

GALAXY Book Eighteen GLADIATORS



ZAR RYNN

Award-Winning Author

Alana Khan

ZAR-BYNN

**A Tortured Hero Alien Warrior Romance [Galaxy
Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Book 18]**

Alana Khan

Temptation of the Horizontal LLC

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TROPE ALERT

Trope alert

Attempted Rape (super brief with no on-screen specifics)

History of slavery

Violence

End of trope alert

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Up TO NOW...

Anya and Zar met and mated in Book One of this series. If you're just popping in for this amazing book, I assure you I'm giving you all the important bits of backstory you'll need. Want the whole experience? There are seventeen other books that will make reading Zar-Rynn even richer. Impatient? Jump right in.

Alana



1

CHAPTER ONE

Planet Paragon aka the Pleasure Planet Present Day

Zar

“Let’s meet back here at 1600 to travel back to the hotel,” I call to the party of eight who’ve joined Anya and me at the base of the mountain. “Enjoy the Pleasure Planet.”

My mate, Anya, grabs my hand, looks up at me with a close-lipped smile and sparkling eyes as she leads up the path.

“I’m glad we stopped for R&R on this planet,” she says. “It’s good to see the burden of worry drop from your shoulders even if it’s only for a few days.”

She’s right, carrying the responsibility for so many souls is a heavy weight indeed. Was it only three *annums* ago I met my beloved mate? She was tossed into my cell like a sack of garbage and within an *hoara* we were ordered to mate.

Those were unhappy times, although I didn't fully feel them. Spending my entire life as a slave, forced to be a gladiator, to fight and kill, I'd driven my feelings deep inside. Although I was a stone with a dead heart, I was present enough to make those days easier on Anya.

It's a miracle she saw there was life inside the husk of my body. Like a single ember in a burned-out fire, she found that spark and blew life back into me.

My heart swells with love. This happens sometimes. It's hard to predict when it will strike, but it can be overwhelming. Sometimes it's obvious why it comes. When I perform a mating ceremony for a couple on my ship, I always remember our own mating day and taste the sweetness of the depth of our love and the promise of our future.

Other times, like right this moment, it just overtakes me, filling my heart with tenderness and gratefulness to the fates or Gods who somehow threw my beloved into my path and helped her see that underneath my gruff exterior there was a male worthy of love.

We've barely moved up the steep mountain path when I tug Anya aside, pull her into my embrace, and nuzzle her neck.

"My sweet mate," I breathe into her ear. "You're more important than the air I breathe."

Like we have since shortly after our terrible meeting, we sync with each other. I can feel the moment her emotions switch from her eager desire to climb to the temple nestled at the top of the mountain to a wave of sweet love for me.

Our gazes connect, and her tilted green eyes communicate all the affection she holds for me. Her emotions are so strong, it's as if they shimmer between us and enter me like a living thing.

Her smile is shy, but her gaze is direct when she says, “We may be on our way to tour one of the holiest temples in the galaxy at the top of this mountain, but I’ve read there’s a maze of tunnels and caves on the way up.” She gives me a sly wink. “Want to find a private spot to have your naughty way with me?”

Is it her words or the wink that transforms the sweetness of the moment into lust? I don’t know, but my metamorphosis is swift. Need courses through me. My cock is hard as steel as I lead her up the path in search of an entrance to the cave.

Anya

Lucky me. I’m being tugged toward a cave by the galaxy’s sexiest lion-man. My beautiful Ton’arr mate. The best present life ever handed me. When we planned the insurrection three years ago, I couldn’t think past taking over the slave ship that imprisoned us. We were ten gladiator slaves, ten human women, plus a few crew members who helped us. Within days of meeting, we’d commandeered the ship and elected Zar captain.

It should have never worked. Had the fates not been with us, our owners, the MarZan cartel, would have found and re-enslaved us within days, yet three years later we’ve expanded to two war-class ships and an enormous compound on planet Fairea that is a sanctuary for runaway and emancipated slaves.

I worry about safety and the future, but Zar bears the burden of responsibility for us all.

Now we’ve arranged to have these few days to rest and have fun. I’m his most trusted advisor, but right now, I’m giving myself a change in job description. After designating myself the official Captain Relaxer, I promise to take my job very seriously indeed.

With that thought, I giggle and take the lead when I see a cave opening to my left.

Although the mountain is steep, the path to the temple is wide, with a sheer drop-off to our right and a high wall of gray stone to our left. The brochures touted the cave system, saying it was like a honeycomb that stretched deep into the mountain range.

It's dark in here, but we both turn on our wrist-comms' flashlights and wind deeper inside the mountain. The farther we go, the faster our steps grow, knowing what delights await us when we find the perfect hiding place.

The darker it gets and the farther from the throngs of people on holiday, the more my thoughts turn to my mate, my lover, my best friend. It's funny how the worst thing in my life—being abducted from Earth, thrown into a terrifying beast's cell, and ordered to “complete the act”—could wind up being a precious present. I certainly wouldn't have thought it was a gift at the time. It was a nightmare.

I don't want to revisit that right now. I want to make love. There's a little alcove up ahead, just enough of a niche in the wall we can hear any intruders before they stumble upon us.

“Make love with me, Zar,” I say as I press my back against the black stone wall at the deepest part of the alcove.

Sometimes our lovemaking is like a cataclysm—hot, hurried, full of passion. I love those joinings. They make me feel fully alive in a way nothing else can.

But by the lambent look in Zar's golden feline eyes, this isn't going to be one of those couplings. No, the serious look on his expression promises my favorite type of mating, the one where he pledges his love with every blazing gaze, every gentle touch, every gust of breath.

Maybe it's that we're on our way to one of the most sacred temples in the galaxy, but here, in our little niche in the wall, I know we're about to have our own religious experience.

He's purring already. Good. It means he's relaxed and calm. I didn't need the reassuring noise to know he's laid down the burden of leadership. His wide, furred shoulders aren't stiff like they can be when he has difficult decisions to make.

Twisting my wrist so the light shines on his face, I take this moment to inventory him. I don't need the light. If I had a lick of artistic talent, I could paint his portrait from memory.

Gorgeous feline face with a flat nose, pronounced channel from there to his lips, and eyes so golden it's almost as if they're lit from within.

His mane probably looks fearsome to the uninitiated, but to me, it just signals the promise of velvety softness. His fur is mostly golden, but his mane and the tuft at the tip of his tail are mahogany.

"My Beloved," he says, then nuzzles my neck with exquisite tenderness. I never tire of that endearment, even though he lavishes me with it. Every time he says it, he reminds us both how precious we are to each other and how tenuous our time together might be. It makes me want to seize the moment.

I ensure he can see my face, see my sincerity when I say, "You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Aye, that's true for me as well."

His purr increases, vibrating so vigorously I can feel it although we're inches from each other. His tail wraps around my waist and tugs me closer. It's forceful enough to make its meaning known—the time for words is over.

Good.

He dips his head for a kiss, brushing those pillowy lips against mine as he moves his head back and forth. His mane is softer than silk as it grazes my cheeks. The whiskers that sprout from either side of his flat nose quit tickling years ago. They simply remind me of our delicious differences. As soon as his lips coax mine open, his burred tongue presses inside, exploring with wonder as if it's our first time. My knees sag as his taste bursts on my tongue. It's like coming home.

I was right. This isn't going to be a military assault. It's going to be a gentle exploration. A claiming. A declaration of love. Not only do I feel it emanating from him, but after three years, I'm still crazy-in-love with this Ton'arr male.

My hands curl around his shoulders as my fingers slide through his soft fur. Although my mate wants to go slow, my body seems to have other ideas. Desire roars through me despite the sweetness of our kiss.

My nipples prick as they press against my bra. My core moistens with need and my legs open so I can grind against the bulge pressing against his leather kilt.

Feeling my need, perhaps by my scent, he picks up the pace. Although he doesn't relinquish his invasion of my mouth, his hands mount an attack on another front.

After sliding his hands upward from my waist, they stay on my ribcage where his thumbs circle directly under my breasts. His intentions are clear. He's going to tease me, make me ache for him. Oh yeah. I love this game, especially because I know exactly how it's going to end. Bliss.

My hands roam down his back and under his black leather kilt just so I can get a grip on that muscular ass of his. I love the feel of his powerful

haunches. My palms fit perfectly against the indents at the sides. With my hands resting here, I can feel every micromovement as his hips thrust against me, mimicking what we'll be doing naked in a moment.

"Any," he breathes when he lifts his head from me for a moment, just to look at me, to keep our connection.

I lean to bite his plump lips, then shake my head, pulling his bottom lip taut. He grips my ass and thrusts against me with a growl. I love that it's not a human growl. No. This is a lion growl, full of menace. Well, mock menace. *Sexual* menace.

Lifting my t-shirt and bra up, he dips his head to lave my nipples. First one, then the other. You'd think after three years I would be used to the scratch and rasp of his feline tongue, but it never ceases to make me crazed with passion. I arch against him, silently demanding more.

He scrapes the tips of my nipples with the flat of his front teeth.

"Yes," I say, bending farther so I can rub my clit against him. I know I'm not even feeling his magnificent cock, just the thick leather of his kilt, but the friction gives the tiniest relief.

