezed, barely keeping my stress in check. What could possibly be behind the curtain? A statue? A fountain? A statue in a fountain?

What was it? Anticipation was going to kill me!

Finally, after thanking several individuals by name, Hestorum turned to face the curtain. "Humans, I present to you a gift from all of Ortheema Station."

The ties holding the curtain up were released, and the fabric fluttered to the ground. For a moment I couldn't understand what I was looking at. I took a step forward, biting back a laugh.

"Is that a playground?" I asked.

"It is," Hestorum said. "We studied all the image captures we could find of where humans used to play when you had a homeworld. This is what we designed based on those examples."

Set inside a waist-high fence was a round green area that looked to be about a hundred feet across. There were swings, a sandbox, a dome-shaped climbing structure, and potted shrubs and small trees scattered around.

There were even a few benches that looked just like the ones from an Old Earth movie I used to watch before the data crystal it was stored on cracked.

"That's amazing," Cleo said, walking past me. Lexarit must have put her down, and now he rushed past her to open a gate for her. Narmuna followed her.

“Human Cleo said it’s amazing!” Hestorum shouted to the crowd. “Human Opal seems to be overwhelmed by our gift.”

I stood there processing it as Cleo walked to the climbing structure and ran her hand over a few of the rungs.

“It’s just like Old Earth,” I said, realizing that all these Talins had worked tirelessly to create a park on a space station for a couple of humans. “It’s beautiful.”

“Human Opal believes the park is beautiful,” Hestorum shouted. “We have done well to give the humans a familiar environment to allow them to thrive among us.”

All the Talins made sounds of excitement that died down the moment Hestorum held up her hand.

“As joyous as this moment is,” she announced. “I remind everyone of the rules we all agreed on. Do not ruin all our effort.”

With that she left, but all the law keepers stayed. I was still watching Cleo walk slowly around all the park’s features.

“You should join Cleo,” Tolly urged. “It would make everyone watching very happy.”

“Sure,” I agreed and let Tolly lead me into the park. The moment the gate closed, Talins moved. Within a few seconds there were Talins standing at the fence with the only gap being where the gate was.

This made me a little nervous.

“Don’t worry. One of the rules is that only Talins accompanying a human can come into the park.” Tolly pointed to a black square at the top of a pole in the center of the circle. “That’s a vid capture that monitors the area. If anything happens, then an alert is sent straight to the law keepers. This is a safe space.”

Safe from being accosted, but not safe from watching eyes. I almost felt like I was on a stage. What made me feel uncomfortable would probably delight some kids. When Jasper was young, he loved to have an audience when he played. But I found it a bit disconcerting.

Cleo didn’t seem to notice.

“Opal, come look at this!” she called.

Letting go of Tolly’s hand, I walked briskly over to her. She’d toed off her shoes and was standing in the sand pit.

“It’s real sand,” she said. “Feel it!”

I crouched down and sank my fingers in. It was a pleasantly cool sensation. "All we're missing is a little pond."

"Don't say that too loudly or they might do it," she said.

Standing up, I brushed the sand off my hands and noticed Cleo didn't look good. "This is nice, but why don't we come back tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to leave yet."

"Okay, but let's sit on the swings," I suggested, helping her walk out of the sand. I knelt to put her shoes on, but she shook her head.

"The ground cover feels good," she said. Leaving her shoes next to the sand pit, we linked arms and walked across the fluffy greenery covering the ground. I was surprised the guys stayed back, giving us a little space.

After she was sitting in a swing, I took the other one. I did a couple of shallow swings, impressed with how smooth it was. They'd gotten everything right.

"Can't you see JJ playing here?" Cleo whispered.

As soon as she said the words, I could easily picture a miniature Jasper running around, his laughter echoing off the painted sky above.

"Yes," I said. "He's going to love it."

"We'll have to come back here all the time," she said.

"I'm sure we can make that happen," I said. "Especially after JJ is old enough to really appreciate all this. He's not going to notice much for at least the first six months."

"That's true," she said with a chuckle.

The sound was suddenly cut off when she hunched over and gasped.

I jumped off the swing and stood in front of her. "Cleo?"

"Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouchie," Cleo panted.

As she repeated those words, liquid soaked her wrap and dripped off the swing.

"Oh shit," I whispered. "You're in labor!"

"Tell me something I don't know!" Cleo snapped.

"Something you don't know? Well, how about that I'm not ready for this," I said.

She grunt-laughed. "I'm not ready either."

There was a growing sound of worry coming from the Talins around us, and the guys rushed over.

"It's time," I said when they got to us. Tolly lifted me out of the way as Lexarit picked up Cleo.

“She’s in labor!” Narmuna shouted. “Clear a path to medical! Alert the healers. The cub is ready to emerge.”

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Chapter 29

Tolreum

Fourteen marks later Human Jasper Junior left his mother's body to become his own, breathing, screaming entity. Cleo looked elated but exhausted. Jasper Junior seemed deeply upset over the entire ordeal.

Through the whole thing, Opal stayed at Cleo's side. Holding her hand, telling her to breathe in different ways, encouraging her to scream, and reminding her that all the pain would be worth it.

Narmuna and Lexarit remained close also, purring and taking turns doing anything she asked. They fetched her favorite blanket from her nest, got one of the station restaurants to create small shards of ice she could chew on, and gently bathed her face with a cool, damp cloth.

Between Opal, Narmuna, Lexarit, and the healers, there was no room for me to be near the bed. I had to stand back and watch.

I'd never felt so useless in my life, and I hated it.

When Cleo began screaming, I was ready to do something drastic. It was only the serene, knowledgeable Healer Grifforum that kept me calm. As he'd promised, he'd studied everything he could get his claws on about human gestation and birth. He'd guided Cleo through the process and even comforted both Opal and Cleo, assuring them that everything was progressing as expected.

Finally Cleo pushed Jasper Junior entirely out of her body. Healer Grifforum had examined the child, ran a scan, did several other things, then handed the tiny body to Cleo.

“He looks like a grumpy old man,” Opal said, then burst into tears. She collapsed down to hug Cleo and Jasper Junior. “I was so scared this day would never happen.”

“You won’t lose us,” Cleo said, fat tears rolling down her face. Not to be left out, Jasper Junior joined them with loud cries of his own.

I couldn’t take it any longer. It had been hard enough to remain here when Opal was supporting Cleo, but now that she was crying I couldn’t stay still.

I squeezed myself in between Lexarit and Opal.

“Please don’t cry,” I begged, petting her back.

“They’re happy tears,” she said, straightening up and wiping at her face. She swayed a little, and I put my arms around her.

“You need to rest,” I said, sounding a worried rumble.

“Tolreum is correct,” Healer Grifforum said. “You have done very well, but you’re no longer needed to comfort Human Cleo. She and the cub need to rest, as do you.”

“Get some sleep,” Cleo said, sniffing and batting away the cloth Lexarit tried to use to wipe away her tears. “I have a really important assignment for you after you’ve rested.”

Opal tilted her head. “Yeah?”

“See if you can get some podmash for me,” Cleo said.

Opal wrinkled her nose. “Why would you want that?”