He opens that fierce mouth wide and grips the side of my breast in his fangs. He didn't do this with me for the longest time. We only stumbled upon this maneuver accidentally and he later confessed he was surprised I didn't punch him for it.

Punch him? No. It makes my core quiver in lust. There's something about having one of my most intimate places at his complete mercy. It's arousing knowing he could bite down and tear my flesh, but he doesn't. Feeling his four fangs on my tender flesh and knowing he will never, ever hurt me makes me wet for him. Yeah, there's something about riding the edge of danger that ramps my excitement.

His breath whispers across my breast, hot and humid, then he releases me with a darkly feline pant, again reminding me of his leashed strength. It's a powerful turn-on.

Reaching down, I grip his furred thighs above the knees and slide upward, knowing I won't encounter any clothing. My male likes to go commando under that sexy kilt of his.

Bypassing the main attraction, I go for the road less traveled, choosing instead to cup his heavy sac. He makes no noise, although he's still purring. Instead, he releases my breast and tosses his lion-like head, then snaps that ferocious mouth in pleasure.

Only now that I've gotten his full attention does my palm head north, gripping him at his base and applying pressure in tiny increments until he rewards me with another head toss and dangerous snap.

I drop to my knees, duck under the kilt, and suck him into my mouth all in one continuous movement. This earns me a growl. Which earns him a gust of my arousal scent.

"Anya. You are too good at that. Too generous."

Lies. How can I be too generous to a male who deserves *everything*?

With my hand securely gripping his thick base and my lips in a tight ring around his girth, I pleasure him. I swirl the tip with my tongue, stealing a taste of his tangy essence, then bob and suck, relishing the way his fingers tighten on my shoulders.

With every extra psi of pressure, I know I'm destroying his initial resolution to be gentle. I'm unraveling him bit by bit. This is good. Unraveling Zar is my mission.

His soft fingertips press into me and his hips pump in the same rhythm as my bobbing head, but I won't be happy until I... yes, there it is. I feel the

slightest prick as his claws descend into my shoulders.

He won't break the skin. He never has. This beastly male is tightly leashed. But I like to bring him to the brink, to the edge of control. When I feel his claws, I give myself a mental point. I know I've won.

Zar

She's done it. My mate hijacked my game plan. I'd wanted to show her with every touch, every breath, how much I love and cherish her. But she has other ideas. She wants it hard and fast? She'll get it. She owns every part of me. I'll give her the parts she wants.

Lifting her from under her arms, I force her to her feet, then spin her to face the stone wall. This sensual dance, where no words are necessary, is the result of three *annums* of working in sync. We know each other in a thousand ways. Many of those are in bed. Or, like now, up against a cave wall.

I flick off the light in my wrist-comm, then turn hers off as well.

Cupping my hand over her mouth, it's my silent command for no words.

"Want it hard?" I ask, a mere whisper of breath against her ear.

She nods as I knew she would.

"Want it *all*?" I ask, assured she knows exactly what I'm asking.

She pauses, probably less to think than to reassure me she's certain of her answer—which is one nod. A deliberate up and down and up again.

After her teasing blowjob, I hadn't thought I could get any harder, but when she buys in to my last question, my cock punches against the leather of my kilt.

With one hand still covering her mouth, I pull her pants and panties down in one movement and tug one leg off completely over her sandal, leaving her with her pants around her left ankle. In case she forgets how primitive our

coupling is, here in this pitch-dark cave, she'll remember we didn't even take the time to remove our clothes.

"Anya wants my cock?" My voice is a deep snarl against her ear.

A nod.

I slide through her folds from behind, reveling in her slickness, how ready she is for me.

"Feel this?"

She nods.

"I will never tire of you, Anya."

She releases a little moan of pleasure which undoes me. We've learned we like to mate like this sometimes. To feel primitive and alive and unfettered. Usually when we're in this space, I leave the flowery words behind. But today, for some reason, I can't.

I may be about to slide my cock into her, but I have to remind her the body clinging to her back is her lover, her mate, her friend.

"Beloved." The word is an endearment, but I'm too lost in passion for the tone to sound like anything but a cross between a rasp and a growl.

"Mine," she says into the palm of my hand, pulling a smile from me.

Then I slip fully into my nature, letting all the civilized trappings fall away. Snapping my hips against her bottom, I focus on the warm slide of my cock through her dripping folds. My palm covers her mouth a bit tighter, giving her permission to make as much noise as she wants, even though there may be others in this cave. My other hand drifts to her nipple, plucking it until she writhes against me with a moan.

Dipping my knees, I line up to spear into her. I hiss in pleasure when my cock finds its way, easing into her only as far as the tip.

I stroke her this way for long *minimas* as I pluck her nipple and nip her shoulder and make us both skirt the line between pain and pleasure as time ticks by denying us release.

She's riding me, bending her knees, trying to press me deeper inside her even though she knows it never works. I am and always have been stronger than her. She'll never get her way in a battle of wills. Not in this venue. Her voice is too muffled to understand, but I know what she's chanting into my palm. "Please, please, please."

In one slide, I give us what we've both been waiting for. All the way to the hilt, then one more thrust to reassure us both I'm fully inside her. She moans, tipping her head back. I've seen her like this enough times to know her eyes have rolled into the back of her head. I love her like this. There's no other time in our lives when I feel more like she's fully mine.

As I pump into her, I reach to her clit and circle her with the pad of my finger in the way she likes. I bring her to the brink of orgasm, but don't let her fall over. She asked for it all. I want to give it to her.

I wait until she's straining, her haunches quivering in anticipation, her moans louder even though they're muffled by my palm. Then I circle her faster and apply a bit more pressure until I feel her body spasm beneath me. Her voice changes timbre to the decibel level that signals only one thing—her exquisite pleasure.

I live for this.

I bring her pleasure two more times, forcing myself not to release, even though her inner walls are milking me.

"Now?" I ask.

Her "Yes, yes, yes," is muffled, yet clear as day.

Her t-shirt is still on, but won't be an impediment. She'll just have to replace it with a new one from the gift shop before we step off the mountain.

I set my fangs on her shoulder near her throat. Making certain she feels the promise of my intentions, I wait for her almost-imperceptible nod.

I come, feeling my essence leaving my body and imagining it entering my beloved, then bite my mate.

My purr gets so loud I feel it vibrating against her, although it's hard to differentiate it from her own orgasmic spasms. She moans, then screams my name, then sinks against the rock wall in front of her. As she screams, a roar thunders out of my mouth, announcing our matebond. So much for remaining quiet.

The first few times we did this, I panicked, thinking the scream that accompanied the bite was one of pain. She had to reassure me a hundred times that it was pleasure.

Pulling her shirt toward the edge of her shoulder, I lick the punctures with flat swathes from my tongue to remove any lingering sting.

She's limp as a noodle, which gives me a pang of regret. I should have done this in our bed. But when I flick my wrist-comm light on and turn her in my arms, her gorgeous green eyes look up at me like I hung the moon. My regrets fly away.

I'm filled with love. Only love.

Anya

Somehow, I find the energy to reach around his neck, and somehow he finds the strength to lift me into his arms and tuck me against his chest. If we were in bed, I'd sleep for a few hours. But I'm not in our bed. I just need a moment. A moment to bask in this amazing, beautiful thing we have.

It's not just love, although that's the foundation. It's the friendship and the partnership and the common goal we strive for every day. It's the camaraderie and the... we're bonded. We're totally in sync.

And the sex? That's the icing. And when he bites me? It's the cherry on top. It symbolizes everything we have together. I love, *love*, that it's a physical embodiment of everything we share.

CHAPTER TWO

Anya

It took us a moment in the cave to pull ourselves together. Maybe it's planet Paragon, or that we're on vacation and away from our duties on the *Fool's Errand*, but I'm calm and happy and more in love than perhaps I've ever been.

"Do I look okay?" I ask when we're close enough to the cave entrance for ambient light to shine in.

He doesn't spare me a glance when he answers, "You're the most beautiful thing in the galaxy, Anya."

I smack his shoulder.

"Do I look like I'm a tourist who *hasn't* just fucked her mate in public?"

He turns to inspect me, slides a few stray curls behind my ear, and shakes his head. "The four holes in your shirt are a dead giveaway." He doesn't even have the good graces to look contrite. On the contrary, he gives me a wide smile that's happy enough to show fang. No, he's not apologetic, he's *proud*.

I slap his shoulder again, not bothering to hide my proud smile, either. *Hey planet Paragon, this guy is mine.*

As we trudge up the mountain, we play a game we sometimes do when we're on a planet or space station and waiting for others in our crew. It's a game best played when sitting down, although this works nicely. We people watch.

It's not just people-watching, though. We tell stories about them. My best friend in high school and I used to play the game at the mall, but on another planet, with a hundred different species milling around, there are so many exciting possibilities.

We giggle. Well, okay, I giggle, he rumbles about the green male and his much younger female companion as we trade salacious hypotheses about their relationship.

We stop the game for a moment as four young, red Halckon males approach. Their matching saffron robes are a clear sign they are acolytes of some religious sect. They look so somber, as if they just touched a sacred artifact. It's heartwarming after all the hatred, slavery, and death we've encountered in our travels to see such earnest holiness in these young monks.

Two tall gray males approach us next. They're obviously of the same species, looking almost like brothers, although one is much older than the other. They're nearly Zar's height, but they're much thinner. It's almost as if their necks are too thin for their rather too-large heads.

"They went to the temple to repent their illicit relationship," I quip because they were both so serious, so dour, it's impossible to imagine either of them as sexual beings.

Zar laughs, immediately understanding my little joke—the juxtaposition of incongruity.

Suddenly, the planet trembles beneath my feet. Zar was a gladiator for decades. His reflexes are lightning fast. He envelops me in his embrace and takes us both to the ground, covering me as best he can, which is a good move, because rocks are tumbling from the mountain and landing with shuddering thuds all around us.

“It will be okay, Love,” he says, his mouth inches from my ear.

His body bounces against mine. He grunts in pain as he’s pounded by falling rocks while he protects me.

The tremor continues for what feels like hours, but is perhaps a minute at most. It almost stops, then starts again.

When it finally shudders to a stop and Zar peels himself off my back, I hear shouting and wailing from all around me.

People are picking themselves off the ground and finding their loved ones amidst the rubble. As I scan the area, I see two bodies that aren’t moving—the two thin gray males we accused of being illicit lovers.

After Zar ensures I’m fine, we bolt to them. It’s obvious one of them is dead. The younger one’s head is at a shocking angle and his open eyes are glassy. The other is still alive, but his breathing is labored and both legs are pinned under a heavy boulder.

He gasps, then breathes no more.

Zar comms Dr. Drayke. He’s one of the friends who started up the mountain with us less than an hour ago. He can’t be more than half a mile away. It’s obvious we don’t have time to wait, though. The older male isn’t breathing. I rush to him as I try to remember my CPR instructions. I took the class twice for my shitty call center job back on Earth, but the steps are fuzzy.

Kneeling near his head, I sweep his mouth for foreign matter, look, then turn my head so my cheek hovers over his mouth to listen and feel for a breath hitting my cheek. He's definitely not breathing. I turn my head, lift up on his chin to tilt his head back, pinch his nose with my other hand, seal my mouth over his, then give the two rescue breaths.

"Anya!" Zar shouts. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to save his life."

"Tell me how."

If things weren't so dire, I'd have to laugh. My big Ton'arr male can't bear to see my mouth on another male even in a life-and-death situation.

Ridiculously sweet.

Within precious seconds, Zar's mouth is on the gray-skinned male. I focus on my chest compressions for half a minute, then glance at Zar. His mouth is sealed over the male's open mouth with his fingers pinching the male's nose. Just as I told him, he's giving rescue breaths.

As soon as I notice he's breathing in and out without letting up, I shout, "Zar, release his mouth after you breathe into him so you can take a full breath, then breathe it into him." He immediately complies, and together we give CPR with Zar giving breaths and me providing chest compressions. All at once, Zar's body freezes. It's as if he's paralyzed. He's so still, so frozen, I immediately know something is terribly wrong although I can't fathom what it is.

I hear Dr. Drayke's reassuring voice from up the mountain as he calls our names at the same moment I watch Zar's eyes roll into the back of his head. His body loses all muscle tone, and he slips to the ground.

"Anya!" Drayke shouts as he kneels next to Zar who is in a crumpled heap on his back, his head on the gray male's chest. "What happened?"

I tell him what I can, but I know nothing that can be of help.

Zar is breathing. His skin is unmarked. I see no bruises, no blood.

“Let’s turn him to look at his back,” I say, wondering if one of the falling boulders he protected me from did damage I hadn’t noticed.

Drayke’s mate, Nova, calls for a hover-stretcher, then kneels next to Zar to examine him more closely. As we wait for a hover-stretcher so we can get him back to the ship, the two of them check Zar over. There are some scrapes and small cuts on his golden fur. Drayke palpates his ribs and assures me nothing is broken. We can’t find anything obviously wrong with him.

Dr. Drayke does a quick assessment on the male we were trying to save and assures me there was nothing more we could have done. There’s a small river of blue blood flowing from under the boulder that crushed the male’s legs. There was no chance of saving him, but at least we tried.

Dax, Dahlia, Stryker, and Maddie join us. They’d been exploring the mountain and heard our desperate comms requesting someone from the ship bring a hover-stretcher for Zar.

“No time to wait!” Dax announces. He’s the biggest male on the ship, a mountain of muscle who easily stands seven feet tall. “Will it hurt if I carry him?”

Drayke pauses a moment, which scares me more than anything that’s happened yet. The doctor is a consummate professional and always seems to have the answers. Him not knowing whether Zar is safe to be carried makes me feel as if the blood in my veins has turned to ice water. My breath actually stutters in my chest.

“Yes. I can’t do anything for him here. Let’s get him off this *dracking* mountain,” the doctor bites out.

I've never heard him curse before. Ever. I can't ask it out loud, but in my head, I wonder if Zar is going to die.

Rynn

Everything is wrong.

It's the first thought I have upon awakening. Although I'm lying down, my body feels heavy, and my thoughts are slow.

Now I remember. I'm on planet Paragon. There was a quake. Did the body die? That must be it. They must be performing the Sacred Transfer Rite. That couldn't be correct. Where are the stringed instruments, the flutes, the music designed to facilitate a peaceful transfer? Why don't I hear the priestesses chanting, helping me calmly make the attachment to my new host?

In my 56 lifetimes, I've only had one emergency transfer, but it wasn't like this. Despite the urgency and lack of planning, it went smoothly. The journey into my new body was peaceful and orderly.

Now that I've been conscious for a moment, it strikes me that this doesn't feel like a Boklorn body. For 56 lifetimes I have made peaceful exits and entries. For 56 lifetimes I have entered a Boklorn body. This is unlike anything I've done before. I need answers. As soon as the initial meld is complete, I'll have to discover what has happened.

Despite the lack of either properly soft bedding or a silken pillow beneath my head. Despite the lack of stringed lutes and melodic flutes and a softly beating drum. Despite no quiet susurrations of the priestesses as they welcome me into a new body and encourage the seamless joining of an Arclite and his new Boklorn host, I must ensure I'm securely embedded into my new host's brainstem.

At the moment of my former host's death, I unwrapped my filament-like tendrils from his brainstem and returned to my most elemental form—gas. I left his body with his breath and entered through my new host's mouth.

This makes me wonder who my new host could be.

The transfer is a most fragile moment. My gaseous state has to be accepted into a new host without disagreement. My species is not invasive. We are not conquerors. Our new host has to breathe us in on purpose.

How did this happen?

I return to my task, speeding through my new body, ensuring I'm at the base of the brain, then willing myself to transmute from formless to formed.

Tendrils thinner than the most sophisticated filament assemble from nothing, wrapping around cells at the most elemental level. This process progresses as I build a platform from which to merge with my host.

I don't have control of the body yet, so I can't open my eyes, can't get my bearings, can't inspect my new host. What's making it doubly hard is that I'm now moving. The body is jostling.

As I connect to my host's neural network, it doesn't help that the first sensations I receive are of pain. I'm working under a handicap to be sure. People are shouting in different languages. I'm fluent in 187 languages and I'm certain I know the ones I'm hearing, but I can only multitask on so many levels. Right now, if I don't complete the connection with his neural network, both my host and I will die.

I don't know how long the bumping and shaking goes on. I simply focus on my task, forming delicate connections in my host's brain.

Finally, the pummeling stops. I believe I'm in a vessel, perhaps a hovercraft. Soon I might be able to demand to be transported home, to get

the support my host and I need to form the bond that will last my new host's lifetime.

I must connect to the body's brain activities, but now is not the time. This connection is too fragile, too tenuous. We both need to rest before I move to that phase.

Anya

This is surreal. I keep wavering from terrified and crying so hard I have to keep wiping my nose with the back of my hand to being so emotionally detached I can barely process what's going on.

Dax and Stryker took turns carrying Zar's comatose body to the hover lot. Shadow, Zar's second in command, ran ahead and was in the driver's seat of our vehicle when the rest of us arrived. Dr. Drayke tried to assess and treat on the wild hover ride to the ship's medbay, but that was a fool's errand. He had no medical equipment.

Now I'm in the ship's medbay, trying to stay out of the med team's way as they investigate what's wrong.

In the hover we debated taking him to an on-planet hospital, but I know Dr. Drayke. He's a friend as well as a gifted physician. He loves Zar. No one—no one—would treat my mate with more skill or compassion.

I'm trying to remain out of the way, even as I stay physically connected to my mate. I'm sitting behind his head, barely allowing my lips to leave his mane as I keep kissing him and murmuring quiet encouragements.

"It's okay, Zar. We'll get you through this."

Drayke has me move as he performs brain scans for what seems like the tenth time. I watch his blue face, usually so dispassionate, as he goes about his assessment. Is that a slight frown? A fresh bout of panic flies through my body like a live electric wire.

“See this?” he motions with his head, wordlessly calling his human mate Nova to his side. Nova, who’s now his trained medical assistant, slides next to him and tips her head to get a look at the medpad. Her lips form into a tight line.

Drayke and Nova developed a psychic connection during their mating ceremony. They’re not talking out loud, but I’m certain they’re having a long conversation in the privacy of their minds. If it’s not fit for me to hear, the news couldn’t be good.

“What?” I demand, my voice full of terror.

The pair exchange silent glances, then Drayke comes to the head of the bed and shows me his medpad.