“Because Mom always ate it when she was nursing. She said it helped with milk production,” Cleo explained.

“I’ll do my best,” Opal agreed, but I could already see that Narmuna was looking podmash up on his Ident. If there was any on this station, Narmuna would make sure Cleo got it.

“See you tomorrow,” Cleo said.

“Have them come get me if you need anything,” Opal said.

Cleo grinned. “I won’t.”

They both chuckled, then Opal turned in my arms and leaned heavily against me. “I think I might need to be carried. My legs aren’t so steady.”

I felt her body shake, and as I bent my knees to pick her up, her legs gave out.

"I've got you," I murmured, shifting her in my arms so I could cradle her against my chest.

"Sorry," she whispered, letting her head rest against my shoulder. "I'm suddenly really tired."

"That's unsurprising," I responded, carrying her out of medical before one of the healers stopped us to check on Opal. I knew there was nothing wrong with her that a long rest and a good meal wouldn't set right. She didn't need to be scanned or have any tests run.

One of the law keepers was waiting in the hall and quickly moved to escort us back to our suite.

"I heard Cleo's pup is a healthy male," the law keeper said.

"Yes, they've named him Jasper Junior, after his sire," I said. Opal kept her eyes closed, and I thought she might have already dozed off.

"This is excellent," the law keeper said. "If the healers hadn't been sending out updates to the station's Unibase, I think medical might've gotten invaded despite all the rules that Station Director Hestorum set down."

"I didn't know they were sending out updates," I said with a surprised rattle.

"There's a whole section in the station's Unibase about all three of us," Opal said without opening her eyes. "Well, probably four of us now to include Baby JJ. There are even details about our favorite foods and how much I like to play games with balls."

An amused rumble slipped out of me. "That explains why we've received so many boxes full of toy balls. We have a stack of boxes full of them now."

Opal hummed, rubbing her face against the bare strip of skin. "Yup."

"I'll mention that you have enough for now," the law keeper said.

He asked a few more questions about Jasper Junior, which I answered as best I could. I'd been so scared for Cleo's health that a lot of what the healers had told me didn't stick in my brain.

Finally we were at the suite. The law keeper left us to return to medical, and I carried Opal into our room.

She let out a contented sigh when I laid her down in the nest. "I don't think I even have the energy to take my shoes off," she said.

"You can rest, and I'll take care of everything," I said, tugging off her slippers then running my hands up to find the waistband of her pants to tug them down.

After that I untied the wrap and rolled her body left then right to pull it off her. She let out a quiet laugh as I moved her body around. Finally she was naked.

“Tomorrow I'll take the longest shower ever,” she said and curled up on her side as I tucked one of the blankets around her.

“I'll be there to bathe you,” I promised. “I know you're tired, but I need to know. Do you want a child?”

She opened her eyes and regarded me with a slight frown. “Where did that question come from?”

“After watching Cleo endure so much pain for Jasper Junior, I'm scared you want to do the same,” I admitted. “I know Healer Grifforum assured us that after this birth he will have better pain management protocols in place, but that doesn't seem like enough.”

She snorted. “You don't have anything to worry about. Being the best aunt to JJ will be more than enough for me. I don't need to have a child of my own.”

Relief made me flop down in the nest next to her. “Thank the ancestors.”

Chuckling, she rolled over and snuggled against me. Purring, I held her until we both fell asleep.



Opal

I slept so long and deeply it took me forever to fully wake up. A long hot shower and three mugs of slash tea helped. After all that, we made our way back to medical to find Sloane and Mieshorum already there visiting Cleo and Baby JJ.

Cleo was sitting up in the bed with Baby JJ cradled in her arms. Sloane was holding one of Baby JJ's tiny hands between her thumb and forefinger. She was smiling and cooing at the baby.

It was such a change I came to a sudden stop, stunned.

“That's surprising,” Tolly murmured, having stopped when I did.

“Very,” I agreed. Then Sloane noticed us, and her expression shuttered. She let go of Baby JJ and straightened up. After patting Cleo on the shoulder, she walked over to me. Mieshorum followed right behind her.

"I need to talk to you," she said. Her flat demeanor made me want to run and hide. I had a hard enough time having emotional conversations to begin with; I didn't think I was ready to handle anything Sloane wanted to say to me.

I spent a little too long trying to come up with an excuse, and Sloane took my non-answer as an agreement.

She gripped my wrist and tugged me to the far corner of the room. Tolly and Mieshorum tried to follow, but she held up a hand.

"Stay," she ordered and finished pulling me away.

"Isn't JJ cute?" I said, hoping to derail the conversation. "I swear he's the most adorable baby that ever babied."

"Yes, he's adorable," she agreed.

I nodded my head. "I can't wait until he can see. You know babies can't see very well at first. They can't hear much either. There's so much to experience, and they can't take it all in right away."

"Opal," Sloane said, cutting off my flow of words. "I want to tell you something."

"Is it that you're super happy to be alive and can't wait to travel around the universe with us in the Ever Secure?" I asked, mentally crossing my fingers.

"I'd like us to be friends."

"You should really consider...wait, what?"

A half-smile fluttered briefly across her face. "I want to be your friend. What do you value in a friend?"

And I thought conversations with Sloane couldn't get any more awkward.

"Probably what others value," I said. "You know, stuff like kindness and loyalty."

"I don't care what other people value," she said, her expression intensely focused. "I want to know what I need to do to be your friend."

"I'm going to be blunt," I said, giving up.

"Please," Sloane agreed.

"I've never analyzed who I make friends with and why," I said. "I don't want you to make yourself into someone you're not. We should get to know each other and find our friendship that way."

She nodded. "You want authenticity. I can try that. If you decide you don't like it, I can change."

That statement made me curious. “Have you changed yourself a lot for others?”

“Everyone,” she said. Real vulnerability showed on her face, giving me the urge to hug her. “No one wants to be around you when you tend to be sad or withdrawn most of the time. No one has ever accepted who I was until Mieshorum. He's the Papa Bear I didn't know I needed.”

“That's great,” I said, thankful for all Mieshorum's hard work. “I don't want you to hide yourself because you're scared we'll reject you. That's not real friendship.”

“But if you and Cleo don't like me, I might have to leave the Ever Secure,” Sloane whispered, and I could hear the undertone of fear in her voice. “I don't want to leave. I want to stay with Mieshorum.”

I gave her a big smile. “Mieshorum would be happy to know that. You should tell him.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I should? But I've already been such a burden.”

I shook my head. “I promise he doesn't see you as a burden. Also, unless you plan to murder us in our sleep, you won't be kicked off Ever Secure. We're all in this together.”

“That's a nice thought,” she murmured.

“It's a reality,” I insisted.

“I like your hope,” she murmured. “I might try to adopt it.”

“Help yourself,” I said grandly.

She nodded, as if taking me seriously. “I'm tired. I think I need to lay down again.”

“Yeah, of course,” I agreed. As far as I knew, this was the first time she'd left her room. Going all the way to medical and interacting with Cleo and JJ had to be a lot.

“Mieshorum, um, I mean, Bear!” I called, turning to face where the guys were standing watching us. “You should take Sloane to bed. She's had a big day.”