“See this?” His elegant blue finger indicates something in a picture that must be Zar’s brain.

“Mmm.” I have no idea what I’m looking at.

“This, here and here.” He points to various places on the screen. “This is healthy, normal brain tissue. Now look here.”

He points to what appears to be the top of the spine.

“See this... lacey mass?”

“Maybe.” I’m still uncertain what I’m seeing.

“This shouldn’t be here. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“You said it could be blood, maybe from a blow to the head,” Nova says, no doubt trying to calm me down. This just proves they were having a long, private conversation they didn’t want me privy to.

My gaze flicks from the doctor to Nova, to my mate, to the medpad. I’m lost.

“Look!” Nova points to the vitals screen on the wall above Zar’s head. “His vitals have stabilized. That’s a good thing, Anya.”

Twisting to look behind me, I see the reassuring vitals. They're marked in such a way that even a child can read them. They're color coded, and all of Zar's are in the green column.

With a few slow, deep breaths, I force my heartbeat into the green column as well. I can feel my blood pressure lower.

"We could give him meds to force him out of his coma," Dr. Drayke offers, "but that could elevate his vitals. I'd like to just observe him for a while. I'm not leaving this spot. At the first sign of his condition worsening, I'll administer those meds. Let's not worry. Zar's the healthiest male on the ship."

Yeah, let's not worry, even though he just said he's never seen anything like the spidery looking thing gripping Zar's brainstem. That sounds reassuring. I shimmy closer to Zar's head, kiss his round, furry ear, and thrill when it twitches in response. Is that just a reflex, or did he feel that? I can hope, can't I?

I only half pay attention when Drayke walks to the medbay entryway and makes an announcement about Zar's health to the group of our friends waiting in the hallway for the news.

The more he tries to sound detached and professional, the more frenzied their questions become.

This reminds me of what happened after our insurrection three years ago. A few people got minor cuts and bruises during the armed skirmish. Except for Zar. One of our enemies stabbed him in the belly, almost killing him. It was touch-and-go for a while. Everyone on board offered their support then, just as they're doing now.

I try to reassure myself as I repeat the same mantra. This, too, shall pass. He's the healthiest male on the ship. Of course he'll make a full recovery.

I kiss his head and pet his mane and furrow my fingers through the fur on his arms. I remind him how much I love him and ask him to come back to me. No. Not ask. Beg. Which makes me want to cry.

I have to draw the line at that. I can't cry. It's not good for any of us.

Suddenly, his eyes pop open. It feels like a miracle and fills me with relief.

"Zar! Dear God, you're back!"

I roll my short stool from the top of his head where I've been sitting, to his side. I want to see that beautiful face when the lights are on inside his mind.

"How do you feel?"

"This is not the way it's supposed to be done," he says as he glances around the room. His gaze skips over me as if he's more interested in the color of the walls and the placement of the light fixtures than in seeing his beloved's face. He must have taken a helluva hit to his head.

Drayke closes the doors to the hallway and bustles to the gurney. "What hurts?" he asks.

"No pain. It's disorienting, as it always is," he says.

Always?

"Yes. A concussion," Drayke says, nodding. He seems pleased with the news.

A concussion is probably a good thing compared to the thousand other terrible things that could be wrong. Zar's been a gladiator his whole life. He's probably had a number of these and lived to tell the tale.

Drayke runs through a routine, the outer space version of how many fingers am I holding up. With each response, Drayke's smile becomes wider and his nods travel farther up and down.

"I think you're going to be fine," Drayke tells us. "It's a concussion. Lie down for the rest of the day, no sparring until I clear you, and you probably

don't want to eat anything more than broth today. You might be nauseous." *See, Anya?* I tell myself, *You were terrified about nothing. It's a concussion. Nothing more.*

"Hear that, Babe?" I ask him with a huge smile on my face as relief courses through my veins. "I was so worried about you." Heaving a sigh of relief, my shoulders release the tension they've been carrying.

Is he having trouble focusing his eyes? Isn't that a symptom of concussion? He hasn't even spared me a glance.

"There's an anomaly at the base of your brainstem," Drayke says, with no change in his voice. He's obviously not worried. "It's kind of an echo on the scan. We'll follow it. If it doesn't resolve by the end of our stay on planet Paragon, I'll have you see a local neurologist."

"That's not an anomaly," Zar announces, his voice irritated. "That's me. I'm an Arclite."

Fear slams through me so hard and fast that a harsh, shocked breath escapes my mouth even though I'm trying to keep my feelings in check.

"You're a... what?"

"An Arclite. A symbiont species. My previous Boklorn must have died in the avalanche, correct? I'm a symbiote and I've now attached myself to the base of my new host's brainstem. We're connected. Once I'm fully linked, someone will have to fill me in on the specifics of the transfer."

"Host? Symbiont?" Drayke asks. "Zar, what are you talking about?"

Zar looks more closely at his surroundings, examining Drayke, Nova, and me for the first time since he opened his eyes.

He lifts his hands, yanking his right hand out of my grip as if he'd been holding a dirty napkin. "I'm not in a Boklorn? This body? It wasn't a novitiate? No wonder nothing is progressing as normal."

I don't think the word "normal" has any place in this conversation. All the talk of Arclites and Boklorns and hosts and novitiates? That's weird enough. More unusual, though, is the look on Zar's face and his tone of voice.

He looks as if there's a bad smell in this room. His nose is all squinched. And there's a haughty, nasal tone in his voice that I've honestly never heard come out of his mouth before.

Wait. Yes, I did. A couple years ago, he'd had a shot of Sillerian whiskey and was mockingly imitating a pompous official at one of his gladiatorial matches. He had us all in stitches with his imitation of an arrogant, pompous asshole.

Drayke pulls up a chair, sits down, and sticks his face close to Zar's. "You need to explain. I want to know what you mean by the terms symbiont and host. You will give me an explanation right now."

I've never seen Drayke this upset.

It's confusing that Zar is content to keep his hands fisted at his sides rather than threading his fingers through mine. Not more than a few hours ago, we shared such intimacies. I glance at my t-shirt and see the four holes from his fangs. They reassure me, tether me to the here and now, because otherwise it would be hard to believe the furred male on the table and I are anything more than strangers.

I examine Nova's face, her eyes wide in surprise. I try to pay attention to something other than the feelings of dread circling in my belly.

This is just due to the head wound, right? Some odd effect of a concussion? The ramblings of a confused mind? Because it can't be true. It just can't.

"I've already explained myself," he says, his voice sharp, irritated. "You're capable of interstellar flight, right? That means you have access to the

Intergalactic Database. Look it up.” Zar closes his eyes, obviously fatigued. My heart constricts in empathy for him. He just needs some good old-fashioned rest. I grab his hand and twine my fingers between his. Even as I’m trying to convince myself everything will be okay, he yanks his hand from my grip and folds his hands together on his chest.

I know he’s sick and in pain and confused, but he’s never done this before. We’ve had our spats over the years, but never has he refused my touch. I try to control the hot tears gathering behind my eyes, but I can’t. Instead, I tip my head and try to hide my face.

I’m vaguely aware Drayke and Nova have both grabbed their computer pads and are researching the wild ramblings of a concussed male. Trying not to pay attention to anything other than how much I love my mate, I strengthen my belief this will all work itself out over the next few hours. I’m jolted back to reality when Drayke comms Shadow. Although initially I try to ignore their quiet conversation, I’m soon sitting up straight in my chair as I listen.

“The findings are preliminary,” Drayke says, “but I think what he’s told us might be true. The Arclites have been around for eons, taking humanoid hosts who willingly undergo the merging. I’m going to research how to remove it. Until I get conflicting information, I’m considering it a parasite. “In the meantime, I think it wise to put an armed guard in the room and one outside the door. I have no idea what this... thing is capable of. And,” he pauses, clears his throat, and his gaze darts guiltily to me, “I think you should officially take over the duties of captain until we get this sorted out.” This quiet, factual conversation does what Zar’s own words did not. Drayke just made it clear these aren’t the fever dreams of an injured male. There

may be a... parasite living inside the male who is the most important being in my world.

Hot tears stream down my face. I have no control over them and no longer have the will to hide them.

“It’s true?” I ask. Perhaps if Drayke and his mate Nova didn’t have a psychic link, if they’d been talking out loud as they researched these wild allegations, it would have prepared me for this sudden pronouncement that things are so dire they’re relieving Zar of his duties. But with the way it unfolded, I’m thunderstruck.

“The Database confirms everything Zar said,” Drayke intones dolefully. The male I love is inches away from me. His fur was under my fingers, his tongue in my mouth, his cock was *inside* me only hours ago. I refuse to believe he’s now sharing his body with some parasite.

I snag his hand again, pull it toward me, twine our fingers together, and bring his knuckles to my mouth to kiss each one. At least he doesn’t yank away from my touch like he did a moment ago.

Shadow approaches the foot of the bed. He’s Zar’s closest friend and confidant on the ship. Their relationship started with friction because Shadow was an ass.

He’s come a long way since then, growing into a male with an enormous heart, compassion, and a good head for leadership.

Initially, I thought he was a cyborg. He had a prosthetic arm and eye. The eye was like something made for a Borg from Star Trek. It was a badly fitted metallic eye that shone with a red light. Dr. Drayke made some modifications, and Shadow now looks more humanoid. Although he’s from Morgana, their species can’t be differentiated from humans without DNA testing.