Mieshorum rushed over and picked Sloane up. “I warned you this might be too much.”

“It wasn't,” she said as he turned around to leave. “It was the perfect amount.”

As Mieshorum left with Sloane in his arms, I walked over to stand next to Cleo.

“What did she say?” Cleo asked.

"I'll trade baby for info," I said, holding out my arms.

Cleo grinned and carefully handed me the baby. He was swaddled and wearing a hat so only his little scrunched face was visible.

"Hey there, sweet boy," I murmured. "You're looking good for being an entire day old."

"Talk," Cleo demanded.

With a chuckle, I recapped the conversation. Unlike me, Cleo didn't seem confused by Sloane, she only looked sad.

"None of us have had it easy," she murmured. "But it seems like Sloane might have had it worse. I wonder what her childhood was like."

"If you want to know, you can ask," I said. "I'm not opening that box."

"Maybe someday," Cleo agreed.

"She said she was always pretending," I said. "Do you think she really likes JJ or that she was pretending so you'd like her?"

Cleo's brows wrinkled as she thought about it. "You know, I'm not sure, and that's unsettling."

I nodded my head. "Well, I told her to be herself, so I guess we'll see who she is soon."

"I hope so," Cleo said.

"How long until you can come back to the suite?" I asked.

"The healers said tomorrow morning," she said, "as long as JJ keeps being perfect and the nanos in my body do their job. But they still want to check on me once a day. They wouldn't tell me how long that would last."

I nodded my head over to where Narmuna and Lexarit were talking with Tolly and one of the law keepers.

"How are they handling everything?"

"Like proud papas," she said. "JJ hasn't been set on a bed yet because one of us is always holding him. They have endless questions for me and Healer Grifforum about child development. Every time he makes a sound, they half panic."

"That sounds like the average first-time parent," I said. "Remember, these guys didn't grow up like us, taking care of siblings or other children in the neighborhood. They don't even have that experience to go by."

"I know," she said. "It's equal parts adorable and annoying."

"They're going to be great dads," I said.

She nodded. "As good as Jasper would've been."

“You know, I think Jasper picked them for you,” I said. “He knew you’d need plenty of help, so he got you two Talins.”

She rolled her eyes at the same time JJ woke up and started fussing. She held out her arms, and I handed him over. She tucked him against a breast, and he latched on and fed with gusto.

“Good job,” I told him. “Keep it up and we’ll promote you to toddler.”

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Chapter 30

Opal

“Why did you want to meet them here?” Tolly asked. We were sitting on a bench in the play area waiting for a Talin to arrive with his human. Even though I was by myself and sitting on a bench next to Tolly, Talins had gathered around the fence to watch.

“It’ll be easier to get the human by herself so I can check to make sure she’s okay,” I explained. “You could talk to her owner about the contracts he’s offering. That’ll keep him away from us.”

“That’s a good plan,” he said with a rumble of agreement.

I smirked. “I thought so.”

“Have you had time to read the contracts I sent you?” he asked.

“Most of them, but a few were too complicated for me to make it through,” I admitted. “I wish you guys used Universal. It’d be a lot easier if I didn’t have to run everything through translation.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve thought of that,” he said. “When we get back to the suite, I’ll go over them with you. Narmuna was hoping to have a crew meeting soon to decide on a few things, including picking a few contracts. I want you to be able to make an informed choice when we get to that part of the meeting.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever been a decision-making member of a crew,” I said. “I like it.”

"I hope you continue to like it even when it becomes tedious," Tolly said. "Narmuna can be pedantic sometimes."

"Bring it," I said, making Tolly rumble with amusement.

There was a commotion that made us both turn. A large blue Talin was walking up to the gate with a black-haired human balanced on his shoulder. Her gaze met mine, and a look of relief flashed across her features.

The law keeper escorting them opened the gate, and when they stepped in I could see the Talin was also carrying a child balanced on his hip.

The moment he set her down, the kid ran for the swings. I jumped up to follow. I'd found out the hard way that if you've never been on a swing before it was easy to flip yourself off it! Thankfully the Talins had put surprisingly bouncy ground under the play equipment. Even with a somewhat gentle landing, it was an experience I wanted to spare this little girl from having.

I got there at the same time as her, and we paused to look at each other.

"I'm Mia," she announced. "I'm six, and I'm very smart."

I nodded. "I'm sure you are. I'm Opal. It's nice to meet you."

She held out her hand, and it took me a moment to realize that she wanted to do an Old-Earth-style handshake. This child was adorable!

"It's nice to meet you too," she said, sounding very formal. "Iris said it's important to make friends with other humans because there aren't many of us."

I shook her hand. "Iris sounds smart too."

"The smartest," Mia agreed as the woman who'd arrived with Mia got to us.

"I am smart," Iris said with a small laugh. "Smart enough to remember what I told you when we got here. What was that, Mia?"

Mia dropped her eyes. "Not to run until Dee said it was okay."

"And what did you do?"

Mia's voice got really quiet. "I ran." Then she looked up and pointed at me. "But only because she was here. Opal should be punished too."

"Whoa, how is this my fault?" I asked, fighting a grin. "I was sitting on the bench when you headed for the swings."

Mia shook her head. "Na-ah, you were going for the swings first. I saw it."

"Okay, little fibber, that's enough," Iris said. "You can play on the swings, but no dessert for two whole days."

Mia's eyes went wide then narrowed, and her mouth turned down in a fierce frown. "You're mean and I don't love you!"

With that, she ran off to the blue Talin who'd walked over to Tolly.

Iris shook her head. "She was a perfect child until all the Talins started spoiling her. Now she's developed temper tantrums. The rest of the crew don't know what to do. The moment she looks like she might start crying or screaming, they give her anything she wants."

That was an aspect of raising children among Talins I hadn't considered. "I'm sorry. That has to be difficult."

Iris gave me a tired look. "I think I might have to add a new rule for a while. If Mia fusses, they have to ignore her or call for me."

The way she said that made me curious. "Are you often doing something besides spending time with Mia?"

Iris snorted. "So often. Everyone might think Damascus runs everything, but it's really me. The last time he tried to read a contract for me, he fell asleep before he even got halfway through. I found him sitting at a desk with his head back, mouth open, snoring."

I giggled at the mental image. "Talins snore?"

"Only when they sleep in weird positions."

"You read contracts for Damascus?" I asked.

"Read, negotiate, and agree," she said with a nod. "Damascus does anything that requires face-to-face meetings."

I was silent for a moment, processing what she'd said.

"You're not a real pet," I blurted out.

"I'm not," she agreed, as if it wasn't a major revelation. "Did I hear correctly that your friend Cleo just had a baby?"

"My sister," I murmured, not wanting to say the in-law part and having to talk about Jasper. "Why did you want to meet me?"

"To see if you needed to be rescued," she explained, as if this was a conversation she had all the time. "I have a powerful friend among the Talins, and I control a lot of wealth. I know I could buy both of you if I had to, but I need to make sure that's something you and your sister want first."

"There's one more," I said. "A woman named Sloane is with us too. But I think we're all happy where we are. Besides, I don't think any of the guys would sell us, no matter how much you offered."

"Wealth isn't the only tactic I have," she said ominously.

“Well you don't need to use any tactics,” I assured her. “No need to make anyone disappear in the foundation of a new building.”

She chuckled. “Is that because you don't mind being a pet as long as it comes with safety and security?”

“Because I'm like you,” I said, proud to be on equal footing as this other human. “I own myself and am an equal partner in our ship.”

Iris's expression relaxed. “That's good. The last human I met was terrified and badly traumatized by the Talins that captured her. It took me forever to get her away from them. It made me want to grab all the humans I know and leave the empire. You're helping me restore my faith that Talins can learn and grow.”

That made me think of a question. “If we come across a pet that needs help, should I contact you?”

“Yes!” she said. “I have several places within the empire I can send them to that are safe. If they want away from Talins, then there's one place way out on a planet within the Ilgorian Federation. The most important thing is that humans can pick where they want to go, including staying with the Talins they love.”

“I didn't say anything about love,” I protested.

“Oh? Your hair is soaked in bonding oil,” she said.

I felt myself blush. “Okay, fine. I love Tolly. Let's change the subject. Tell me about these safe places?”

She gave me brief descriptions of a colony named Kalor, a place where everyone lived in houses built on massive tree trunks, and a community on the Talin homeworld, Talarian.

I was impressed. “You've created an amazing network.”

“Honestly, outside of the Ilgorian Federation, the Talin Empire might be the safest place for humans. Even for the ones that are actually pets. I met a husband and wife that were absolutely ecstatic to be owned by a Talin family. They had defaulted on debt and were being sold as slaves, and a Talin bought them. Now they're pets and encouraged to spend each day lazing around and having sex.”

“It's a strange paradise,” I said with a chuckle.

“They thought so,” she said. “I'd like to meet Cleo and Sloane.”

“Cleo will be easy,” I said. “But Sloane's a little different. I don't know how to describe her, but she's told me what she wants most is to stay with Mieshorum. She might not agree to meet you.”

“That's fine, as long as you tell her about what I'm offering,” Iris said.

“I will,” I promised. “I’m glad you’re out here doing this. I’d hate to think of anyone being mistreated or angry at being owned. If someone's unhappy, they should be rescued.”

“That’s the goal,” she agreed.



Tolreum

We all had dinner together in our suite. The station offered a room, but Iris and Damascus refused so it would be easier for Cleo and JJ to join us.

After pushing all the furniture out of the way, Narmuna and I moved most of the rugs to create a large circle. With that done, we spread pillows all around the circle. When Opal and Cleo saw what we’d done, they both looked amused but settled right down.

Iris and Damascus joined us soon after the food arrived, but Mia wasn’t with them this time.

“She’s still angry with me,” Iris said with a sad shrug when Opal asked about the child. “When we got back to the ship, she stomped into her room and refused to leave. All the crew is staying away from her for now.”

I remembered how upset Mia had been when she’d run to me at the park earlier today. Damascus hadn’t been overly concerned, so I didn’t react. She calmed down quickly and asked me many questions.

Iris’s comment made me think this was a systemic issue. I felt bad for Mia and Iris, but at least we’d never have the same issue with Jasper Junior. He was a perfect child.

“I can’t believe you only gave birth a few days ago,” Iris said to Cleo. “You look great!”

Cleo beamed at her. “Thanks. I’ve gotten better care from the Talins than any human I knew growing up.”

Iris nodded. “I hear that a lot.”

“Do you want to hold him?” she asked Iris.

The young woman was quick to shake her head and held her hands up to ward off Cleo handing over the child. “No! Infants scare me until their heads aren’t so floppy.”

Opal snorted. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

Cleo looked amused. "I can see why that would be scary. I guess we'll have to visit again when JJ isn't so floppy."

We fell into a friendly conversation as everyone ate. About a mark into the meal, the door to Sloane and Mieshorum's room slid open.

Sloane didn't walk past the doorway but waved at us. "Hello. I'm Sloane. Thank you for visiting. I'm perfectly happy here. Have a nice meal and evening."

Then she stepped back into Mieshorum's arms, and the door slid shut again.

"That was interesting," Iris said.

"I told her you wanted to make sure she was content. I guess that was how she decided to do it," Opal said.

"That's the most words I've ever heard her speak in a row," I said.

Opal chuckled. "I think she'll get more talkative as she becomes more confident that we aren't going to reject her."

"Why would we reject her?" I asked.

"I get the feeling she's had some bad experiences in the past," she said. "But whatever Mieshorum is doing is working because she's doing so much better."

I sounded a rumble of agreement. "Does anyone know what she used to do for work?"

"No idea," Opal said. "But that might need to be the next question. Everyone should have a job on Ever Secure."

"What's JJ's job going to be?" Iris asked.

Opal gave her a wink. "Chief of Adorableness, Steward of Congeniality, and Bosun of Happiness."

Iris burst out laughing, and the rest of us sounded rumbles of amusement.

"Maybe you should rename the ship from Ever Secure to Ever Joyful."

"Maybe we should!" I agreed. Narmuna and Lexarit sounded rumbles of agreement. "We've definitely entered a new era of our lives, and the ship should reflect that."

Cleo held up her mug of sopa. "I declare Ever Secure is now Ever Joyful."

When Opal picked up her drink and tapped it against Cleo's, we all did the same. It seemed we'd renamed our ship, and I couldn't be more content about it.

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Chapter 31

Six Months Later

Tolreum

As part of our daily routine, we were all sitting in the galley drinking tlash tea, talking about what we needed to do that rotation. The humans had finished their first meal of the day, and Jasper Junior had fallen asleep on Narmuna's lap after enthusiastically squishing food all over his face while we'd encouraged him to eat.

Opal and Cleo assured us this was a normal part of growing up. I knew Narmuna and Lexarit didn't mind the mess, but we were all worried about him getting enough nutrients. I might need to talk to Narmuna and Lexarit about sending a message to Healer Grifforum for advice.

"I've been going over our finances," Cleo said when there was a lull in the conversation.

Cleo was excellent with wealth, numbers, and investments, so she'd taken over that side of our business. Mieshorum had been ecstatic to give her control, and after showing her all the programs and numbers, he begged her not to make him do it ever again. She'd laughed and promised he was free.

I hadn't realized he'd hated it so much until that day.

In the last forty rotations, we'd successfully fulfilled our first two contracts since returning to work. Those contracts provided more compensation than we'd normally make in an entire solar.

“Finances?” Opal repeated, her expression going from relaxed to nearly panicked in a micromark. “Is there something wrong? We could sell some of the gifts we got while staying on Ortheema Station. There are still boxes we haven’t even opened. We probably wouldn’t get much for the clothes secondhand, but it’s still something. Or maybe we could contact Iris and Damascus for a loan. I’m sure they’d be willing to help us.”

Cleo held up her hands. “Opal, calm down, we’re fine!”

“Sorry,” Opal muttered. Despite all my assurances, Opal sometimes still had flashbacks to when she and Cleo were barely surviving. I only wished we’d found them sooner.