“You!” he says, his voice colder than I’ve heard it in years. He shakes Zar’s ankle. “Wake! Wake up.”

I’m about to snap at him that bodies don’t work that way when Zar’s eyes pop open. He immediately snatches his hand from mine.

This. This, more than anything that’s happened today, makes my heart feel like it’s being torn from my chest.

“Name?” Shadow barks.

“Rynn,” he says, as if he’s reciting a fact, like two plus two equals four.

“You don’t belong in that body, Rynn. Get. The. Fuck. Out of it. Now!”

“That would be impossible,” his voice is clipped.

“Nothing is impossible,” Shadow replies in the soulless tone gladiators use with their opponents in the arena.

If I’m not mistaken, his fingers tighten around Zar’s ankle.

“You don’t belong. You’re an interloper. A thief. Give this male his life back!” He removes his hand long enough to grab the dagger all the males wear hidden in their boots. He must think better of it, realizing it would hurt his friend’s body, because he returns his crushing grip to the ankle.

“The process has begun. My being is now intertwined with this male’s brainstem,” Zar’s beautiful lips say. “An Arclite only has a few *hoaras* to make this connection. It is a biological imperative that must be fulfilled. Despite the bumpy traveling, my only initial concern was the inaugural meld. Now that it’s complete, separation will kill us both. The process has progressed far enough that this host’s body will die if I leave.”

I shake my head, unable to process the information. Shadow’s faster than me.

“Where’s Zar? He’s still in there? I want to speak with him.”

“That’s not possible.”

Shadow can't control himself. He steps closer to the head of the bed and grabs Zar's cheeks in one of his huge hands, squeezing until Zar's handsome face contorts into an ugly grimace.

"Where. Is. Zar?"

Zar shakes his head until Shadow removes his grip. "The first portion of the melding process occurs in the host's brainstem. And, might I remind you, he was a willing host. Arclites are not an invasive species. We only enter volunteers who inhale us into their bodies once we have released from our previous host."

The CPR. The fucking CPR! Is that how he invaded my mate?

I flashback to the image of Zar giving rescue breaths, keeping his mouth sealed around the Boklorn's lips while he inhaled and exhaled.

A wave of despair washes over me. I wish it had been me. I think it would have been easier on me to have been absorbed by this... cruel, unfeeling asshole than to be on this end, watching the person I love stolen from me.

"Go on," Shadow's tone is menacing.

"The second step is for me to connect with your friend's brain. Right now, I don't have access to his memories. When the second step is complete, I will have absorbed his memories."

"What does absorb mean?" I ask, leaning forward. Zar's still in there? *My* Zar. I want to get him back.

"Your friend is my 57th host. Inside my consciousness, I hold the memories of all 56 previous hosts. When our consciousnesses combine, I will hold his memories. I can avoid this if you would like. I have no need of his memories.

"The Boklorn are the species who choose to host us. On their planet, they consider it a great honor. They vie for the opportunity to become a host and

are groomed for it from an early age. Once chosen as a possible recipient, they reside in monasteries and live simple lives to better accommodate their Arclite symbiont if they are lucky enough to receive one.

“They lead lives of contemplation with a minimum of emotion. It makes it easier for us to meld with them. And easier for us to continue our important work. When an Arclite like myself chooses to become a Recepticon, it is our mission to become the repository of all knowledge in the galaxy. My species’ payment for the use of the host’s body is to keep their memories alive. That is the tradeoff.”

He settles back against the pillow and closes his eyes. As if what he said just explained everything.

“So Zar is still in there?” I ask.

“Once I embedded into his brainstem, the male you knew as Zar is dead as you know it. His will, his life-force, his soul, if you believe in those things, are all dead.”

He has the audacity to open his eyes and spear me with an emotionless look that pierces straight into my heart. No compassion at all.

If he weren’t in Zar’s body, I would strangle the motherfucker without a second thought. Instead, I grab his balls. Out of the blue. I’ve never done such a thing and never would have if I’d given it a moment’s thought.

“You’re going to disentangle whatever that web is at the base of his brain. You’re going to pack up and leave, motherfucker.” I twist just a little to make sure I have his attention. “You’re going to pack up and leave, motherfucker.” I squeeze until he yelps. I’ve never heard this noise from Zar before. Instead of satisfying me, it only serves to prove to me that this male is not my beloved.

He looks pleadingly not at me, but at Shadow. As if I'm a hysterical female and he needs a level-headed male to intervene. Thankfully, Shadow's having none of it.

"Do it! Do what she asks," Shadow seethes.

"It will kill us both. If you don't believe me, it's on the Intergalactic Database. Look it up."

Drayke steps into my field of vision, his expression dripping with compassion, and nods.

The doctor reads from the Database. "'Once the Arclite symbiont fully assimilates with its host, the body becomes dependent upon the Arclite for survival. If the Arclite disengages from a living host, the body ceases to function. The Arclite, now in gaseous form, moves to the lungs, then has a maximum of ten *minimas* to transfer to a new host'.

"'Once an Arclite chooses to become a symbiont, they can no longer exist in a gaseous form for more than ten *minimas* outside a physical body. Thus, the Arclite and its host are codependent for survival'."

I release the balls of the male I love, cup my face to try to hide my emotions, and weep.

"You have one choice," the *thing* adds. "If you don't want me to acquire the host's memories, I don't have to. They mean nothing to me. It's simply part of the contract. Let me know. You have twenty *hoaras* from the moment I entered his body before that choice will be made for you. His memories will fade and be irretrievable."

CHAPTER THREE

Anya

Shadow and Drayke escort me into the small, attached lab. They're each so kind, touching me as if I'm breakable as glass. It just proves how badly I'm taking this and how worried they are.

It's cramped in here and a bit overwhelming with me on a little rolling stool and the two large, muscled males looming over me. They must sense my panic, because a minute later they've rolled in two more stools and we're all crammed in, knee to knee.

"Nothing needs to happen right away, Anya," Drayke explains slowly, his voice calm and soft, as if he's talking to a frightened child. "Just one thing. The decision about Zar's memories."

I take a deep breath and blow out slowly, trying to calm myself. Just one decision. I can do that. In fact, I already have.

"Unless you can think of a reason not to, I want that *thing* to keep Zar's memories. When we figure out how to extricate their two consciousnesses

and kick the parasite out, I want my Zar back.” It doesn’t seem like a hard decision to me.

The two males share a glance. I know this look. When Grandma Hannah had dementia really bad, she’d continually ask where her husband Manny was. I remember being young when she’d ask and my mom and her sister would share a glance, then tell her, “Mom, daddy’s gone. Remember?”

The pain on all three faces was stark. Grandma had to receive the news of her husband’s death for what felt like the first time to her, although he’d been dead for years and she’d heard the sad news of his passing a thousand times.

My mom and aunt had to deliver the devastating news, knowing how it pierced grandma’s heart.

That’s the look of sadness and compassion that Shadow and Dr. Drayke share as they sit across from me. As if they’re dealing with someone who hasn’t accepted reality, but they’re going to humor her.

“Good,” Drayke says. “I agree. This isn’t over, Anya. We’re going to research, contact experts, perhaps even contact the Arclite Symbiont Council. If there’s a way to get Zar back, we will make it happen.”

“In the meantime,” Shadow says, “why don’t you get some rest? Want me to have Petra walk you to your cabin?”

Leave Zar? No, thank you. And *my* cabin? *I* don’t have a cabin. *We* have a cabin. Well, we *had* a cabin. When I picture entering that room, knowing my mate might never join me there again, I feel physical pain. It squeezes my heart and circles my stomach like a python crushing the life out of me. I can barely breathe.

“No. I’ll stay with him.”

The two males share another of those looks, full of compassion and sadness. It makes me feel worse, not better.

Rynn

Messy. This is certainly the messiest transfer of my existence. It should be orderly, calm, and peaceful. I should have merged with a Boklorn who trained his entire life for this and was eager for the joining.

It should not be conducted with an unwitting host, especially one with... fur and claws. And definitely not include a... what? Who is that female? His mate? Concubine? She put her hand on my testicles. Without permission. How did this happen? There was no resistance. How did he accept me without prior knowledge or consent? This has never happened. With all the wealth of information stored in my brain, I am clueless as to how to deal with this conundrum.

“Go ahead. Do what you need to do to keep Zar’s memories.”

I open my eyes to see it’s the tan-skinned male with the bionic eye, the angrier of the two males, who gave this order.

“Zar? His name was Zar?” I ask.

“His name is Zar,” the male seethes. “He’s the best male I’ve ever met. He’s smart and thoughtful and good. Do you hear that? This male is more than you’ll ever be, whether you have fifty or a hundred lifetimes. Get it?”

“You don’t deserve to inhabit his body and you fucking sure don’t deserve to have killed him in the prime of his life.”

He pauses, breathing as heavily as if he just ran a race.

“You will keep his memories. *All* of them. And, by the Gods, you should learn from them. It will teach you more about being a person than you’ve learned in all your previous lifetimes.”

The male’s chin is quivering. Not in anger, but in passion.

I live a simple life devoid of passion. By choice. When I encounter it, I avoid it. Not only out of personal preference, but because it is the Recepticon way. We keep emotions out of the equation so we can be better repositories of information to be handed down for eons.