I took Opal’s half full mug of tea out of her hands, set it on the table, then lifted her onto my lap. She snuggled into my embrace with a sigh.

“My fault,” Cleo said. “I should’ve led with our finances are fine. I’m sorry if I alarmed you.”

“I’m too sensitive,” Opal said.

“Not sensitive, traumatized,” Cleo murmured. The two women exchanged a look that clearly spoke volumes I couldn’t hear. After they were done, Opal smiled and Cleo nodded her head.

“What do you want to talk about?” Narmuna asked, slowly swaying in his seat. I noticed we all tended to do that when holding Jasper Junior.

No, he was JJ. Cleo and Opal had begun insisting we use the nickname instead of his full name until he was older. It was hard to remember sometimes, but we were all trying.

“We’re accumulating wealth quickly,” Cleo explained. “If we keep getting these lucrative contracts, we’ll be able to buy a bigger ship or a second ship soon. I thought we should talk about it now.”

Opal shook her head. “Really?”

“Really,” Cleo said with a grin.

“A bigger ship would mean we could refuel more stations and outposts before having to visit a refinery to reload,” Lexarit said.

“That’s true, but two ships mean double the profits,” Cleo said. “I ran the numbers, and that is the option that creates more wealth.”

“No.”

We all looked at the door to see Sloane walking in with Mieshorum right behind her. Usually they joined us for the last meal of the day, but almost never for the first meal.

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Opal sat up and gave her a cheerful wave. “Sloane! Come sit. Are you hungry?”

“No,” Sloane said as she and Mieshorum joined us at the table.

“Is no your favorite word?” Opal teased.

“No,” Sloane said with a hint of a smile, making Opal and Cleo chuckle. “You were talking about buying a second ship. We can't do that.”

“Why?” Mieshorum asked gently as he sounded a soothing rumble.

“Because we shouldn't separate,” she explained. “We're family and should stay together.”

Although her words were calm and firm, I could hear a hint of fear. The way Cleo and Opal reacted told me they heard it too.

“You're right,” Cleo said. “We should get a bigger ship instead of a second one. JJ needs all his aunties and uncles to be close while he's growing up.”

Sloane nodded her head and gave JJ a soft look. “Yes, exactly.”

“She said yes!” Opal said with exaggerated excitement, making a smile briefly appear on Sloane's face again.

JJ woke up and began to fuss. Sloane held out her arms. “Can I hold him?”

Narmuna handed him over, and Sloane hummed as she stood up and swayed. He settled down right away.

“I can research what ship we might want to get next,” Mieshorum said.

“I'll give you an estimated budget,” Cleo said.

“Maybe we could get one with the ability to land on planets with atmospheres,” Lexarit said.

“That's a good idea,” I said. “That would allow us better access to refineries.”

We talked more about what we'd like in a ship. Mieshorum unclipped his Ident and took notes. Sloane even made several more good suggestions. By the time we finished and were ready to start our day, Sloane looked

energized and even asked if she could carry JJ back to his room with Cleo, Narmuna, and Lexarit.

Without needing to speak, I stood up and carried Opal to the first storage bay. We always started our day by checking on all the fuel rounds and rods.

“We make a good team,” Opal said as we moved down a hall. “All of us together, as a crew.”

I sounded a rumble of agreement. “Yes, but I think we make an even better family.”

She smiled up at me. “You're right. How did you get so smart?”

“You,” I said simply. “With you in my life, I understand so much more.”

She snuggled against me, and the familiar feeling of contentment washed through me. Praise the ancestors for putting humans in our path. We were a better species under the influence of their humanity.

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Bonus Chapter

Cleo

It took a lot of quiet planning with Opal and Sloane to arrange this night. Now I only had about ten minutes to make everything perfect.

I opened a small, decorative box of fargin stones that bathed the room in a soft, topaz light. After setting it on a small table, I opened the second one and put it on the floor near the nest. That gave me enough light to see everything, but it still felt romantic.

Going to one of the storage lockers, I dug deep until I found the treasure I'd been hiding in there. It was a container of wine that Tolreum had assured me Narmuna and Lexarit would enjoy. I set that next to the two Talin-style carved stone cups on the table.

With that done, I rushed into the cleansing unit to change into the outfit Opal had gotten me. It was in the style of a wrap garment, but so sheer it was basically see through. I tapped one of the panels to make it reflective and checked my appearance.

Nope, that was a bad idea. I loved JJ but carrying him had been rough on my body, and even eight months later, I wasn't back to my pre-baby body.

Blinking rapidly to hold back the tears, I tapped the panel so it didn't reflect any longer. I debated about putting on my regular clothes and abandoning my plans. Maybe this whole evening was a bad idea.

Then the cabin door opened, and Lexarit and Narmuna were walking inside. The sight of them reminded me of why I was doing this.

“What's going on?” Lexarit asked, looking from one box of fargin rocks to the other.

“Did you feel like decorating?” Narmuna asked. “Is there anything we can do?”

I smiled at the males and pointed to the nest. “Please sit down. I have something important I want to talk to the two of you about.”

We all slept together most evenings with me curled between the two of them. JJ either slept at my side or in his crib. More and more, he was sleeping in his crib. Eventually he'd have a room all to himself next to ours.

For this evening, I'd moved him and his crib full of toys into Sloane's room. She and Opal were on JJ duty for the evening to give me time alone with the guys.

Lexarit sounded a worried rumble as he moved to kneel in the nest. “Are you upset with us?”

Narmuna followed him into the nest and echoed the worried rumble. “I know we haven't been as attentive now that we're delivering fuel again, but if you're patient, we can work on a schedule so one of us is always with you and JJ.”

I stepped into the nest and sank down in front of them and grabbed one of each of their hands in one of mine. “I'm not unhappy with either of you. I swear!”

They purred and gently gripped me back.

“Then what do you need to discuss with us?”

I pulled in a deep breath. It was time, but the words felt stuck in my throat.

“Cleo?” Narmuna said. “If it's not us, are you unhappy with being on the ship? Would you rather live on Ortheema Station? Or we could contact Iris and Damascus and see about moving to one of the colonies they mentioned.”

“No,” I said with a shake of my head. “It's nothing like that. I love this ship. It's not as cozy as the Ever Joyful, but now we have room for JJ to have his own cabin when he's ready.”

“The Secure Alliance is better in many ways,” Narmuna agreed.

We talked for a long time about what to name the new ship. We'd all finally agreed on Secure Alliance because it sounded professional and had a

deeper meaning for all of us. Living together made us all feel secure, and we planned for this alliance to last a long time.

“When we visit the refinery on Ishorn we can stay a few days and explore the planet,” Lexarit said with a rumble of agreement. “There are several areas of ecological interest. We couldn’t do that without a ship like this one.”

“Right. I want to talk about the three of us,” I said. “Not the ship.”

They both went silent, and I could see them tense. I silently berated myself. I was making a mess of this. Opal always claimed she was the worst at emotional talks, but right now I could give her some competition.

“I like both of you very much,” I said. “No, that’s not the right word. I love you both.”

Narmuna purred, but Lexarit let out a worried rumble and opened his mouth to talk. I shook my head.