I'm not used to emotions. Certainly not raw ones like this.

"I will preserve his memories," I answer truthfully, then add the lie he insists on, "and I will learn from them."

I will keep his memories. That is the Symbiont's unwritten contract with our hosts. *Learn* from a male like this? I can't imagine there is anything in the archive of his memory banks that will be helpful for the future of civilization.

"I will spend the better part of the next day completing the meld and absorbing Zar's memories. Please do not interrupt this process. It is delicate. When I awaken, I will be known as Zar-Rynn."

I give a pointed look at the female who is again sitting at my side, looking at me as if she expects something from me. Is she planning on staying for the completion of the meld?

"It would be best if you go," I urge.

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I'm here for the duration," she says as she wiggles in her seat to underscore her intentions. Her tone is full of anger, but her eyes, her eyes are looking at me with... what? Desire? Longing? She expects something I won't be able to give.

I take a sip of water someone placed on my bedside table, then close my eyes, and begin the second step of the meld.

I'm fully entrenched in the brainstem. Now I let the tendrils of my consciousness progress through the cerebellum, then move methodically throughout the brain.

My first pass is an exploration. I'm mapping. This feline species is nothing like the Boklorn. I need to get the lay of the land before I dive in.

Nothing is like my previous 56 hosts. Perhaps because they're different from this species, perhaps because they prepared their entire lives for my entry, but their brains were neatly segmented.

Hearing came from one part of the brain, sight from another, and taste from yet another.

In this Zar, everything is interconnected. Memories are harnessed to all the senses, everything mashed together into more of a goulash or stew instead of distinct edibles separated on a plate.

All of a sudden, I'm drowning. I believe I caused the body to scream. Or perhaps it's that I'm squeezing the female's hand so tightly she let out a squeak of pain.

These aren't the memories of a Boklorn—nice, neat pieces of a bland puzzle. No. I've been immersed into hell. I can't even separate the knowing from the feeling. This host's being is intertwined with his memories.

I'm in agony.

Fiery, blazing spikes of pain slam through me. It's not just physical. It's accompanied by terror and... hatred.

I've read about these emotions. They are well documented in millions of my internal files, just as are the greatest artworks of the galaxy and the chronology of all the wars ever fought.

But I've never *felt* them before.

I'm suffering.

I hear moaning—it's my own. My newly acquired muscles are spasming. My eyes pop open as I try to escape, but seeing this medbay doesn't reduce the pain. It just heaps on more because it adds the picture of this female—

his female—her face etched with concern for a male who, for all intents and purposes, is dead.

Shuttering my lids, I dive back in. I have no recourse. Once the amalgamation of memories has started, there is no way to make it cease. Did I tell them it would take the better part of the day? Surely it's been a *lunar*, perhaps an *annum* as the download continues. How could so much pain be packed into one humanoid lifetime?

He was ripped from his mother's bosom, sold into slavery, forced to comply, to learn, to fight in the hot suns. He was lashed for misbehavior, beaten for non-compliance, and abused for not learning fast or well enough. Oh. Misery. No. This couldn't be happening. Must I watch?

My eyes pop open again, bared wide as I try to make this memory go away or, if not disappear, then fade. Cruelty. Unbearable.

No. No. No. He said it then, I believe my lips are chanting it now. A best friend? The only softness or compassion in his young life? And he was forced to kill him.

Sorrow. I can't bear it.

In order to pull myself from this misery, I focus on the only lifeline at my disposal.

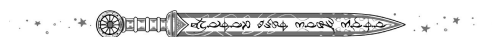
The female. She hasn't left my side. Is she hanging onto me? Or am I holding onto her?

Pulling myself out of the well of sadness, I allow myself the briefest moment of respite to listen to her.

Are her lips at my ear? Her words, so soft, so tender.

"Zar, I know you're in there. I'm still here. I love you more than life. More than breath. Come back to me. I will never leave you. I will stand by you. I will always be here for you."

Perhaps it's this sharing, this accumulation of my new host's memories, that allows me a moment of compassion because all I can think is, *Poor female. Zar, the male you love so much, is gone.*



An eternity later, I've absorbed all of Zar's memories. I am a creature of duty. My job is to be the repository of all information, to gather it throughout many lifetimes, to be a living storyteller should all written and encoded information be lost to all species over time.

With great responsibility, there is always a great cost. The cost is that I've dedicated my life to this duty. The Boklorn species and the Arclites made this pact eons ago. The Arclite hold the knowledge, the Boklorn hosts give their lives in service to it.

It hasn't always been an easy task. I have never, though, wished to be anything other than what I am. Until today. A hundred, maybe a thousand times today, I wished I didn't have to go through with this accumulation of knowledge.

I've never known such pain.

Opening my eyes, I look around the room. I'm only half surprised when I see the female is still at my side. She has scooted her chair as close to the bed as possible and laid her head on my chest.

Over the last *hoaras*, I've seen all of Zar's memories. I know who this female is now. I saw their tragic meeting, their blossoming love, and their heroic uprising.

As I watched their relationship grow, I came as close to love as I have ever been.

Of course, I have knowledge of the concept of soulmates, or truemates as Ton'arrs call them, but this is the first time I'm witnessing and vicariously experiencing the depth of the bond.

There were moments, I'll admit, I envied them. Their sweeping emotions, the sweetness of their love, their unwavering commitment. I skimmed through their sexual encounters. It felt intrusive, like I was trespassing. Even still, I got closer to primitive sexual feelings than ever in my lifetime. I see now why my awakening in Zar's body was a surprise to everyone in the room. I was a sightless, formless gas in a dying body, and assumed the transfer was going as planned. It is a biological imperative.

Now that I look at it through Zar's perspective, I see he was performing a primitive lifesaving procedure on #56's body. He inhaled my essence purely by accident while implementing an altruistic act.

If I could turn back time and change the course of events, I would, even though it would mean my death. But I can't. I take comfort in the fact that Zar died while trying to save a life, although he didn't know the life he would save was mine, or that it would be at such a cost. I have a better understanding of these people's anger and sadness.

Now that I've completed the melding, have absorbed all of Zar's memories, and am on the other side, I can only thank the gods I don't have emotions like that. I can't feel the depths of love, nor thankfully, the urgent desires. I will tuck all of that away. Number 57 will stay at the bottom of the stack of all my hosts' memories. There is nothing Zar can help me with in the future. He's served his purpose.

I ease my shoulder out from under the female. She murmurs and shifts to place her head on the pillow without opening her eyes, then settles back into deeper slumber.

I take a breath, swing my legs off the bed, and make my way to the refresher.

I should have been prepared for this. Even though I just watched all of Zar's memories, I'm still surprised to walk in his body.

I'm used to Boklorn bodies: tall and thin with large heads that always seem too heavy for their necks. I've never prowled in a gladiator body with its symmetry and power. No wonder he became such an accomplished fighter. His body—this body—could do anything.

Even in the few steps I take, I can feel how my gait differs from previous hosts. I have a rolling stride, as if I could drop to a crouch or break into a run at a moment's notice.

I close the refresher door and look into a mirror for the first time since I've entered Zar. My palms cup my cheeks. So foreign.

I pantomime a snarl, giving myself a front-row seat to the view of my teeth. Boklorns are vegetarians, at least host Boklorns are. They spend their lives preparing the body to be healthy and calm. In the past, my teeth have always had flat chewing surfaces.

Fangs. I shake my head even as I glance down and manage to extend my claws from the ends of my fingers. At least my host has four fingers and an opposable thumb.

Perhaps the Symbiont Council will allow me to terminate from this host early. After all, I signed no contract. No. That would be dishonorable.

Without Zar, I would have expired on that mountain.

After figuring out how to extricate myself from the rag that covers my genitals, I relieve myself. Although I have the information at my disposal about how to reapply the loincloth, I fumble with it for only a few *minimas* before I give up.

Upon leaving the refresher, I notice the female has awakened. Look at her. I know that expression on her face now that I've seen my host's memories. It's affection.

I am capable of some compassion, after all. I will steer clear of her, quickly return to planet Boklorn where the Symbiont Council resides, and put a swift end to this. After that, she'll never again see the body of the male who is dead to her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Anya

It's been 82 standard hours and fourteen minutes since the *thing* emerged from the refresher and asked the doctor to be shown to a cabin. I can't call him Zar. He says Zar is dead, and it certainly feels like it when I'm in the *thing's* presence. And I refuse to call him Rynn. That will never happen. So I've given him other names in the privacy of my mind—none of them nice. *Thing* is what I try to stick to unless he's done something particularly heinous—which is every time I interact with him.

He made it abundantly clear he wanted to be housed on the other side of the ship from my cabin. He asked for the hallway as far from me as possible. He didn't just hint at that. That's how he requested it. In that nasally, totally non-Zar-like manner full of arrogance and disdain.

Shadow and Dax escorted him, with me trailing along behind, following all the way to his new doorway. Even as I watched, his tail gave him away. Zar's tail rises when he's happy. It waves like a flag when he's exuberant. When he's angry or hurt, his tail almost drags the ground. Luckily, those

negative emotions are mostly a thing of the past. Well, *were* a thing of the past.

One thing is certain, he never carries his tail straight out behind him. It's just not the way it works. When I followed him with his tail parallel to the floor like that, it was obvious why Zar never did it. It looks ridiculous.

Despite his ludicrous tail carriage, I followed him to his cabin 82 hours ago. I even pushed between two of the baddest motherfuckers on the ship to ask again. I'll quit mincing words. I didn't *ask*, I *begged*. I stood at his threshold and actually begged to sleep on the floor near his bed just to ensure he was okay.

He soundly rejected me.

I'm nothing if not resilient—and sneaky. I assigned myself to the room next to his. Not that I've slept except for when fatigue overtakes me and I can't take another step. It gives me an iota of comfort knowing he's on the other side of my wall. Besides, did anyone really expect me to be able to sleep in the cabin I shared with my mate? In a room strewn with small items he made for me or gifted me with? The male who called me Beloved? The sexy lion-man who made love like a God?

For the fifth time since he soundly rejected my offer to sleep on his floor, I'm on my way to his cabin. The male likes to eat. He always did, and nothing has changed. The first time I arrived with food, the *thing* scrunched his nose and complained about the look, the smell, the portion size, and when he quit bitching and took a bite, the taste. It did not, however, prevent him from eating every last morsel on the plate. He says Zar is dead, but his taste buds are still alive.

I don't just leave the plate of food, either. I bully my way in and stand while he eats.

The first time I brought food, there were two chairs at the small table and I bellied right up to it. I chattered away the whole time, all the while dying on the inside. Dying.

That first meal was two days after making love in that cave. Two days after his alleged death. But I shoved all the grief and anger deep inside me and dished up a plate of his favorite foods, and I waltzed into his room, sat inches from him, and talked.

Part of me hid in the back attic of my brain, weeping so hard she couldn't think straight. But another part of me talked nonstop until he cleaned his plate.

"Remember last time we visited Paragon?" I asked. Not waiting for a reply, knowing I wouldn't get one. I continued, "We had a list a mile long of places we wanted to visit, things we wanted to do, but except for a few obligations we couldn't escape, we made love night and day."

Thing's face pinched as his gaze flew from mine.

"Do you know the moment I knew I loved you?" I asked, trying to trick him, tempt him to look at all of Zar's loving memories.

"You'd been injured in the fight for our freedom. It was at that moment I knew I'd never be able to live without you."

"I'm not Zar," he'd said flatly, without eye contact. "He's gone."

A bullet to the heart wouldn't have been more painful than that response.

In the intervening days, I've brought him every meal. He's made it clear he doesn't want to wander the hallways or darken the door to the dining room, which leaves him at the mercy of someone bringing him his food.

Since I threatened every male and female on this ship that I'd make them walk the plank if they fed him, that elected me as his only means of sustenance.

He's not without his own resources. He removed the spare chair. I'm nothing if not motivated. I just stand in his room and talk while he eats. The pace of his eating has become swifter with each meal, but that doesn't stop me.

I don't know why it took me three days to think of it, but today I grab a chair, put his meal tray on it, and breeze into his room with the means to have a long chat. I even brought my own plate, filled to the rim with food. I'm even more desperate today than I have been. We arrive on planet Boklorn tomorrow where he's slated to meet with the Symbiont Council. *Thing* is impossible to engage in small talk. I found that out days ago. He makes it clear by body language he doesn't want to hear one word of my trip down memory lane about Zar and me. He's even mentioned on more than one occasion that he knows every minute of Zar's life, and he could watch it all if he wanted—that made him blush.

Ton'arrs blush in an interesting way. Their skin is covered by fur, so you can't see any color changes, but they get nervous and their noses twitch. In Zar, it was endearing. *Thing* just looks like he smells something rancid. He finished his very proper tirade about not wanting to hear my stories by reminding me my mate is gone, that there is no way for him to rise from the dead, that those "synapses are permanently and irretrievably severed." Fuck you. I still have hope.

Although *Thing* doesn't engage in small talk, he's too proper not to answer direct questions, so that is now 90% of what our conversations consist of. "What happens tomorrow?" I ask, then take the smallest bite humanly possible. It's maybe the size of a pea, a small pea. *Thing* would never be so rude as to kick me out before I'm finished eating. I've orchestrated this meal to go on for days if I want to.

“Tomorrow I will leave this ship and go to the Symbiont Council’s conference room. There is an antechamber there where I will conduct a ceremonial bath, then don white robes appropriate to the belated welcoming ceremony. After the ceremony, I will continue my work of amassing knowledge to be stored in this... new body. Zar will continue to be productive.”

He interrupts his discourse with a bite of food. While he chews, I try to find traces of Zar in him. The other Anya starts weeping inside me again. It’s maddening, crazy-making, to sit inches from the form of the male I love and not be able to reach him.

The warm look in his eyes when he gazes at me, the way he could never have gone an entire meal without grazing the back of his fingertips against my thigh, or sharing a penetrating look. Those are completely absent. Gone. Even his mannerisms are nowhere to be found. Not the way he cuts his food or chews or lifts his glass to his lips. He’s far too proper and nothing like my lion-man.

“Since this is the first time in over two hundred *annums* that anything this... unusual has happened in a joining, there will be questions.”

“You pretend to be so high and mighty,” I blurt. “How can you justify invading Zar? Just taking him over and killing him without remorse?” I usually try to be calm. I haven’t accused him like this before. But he’s leaving tomorrow and I want him to acknowledge everything he’s taken from me.

That expression he usually wears when he’s in the same room as me—the one where it looks like he smells something bad—falls from his face. For the first time since we met, he looks at me with compassion.

“I should have apologized sooner. Now that I’ve assimilated his memories, I see my error. I was formless, sightless. I thought the transfer was happening as it has for millennia, according to plan. I assumed I had been invited. I see now why you think I invaded. If I could do it over again I would have simply died on that mountain rather than enter a being without permission. I apologize.”

I suck in a startled breath. I think he’s being sincere. I didn’t believe an apology would make me feel better, but it... soothes me somehow.

“Can’t you just leave?” I whisper.

“I’m sorry. Zar is no longer alive. He can’t come back.” He straightens his spine, lifts his chin, and says, “I have taken the liberty of asking Captain Shadow to...”

I wanted to listen. I was tuned in. But the words “Captain Shadow” threw me for a loop. There has only been one captain on board this ship since the insurrection—Captain Zar. It’s a travesty. A shock. A jolt to my system. For a moment I want to join the weak, crying Anya in my mind’s attic, but I put a lid on it. I’ll cry the moment I close the door behind me in my new cabin. “Pardon?” I ask, feigning I’d been overly interested in the next pea-sized morsel I was transporting from the plate to my mouth.

“I’ve asked... for the *Fool’s Errand* to wait before leaving atmo in case, on the off chance, that one of the Council might have questions about the event.” Did he know using the words Captain Shadow would decimate me? Is that why he said them? Or did he simply stumble into them?

“So we’re to cool our heels to be at your beck and call?” After this slips out, I consider apologizing for my snark, but nope, not gonna happen.

“It would be very kind of you to do so,” he replies as he delicately wipes the corners of his mouth with his napkin, like some fop in a historical novel.

Kind. Yeah, that's what I want to do, be kind to my mate's killer. No. He. Is. Not. Dead. I refuse to believe *Thing* killed him, no matter how many times he tells me otherwise.

The idea that strikes me next couldn't be more crazy. Insane, really, especially after that little interchange.

"Rynn," I say. My voice has that deep timbre that would instantly perk Zar's ears. "You know, in effect, you've made me a widow."

I just threw that out there. If I could have thought of a way to make it even more of a guilt trip, I would have.

"Again, I apologize. I'm sorry." He barely manages to make his voice contrite. His gaze is focused on the congealing gravy on his plate.

If this were really Zar, I'd know he wasn't sorry by his tone of voice, but if I give him the benefit of the doubt, maybe this is the sound of contrition Rynn-style.

"I think you owe me something," I say, wondering if this will earn me even a moment of eye contact.

His gaze snaps to mine. Now I've got his complete attention.

Go ahead, Anya. This is a crazy, terrible idea. The craziest, terriblest idea ever thought by your mind or the mind of any other being, living or dead. Go for it.

"I would like to share my mate's bed. One last time before you leave."

I've never seen this look on Zar's face. I believe if there were a picture in the dictionary next to the word "aghast" this would be it.

"Miss Anya," he splutters.

Good job, *Thing*. Put as much verbal distance as you can between us.

If I were a nice person, I would shut up, stand down, take my unholy offer off the table. Instead, I double down by spearing him with my gaze and

continuing, “I’d like to make love to my husband one more time.”

He stands so fast his chair clatters to the floor behind him.

“I have... regrets about what happened. It was unfortunate, but your mate allowed me, albeit unwittingly, into his body. The damage was done before I knew I wasn’t in the body of the acolyte who travels with me for this express purpose.”

For one split second, he wears a Zar expression—one of true contrition, sorrow for hurting me. When Zar and I were locked in that cell together three years ago, I knew this expression well. He’d lived a terrible life, and it showed in the look on his face, the slump of his shoulders, his mournful eyes. Rynn shows me this for the briefest moment, then returns to his pompous self.

“I’m not willing to do such a thing. Arcrites are celibate. We take a vow. We keep our emotions at bay so we do not corrupt our internal information repositories.”