“Please, I have things to say, but all my thoughts are a bit jumbled. Let me stumble through, okay?”

They both sounded rumbles of agreement.

I pulled in a deep breath and let the words flow out instead of trying to make them perfect or eloquent.

“I thought Jasper was the love of my life. He was funny, kind, and loved me without reservation. I’d never met anyone like him before. When I first met Opal I thought she might be resentful, but she was happy to have a sister. With the three of us working and living together we could afford a nice place to live, and I felt secure enough to have a child.”

I had to pause and take a few breaths before continuing. I didn’t know if Opal had told them the entire story of what happened to us on Bright Star Station, but that didn’t matter. I needed them to hear it from me.

“We were going to be the perfect little family. Jasper, me, the baby, and Opal as a devoted auntie. It was a situation I never thought I’d have, and then it was my life. I was ecstatic.” I smiled at the memory. Those days had been golden but brief.

“I should’ve known better. The universe loves to knock us down when everything is perfect. The mine on the nearby moon shut down, and within a few months all our work contracts were canceled. We couldn’t get work and didn’t have enough wealth to move out of Massoc territory. It was a nightmare. I watched our finances dwindle, and we began selling everything worth anything.”

I held back a sob. This next part was the hardest to tell. “Jasper took any job he could get, even the most dangerous ones. That was how he died. He was working a job that he shouldn’t have accepted. A few days later, I realized I was pregnant. I never got a chance to tell him.”

I couldn’t hold the tears back.

“The baby was the only thing that kept me from curling up and letting myself die,” I said. “I lost the person I loved the most, but I still had a little piece of Jasper growing inside me. That gave me the strength to keep going. That’s when Opal started taking any job she could find, like Jasper. I lived every day in fear that I’d lose her. When the jobs were dangerous, she wouldn’t tell me what they were. On those days I’d sit and wait, unable to eat, sleep, or even think straight until she walked back into our domicile.”

I shook my head at the memory of Opal’s relentless optimism. “She was always sure a great work contract would happen at any moment. I still don’t know where she got the energy, especially when the station wouldn’t let me take any work contracts at all. Massoc are very delicate when they’re pregnant, so they had very strict rules about what I could do, even though I wasn’t a Massoc. I wasn’t even allowed to walk in certain parts of the station. The office for mental wellness helped as much as they could, but the entire station was dealing with an economic downturn. It was likely the place would be sold and moved soon.”

I tried hard not to let the memories of being trapped and scared overwhelm me. Opal and I had been in limbo, hoping the station didn’t close before I gave birth. If we had to move while I was pregnant, it would’ve been disastrous because of the restrictions on me. We might’ve ended up separated and never able to find each other again.

I was ready to be strong for Baby JJ, but I knew I couldn’t do it alone.

Narmuna and Lexarit remained silent, but them purring and holding my hands helped me keep all those negative memories from overwhelming me.

“Then you all kidnapped Opal,” I said with a watery chuckle. “She left to do a work contract and was gone. Maglia visited me in person to explain what happened and hoped I could remain calm for the sake of Baby JJ. I think I cried as much as I did when Jasper died. I felt so alone and desolate.”

Lexarit went silent, and Narmuna sounded the sad rumble that made me think of a mythological giant weeping. It made the tears I was holding back overflow my eyes.

"I'm not angry at any of you," I said, squeezing their hands. "Your actions were wrong, but then you did everything to make it right again. In this one case, the ends justify the means."

"I wish we'd done things very differently," Lexarit said and Narmuna rumbled in agreement.

"I don't want to talk about that anymore," I said. "I'm so happy right now. I have Opal back. Sloane is turning into a good friend, and she's an amazing auntie to JJ. I think she truly loves JJ. And I have the two of you."

"Yes, you have us," Narmuna said with a purr.

"Thank you for sharing your pain with us," Lexarit said.

"There's more I want to say." I wanted to rub a hand over my face, but I refused to let go of Narmuna or Lexarit's hands. "I still love Jasper, but I also love both of you. I don't know if Talins ever share, but I want us to be a throuple."

They both went silent. Their lack of immediate response made words tumble out of my mouth.

"You don't have to. We can keep what we have now. I'll still love both of you. It's not as if I want to change our dynamic much. I thought it'd be nice if we could, um, become intimate with each other. I know we're compatible. I've had several conversations with Opal. If you guys don't want that, it's fine. I don't want either of you to be uncomfortable or anything."

I only stopped talking when Lexarit sounded a rumble of amusement.

"What's so funny?" I asked, a little annoyed. Here I was, trying hard to be honest but also not make either of them feel pressured.

"We've already scent bonded with you," Lexarit said. "We would want nothing more than to form a throuple with you."

"I can't believe you didn't realize that sooner," Narmuna said. "We didn't want to make you feel like you needed to do anything. You had a child, and your body needed time to recover."

My irritation vanished, and I bit back a giggle. "I can't believe you know the word throuple."

"Opal explained it to us," Narmuna said.

I felt betrayed. She was my sister and best friend, not theirs! What was she doing talking to them about me? "You talked to Opal about our relationship?"

"We wanted insight on how to make you happy," Lexarit explained. "She refused to respond to some of our questions because she said only you

could answer them.”

I was being irrational. Of course they talked to Opal.

“What questions did she refuse to answer?” I asked, trying hard to calm my wildly swinging emotions.

“If you loved us,” Narmuna said. “Or if you might come to love us eventually.”

Of course they'd gone to Opal. I'd shut the guys down any time they tried to bring up the topic of feelings, but I hadn't been ready until now. I felt a little guilty about leaving them hanging for so long.

“I'm sorry,” I murmured.

“There's no reason for you to be apologetic,” Narmuna said.

“We knew you needed time,” Lexarit said. “You lost your pair-bonded partner. That isn't something a Talin would've survived. We are in awe of your strength.”

Narmuna sounded a rumble of agreement. “Lexarit suggested you might never recover from Jasper's death. That meant you would never feel as strongly for us as we did for you.”

“We were prepared for our bonding to be mostly one sided,” Lexarit said. “It was clear you felt affection for us, and we were determined that would be enough.”

“No, it's not enough,” I said, letting go of their hands so I could clumsily rise up on my knees and lean forward to hug them both. I mostly fell over and their hands kept me from tumbling into their laps. “You deserve love too.”

They both purred, and the scents of cherries and brown sugar filled the air. I breathed deep; their combined scents making something deep inside me settle.

“I love you both so very much,” I said as they shifted me into Narmuna's lap. Lexarit swung my legs into his lap. “I'm sorry it took me so long to realize it.”

“Say it again,” Narmuna demanded, rubbing his scent glands into my hair. Lexarit leaned close and rubbed against my neck and tugged at the neckline of my wrap to spread oil on my shoulder also.

“I love you,” I said, letting my eyes close. “I love you, Narmuna. I love you, Lexarit.”

Lexarit pulled away. I opened my eyes to find his face right in front of mine. “No, I'm not Lexarit.”

That didn't make sense. "What?"

"Humans give their family and loved ones nicknames. Opal calls Tolreum Tolly. Sloane calls Mieshorum Papa Bear. We deserve second names also."

I didn't realize they felt left out, but that was easy to remedy. "Lex was a nickname on Old Earth, can I call you that?"

Lexarit sounded an excited rattle before sounding a rumble of agreement. "From now on, you must call me Lex."

"I will, but I might call you Lexie sometimes."

"Will you name me Nar?" Narmuna asked, "or Narie?"

"I'm not sure," I said. I didn't want to tell him I didn't like the sound of Nar by itself. "Do you guys have last names or family names?"

"We organize by family, then clan," Narmuna said.

"His family name is Favlet," Lex said. "And his clan name is Umor."

"Oh," I exclaimed with delight. "Umor sounds a lot like amor."

Narmuna made a questioning sound. "That's translating to love, but it doesn't sound the same as when you said it before."

"It's a different Old Earth language and was used often as a term of endearment. I want to call you amor."

"Now I'm jealous," Lex protested, with a rumble of amusement. "I want to be called love also."

"You said anything I picked was perfect!" I protested, fighting a laugh.

"How unfair of you to use my own words against me," Lexarit said.

"I guess I could call you cutie-patootie," I offered. I couldn't wait to hear Opal's reaction when she heard me call Lex that.

We bantered about nicknames and fairness for a little while until we lapsed into a content quiet. I was still sitting in Narmuna's lap with my legs resting on Lexarit's.

I felt happy and suddenly very horny. I'd fully healed from JJ's birth and was ready to take our relationship to the next step. To be honest, the last month felt like they'd both been teasing me every time they touched me.

"I have a question," I said, rousing both men out of the soft silence. After they both sounded questing rumbles I spoke up.

"If we're officially a throuple now, does that mean I get sex?"



Narmuna

Cleo's words made blood rush to my mating shaft so swiftly it hurt. I gasped and hunched to the side.

"Amor, are you okay?" she asked.

"He's fine," Lexarit said as he plucked Cleo from my lap and sat her on the nest in front of us. "He wasn't prepared for your blunt question."

"Um, does that mean you guys aren't interested in me that way?" she asked.

"I'm interested," I said, straightening back up despite the discomfort.

"His interest is why he gasped," Lexarit teased.

"Then you both find me attractive?" she asked. Her demeanor shifted from bold to unsure in the blink of an eye. "I'm nothing like a Talin."

"We want you," I said quickly.

Lexarit sounded a rumble of agreement. "You're perfect, Cleo."

"Can you...would you..." She clenched her hands together, her face going red.. "I want to see you naked. I know that's not romantic, but I want to know what I'm getting into."

That's when I realized we'd both been careful to maintain modesty around Cleo. I looked at Lexarit.

"You should go first," I said, unsure how she'd react to my already emerged mating shaft.

He sounded a rumble of agreement and stood up to strip off his belt and pants. I could see the outline of his mating shaft pressing on the inside of his flesh pouch. It wouldn't be long before he emerged.

Kneeling back down, he purred. "You can look and touch if you like."

Her eyes were focused on his flesh pouch. "Where's your cock?"

"You mean his mating shaft?" I asked, and she nodded. I was a little surprised she and Opal hadn't talked at length about Talin reproductive organs. "His shaft is tucked inside his flesh pouch. Do you see that seam?"

She nodded, moving closer. She reached out to touch him but then suddenly pulled her hand back.

"Please," he begged, his voice hoarse.

I moved behind Cleo and wrapped my arms around her stomach and put my mouth next to her ear.

"Touch him, Cleo," I whispered. "Run your fingers along the seam."

Her hand shook a little as she lightly rested her fingers on Lexarit's flesh pouch. My good friend let out a soft moan.

“More,” he begged. “I need you to touch me more.”

She stroked her hand all the way across the seam, then pressed her fingers into it. Lexarit's head dropped back and he gasped. When she tried to withdraw, I grabbed her wrist and held her in place.

“He likes that,” I murmured, urging her fingers deeper.

Reassured by my words, she sank her delicate fingers further inside Lexarit's flesh pouch.

“I can feel him,” she said. I watched her wiggle her fingers, and then almost her entire hand disappeared.

Lexarit let out a little cry accompanied by a full body shudder. “By the ancestors, I've never felt anything like this. Your hand is so soft.”

“You're large,” Cleo said. “But you feel smooth.”

“We don't have keratin plating on our mating shafts,” I explained. Before I could say more, Lexarit's flesh pouch snapped back, revealing Cleo's hand holding onto the tip of his shaft.

The sight of her delicate hand on his large shaft made my own throb with need. I wanted her to hold and touch me also.

Now that his shaft and her hand weren't bound by the tight pouch, she wrapped her fingers around the middle of his length. Jaw clenched, Lexarit's gaze focused on where she was touching him.

She moved her hand up and down a few times, then frowned slightly.

Before I could ask what was wrong, she let go of his shaft and reached up to rub his face with both hands. Lexarit let out another gasp as she pressed on his scent glands, milking him. So much oil came out that she wasn't able to gather all of it on her hands and some dripped down his face to his jaw and neck.

“Cleo, what are you doing?” he asked, voice shaking.

“I needed this,” she said, abruptly letting go of his face and moving both hands back to his shaft. She looked satisfied when she moved her hands up and down. Now I understood that she'd wanted his oil to lubricate her movements.

If I wasn't so painfully aroused, I might have rumbled with amusement. If she'd only asked, I could've told her our mating shafts would produce a small amount of oil also.

“Your touch is like sweet torture,” he mumbled.

She was absolutely fascinated by Lexarit's mating shaft. “You smell like brown sugar, Lex. Do you taste like it too?”

“I...I...I don’t know what brown sugar is,” he stuttered. “But you can lick me if you like.”

She leaned close, held his cock steady, and licked over the tip.

“Oh!” she exclaimed and sucked the tip into her mouth.

“By the ancestors!” Lexarit cried out, his back arching and his hips pressing into Cleo’s mouth.

She gagged and pulled away.

I was quick to rub her back as Lexarit sat back on his feet with a worried rumble.

“I’m so sorry!” he said, clenching his hands together, probably to keep himself from reaching for Cleo.

She sat back and shook her head with a smile.

“It’s fine,” she said, with a wave of her hand. We’d be more inclined to believe her if there weren’t a few tears dripping from her eyes.

“Let’s clutch and cling together,” I said. “We can always try this again later.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Lexarit agreed.

Cleo’s expression turned stubborn. “No. I mean we can cuddle later, but I want sex now. I’ve been beyond horny for the last month.”

The word horny didn’t translate, but I understood from context. Cleo felt sexually neglected.

“We can help you,” I said.

“Yeah?” she asked, her smile coming back.

I rumbled with agreement and pressed at her shoulders, urging her onto her back.

Once she was laying down, I tugged at the sheer wrap, but she suddenly grasped the fabric.

“Um, so, I should warn you guys,” she said.

“Warn us?” Lexarit asked. “About what?”

“I used to be prettier,” she said, focusing her eyes on the ceiling over our heads. “Before I had JJ my skin was, um, I didn’t have stretch marks. My stomach was flatter. My breasts were perkier. I looked so much better.”

I sounded a negative rattle as Lexarit took her left hands in his.

“Your body is perfect,” he said.

“Not really,” she said.

“Let us see, and we’ll be the judge of your beauty,” I said.

Lexarit cast me a look, but I ignored him.

“What?”

“Let me see your body,” I said. “Let me judge your beauty.”

She looked unsure but let go of the grip she had on her garment with her right hand.

“I warned you,” she muttered, shutting her eyes tight.

I tugged at the outside tie until it drew apart. Slowly, as if unwrapping a precious item, I drew one side of the wrap off. I ignored the exposed breast and tugged at the inside tie at her right hip. Once that was undone I was able to fully expose her front to my eyes.

She was tense, as if waiting for a blow.

I purred as I lowered my face to one of her breasts.

“Do you see this, Lexarit?” I murmured, rubbing my scent gland over her relaxed nipple.

“Absolutely lovely,” he agreed. “I want to scent the other one.”

He joined me, covering her other breast in his bonding oil.

She sucked in a breath and let out a little moan as we slathered her chest in oil.

“It tingles,” she whispered, her nipples beading up.

“We should mark every inch of her in our oil,” Lexarit said.

“Yes!” I agreed, moving lower to her stomach. I paused for a moment to marvel.

“I can’t believe you carried JJ inside you,” I whispered. “This body nourished and protected him. How could a body that can do that be anything but beautiful?”

Lexarit rumbled in agreement. “I’m in awe of what you did and forever grateful. Both you and JJ are a gift to us.”

“You only think I’m pretty because—Oh!”

I looked up her body to see Lexarit had sucked one of her nipples into his mouth. Her head was tilted back, and she was cupping his head as if to keep him in place. His action made me want to suck on a part of her too!

Rubbing my oil over her skin, I continued down her body until I got to the soft curly hair at the apex of her legs. I nudged at the tops of her thighs, hoping she’d part them for me.

Bending her knees, she moved her legs far apart, giving me full access to the most intimate part of her.

A delicate, alluring scent hit my nose. I moved between her legs and dipped my face into her sex, rubbing my oil all over her delicate flesh.

I'd read all about human anatomy and sexuality, but nothing could have possibly prepared me for the sublime smell and taste of her.

Pressing my face into her sex, I licked and sucked. I'd never get enough of this!

As I feasted, Cleo gasped, moaned, and moved her legs restlessly.

I fell into a kind of trance and lost track of time. I was so engrossed in my enjoyment that Cleo's sudden cry and convulsion took me by surprise. If she hadn't hooked a leg over my back to keep me in place, I would've stopped.

I kept licking and sucking until the leg holding me in place relaxed and fell to the side. Licking the last of her essence off my lips, I sat up to see her lip pressing with Lexarit.

Suddenly everything felt so perfect.



Lexarit

Lip pressing Cleo while Narmuna pleased her was indescribable. I'd never felt so close to anyone in my life.

When she climaxed, I swallowed her screams and felt her pleasure shiver through her body.

Ending the lip pressing, she dropped her head back down on the pillow and gave me a contented smile.

"That was wonderful," I whispered.

She chuckled. "That's my line."

"What line?" Narmuna asked. He was sitting between her legs, his eyes a little dazed.

"Nothing," Cleo said, sitting up. She hooked a hand around Narmuna and pulled his face close to hers. They lip pressed for a little while, and I could see how beautiful the action looked from the outside.

It was as intimate as it was delightful.

I marveled that we would have solars and solars of lip presses to enjoy.

Cleo ended the kiss. Drawing her legs up, she got on her knees. She put one hand under Narmuna's jaw. "I want you inside me."

Then she turned her head to meet my gaze. "At the same time I want you in my mouth."

Both of us sounded negative rumbles, but she looked determined.

“This is what I want,” she insisted. “We can always stop if I’m not having fun.”

She dropped her hand away from Narmuna’s face and rearranged her body. Getting on all fours, she wiggled her hips at Narmuna.

“Please!”

I was uncomfortable about putting my shaft back into her mouth after accidentally choking her, but I was helpless at her insistence. I met Narmuna’s gaze over her head.

“She wants this,” I reminded him. “It’s our job to give her what she wants.”

Narmuna sounded a rumble of agreement. “Cleo, you have to promise to stop if anything is unpleasant.”

“I will,” she said, wiggling her hips again.

I grabbed some pillows and shoved them under her body so she didn’t have to support herself.

“Good idea,” she praised. Nestling herself down with her torso resting on the pillows, she moved her hand to gently grab hold of my shaft. “Come here.”

She drew me to her mouth. Heat surrounded the tip of my shaft and I moaned. I wasn’t going to last long.

Behind her, Narmuna rose up on his knees and moved into position. I watched him hesitate, his shaft poised at her entrance.

“She will enjoy it,” I said. He sounded a rumble of agreement before going back to a rumble that was slightly slower than a purr. Opal said that made our shafts vibrate in just the right way.

I didn’t purr or move. I was terrified I’d cause her to choke again.

Cleo moaned around my shaft as Narmuna slowly sank his length into her. Once he was fully inside her, she went back to sucking on me with more force.

I bit back a cry of pleasure and gripped the pillow hard enough to make my hand ache. It took every bit of willpower I possessed to keep from moving.

Narmuna let out a low growl and began moving with more force. He gripped her hips to hold her steady and pressed in and out of Cleo’s body.

The faster he thrust, the harder she sucked on me. It was almost as if she was transferring the pleasure she was experiencing from Narmuna to me.

“I can’t....” I gasped. “I can’t hold back much longer.”

“She’s close,” Narmuna said in a low, deep voice. “Her body is tense and....”

His words trailed off, and then suddenly he let out a roar and his rattle filled the room. Cleo screamed around my cock, her body convulsing.

They were both climaxing.

The moment Cleo clamped her lips around my cock and sucked me halfway down, I cried out too.

Pleasure shot up my spine and made my vision haze. I sucked in air as if I’d run the length of the ship several times.

“Cleo!” I shouted. “My human. Mine!”

“Ours,” Narmuna said, breathing as hard as I was. He withdrew from Cleo’s body, petting both his hands down her back.

Cleo licked the last of my seed off the tip of my shaft before sitting up with languid grace. Her hands shook as she cupped my cheek and reached over to cup Narmuna’s.

“Yes, yours,” she agreed.

“Now and forever,” Narmuna vowed.

“Until the three of us join the ancestors,” I said, finishing the ancient phrase.

We stayed like that for a timeless moment before Cleo’s hand dropped and she flopped back with a sigh.

“You guys wore me out,” she said with a grin and patted the nest on either side of her. “Now it’s time for cuddles.”

We eagerly took our places on either side of her. None of us let go, even when sleep overtook us.



To read a bonus short story about Sloane and Mieshorum go [here](#).

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Truthful Deceptions, the first book in the new Human Pets of Talin series: Origins+Abductions. You can read a bonus short story about Sloane and Mieshorum [here](#).

I'm already working on the next story set in this world, [A Very Merry Christmas Captivity](#). I can't tell you how much I adore the Talins of Ortheema Station and everything they do to make the humans happy.

Have a fruitful rotation,

Rye

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