I can’t hold back anymore. My lips are trembling, and I can’t contain the hot tears stabbing behind my eyes. I put myself out there with this stupid, idiotic request, which only earned me one more rejection. I wish the vastness of space would swoop in and swallow me.

“And Anya.” He waits for my gaze to meet his. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t do it because it would harm you. Do you understand?” he asks. And now, in this moment, he looks like the male I love. For just this brief second, something real sneaks through his defenses and he lets me see his compassion. “It wouldn’t be Zar. I’m not Zar. It would be like eating a *picture* of food you love, not the real thing. He’s gone. You can’t get him back.”

CHAPTER FIVE

R_{ynn}

Taking a deep breath, I center myself. Despite that this joining occurred all wrong, breaking every rule, I don't believe the Council will nullify it. Something like this hasn't occurred in over a thousand *annums*. Certainly the circumstances speak for themselves. I can't be held accountable for joining with someone not of the Boklorn species, someone who was not properly trained or prepared to be my host.

I've taken my ceremonial bath here for the 57th time. Never have I performed it in a body covered with fur or with a burred tongue I have to use with special care in order to avoid my sharp canines.

I look into the mirrors that surround me. Before the ceremony, it is meant to remind an Arclite of the body he is leaving. After the ceremony, it is to allow us to get acquainted with the more intimate aspects of our new host. I briefly consider asking the Council for permission to discard this strange body before its natural expiration, but shake my head. That would be wasteful. And disrespectful.

A picture of Zar's mate from last night flashes into my mind. She offered herself to me. It was shocking. Offensive. The sheer audacity of it kept me awake long after my bedtime.

Now, I believe I understand. I paged through some of Zar's memories, the intimate ones he shared with her. Truth be known, I enjoyed those memories, although I will never admit that to another living soul.

The Boklorns who become hosts are kept cloistered and encouraged to avoid strong emotions, including lust. Especially lust. It allows their symbiote to live tranquilly inside them so we can go about our duties of reading everything ever written in all the languages known to us, thus accumulating and warehousing vast stores of knowledge.

Arclites have photographic memories. We can recall every word we've read and every story or conversation we've heard, making us the perfect species for this vast undertaking. We're the receptacles of all knowledge—
Recepticons.

There was a point in my evolution when I wondered if my existence was superfluous. With the advent of computers, why would a physical body be required to perform the task? Weren't disks and drives sufficient now that technology rose to such an advanced level?

But technology can be destroyed with war or natural disasters. As long as Arclites are safe, we can keep the storehouse of all the information ever documented.

I've never known sex. None of my hosts have experienced it. I'll admit to having a prurient interest in Zar's memories, the times he shared with his mate. I don't know what fascinated me more, the physical couplings, or the tenderness he felt for her. The emotion, though foreign, was seductive.

His mate's brash offer to lie with me was shocking. It brought out compassion in me, which is frowned upon by the Council. In my head, I have the specifics of billions of deaths, of famine, war, cruelty beyond the ability to fathom. It does no one any good for the symbiote to have emotions about those things.

I catch my visage out of the corner of my eye. I don't see myself in the mirror, not Zar-Rynn. Just Zar. And that causes me to imagine the pictures he carried in his mind like they were the most sacred pages of a bible. Pictures of lying with his beloved. I can't imagine what it was like to love someone that passionately.

I hear the gong strike three times in the adjoining meeting room. After pulling on the white robes of a newly melded symbiont-host pair, I join them.

For 56 times, this meeting has been a mere formality. Today, I'm being grilled. Each member of the Council repeatedly enquires about the moment I entered my new host. After an *hoara* of this, they ask about his memories. I made a decision shortly after I received Zar's memories that I would not make the Council privy to most of his thoughts. This isn't like a recitation of history that I share after bonding with a Boklorn. Zar was not a sheltered monk.

Although I only parse out the smallest details of his life, I still have to relate how he was abducted as an infant, and that he was raised a gladiator-slave. All they would have to do is ask to see the body and they would know this male has not lived an easy life. His back is crisscrossed with scars bearing the tale of his abused history.

The Council is made of five symbiont-host pairs. They are the final arbiters of all problems or questions that occur with meldings. I did a stint on this

council about one hundred *annums* ago.

Although I knew this review would be more than the usual formality, I did not expect their dour looks, and certainly didn't anticipate their request that I sequester myself in the anteroom while they sorted things out.

"Do you wish to speak with the physician who attended me after the melding?" I ask. "The mate who observed the actual transfer?"

Five heads snap to me as if the movement were orchestrated.

"Mate?" Krin-Fulan asks.

I resist the urge to stroke my chin with my palm. It's a new habit I've developed since I awoke in a furred body with a softly bearded chin. I had deftly told Zar's history without mentioning this fact because I anticipated this cold reception.

"Yes. The poor unfortunate was mated," I admit, as if I'd had every intention of sharing this bit of information, but it had slipped my mind.

They again ask me to wait in the anteroom, but when they call me back in only a few *minimas*, I know my fate before they inform me of it.

"To the entity known as Zar-Rynn," the chairman intones. "We appreciate your predicament. We find that you melded with a host who did not have the ability to give consent. We do not censure you for this, although it is unfortunate. What appeared to be a willing host arrived at a propitious moment, and you entered it, as is your biological imperative."

My knees sag with relief. I thought for a moment they were going to censure me.

"However," he continues, "you are unfit to hold the title of Recepticon. As you know, you must be dispassionate, an open vessel, in order not to taint the information you are shepherding. Being in a vessel with this history of trauma disqualifies you from the ability to fulfill your duties."

I'm shocked. I did not expect this. My mind is reeling.

"We believe from now forward you will be unable to look at your stores of information objectively. You will have emotions about factual information. You might begin to store things differently, or remember them with bias. This event has contaminated your mind."

As I try to absorb this information, my self-preservation instincts come to the fore. I've always lodged in monasteries. I have no credits, no living family. I'm utterly alone and without resources.

"Because your presence on Boklorn is bound to be disturbing to other potential hosts as well as Recepticons, we request you to leave the planet within one week. We will give you the sum of 10,000 credits to help you on your way."

10,000 credits? I'm not certain that will get me to another planet, much less pay for food and accommodations.

"Wh-where will I go? Wh-what will I do?"

"We can't help you."

I stumble out of the temple and sit on the steps leading to the street. I chose to be a Recepticon when I was young. I've been groomed for this calling since that moment. I've known nothing of the real world other than the information stored in my filaments.

I've never fed or housed or clothed myself. The monastery provided everything since I melded with my first Boklorn. Before that, I had been a free spirit, a sparkle of light. When I became a symbiont, I knew there was no going back. I must stay in a physical body for the rest of my days.

I recognize the emotion I'm experiencing from Zar's memories. I think it's despair.

“Rynn?” The question comes over the wrist-comm the ship equipped me with. “It’s Shadow. Just checking. You asked us to stay in atmo in case you needed any of us to bear witness. Did your Council have any questions or objections?”

Is this providence? An avenue of help from an unexpected source? I don’t believe I have another choice.

“I wonder, Captain, if I could partake of more of your hospitality? Might I catch a ride with you to your next port of call?”

Anya

Seeing Zar’s body walk off the *Fool’s Errand* was the saddest moment of my life. It signaled the end. The terminal moment of all hope Zar would emerge from wherever *Thing* imprisoned him. The end of my dreams that I’d get my mate back.

Perhaps if my mom were here, she would have counseled me, held my hand, told me it was the end of an era or the end of a chapter in my life, and that time would heal me. But my mom’s not here and I have no one to hold my hand. It feels like the end of my life in so many ways. That male was everything to me. What we had was just so big and wonderful. It was all-consuming.

I cry for days. Well, it seems like days. According to my clock, it’s only been three hours. I’m afraid to look in the mirror because I’m sure my face is blotchy and my eyes are red-rimmed. I should hydrate because I feel like I cried a river.

Suddenly, it hits me. The awareness is so big, so significant, it feels like my world has tilted off its axis.

I’ve been wallowing in memories these last few days. Many of them have been about our first few days of captivity, the insurrection, falling in love

with Zar.

Usually, I minimize my own role in the slave revolt. Mom always told me not to have a big head. But, dammit, I masterminded the whole thing.

The ship had been full of gladiator-slaves who'd been so beaten down, so used to wearing pain/kill collars, all thought of rebellion had vanished long ago. The other females, all newly abducted like me, were too terrorized to do anything but survive.

No. It was me, Anya fucking Nash, who plotted the whole damn thing. From getting Dr. Drayke's buy-in, to convincing Tyree to use his psychic powers to help us, to encouraging everyone to climb out of their own self-absorbed wells of terror and agree to work together. And we did it. We won. And here we are.

I am not going to let some—how did he describe himself?—gaseous filament, to steal my love from me.

Zar. Is. In. There. And I'm going to get him out.

I risk a trip to the bathroom, and it's just as bad as I thought. I splash water on my face and finger-comb my curls, pull on my pants and shoes, and hustle to the bridge.

I force myself not to feel like an interloper. I belong here. I used to hang out all the time, just to be with my honey. I snag a seat and look out at the planet below. I'm going to ask Shadow if he'll give me a day to find a place to live down there and if he'll come retrieve me, if at some point I want to return to the *Fool's Errand*.

Then I'm going to go down to Boklorn and hound *Thing* to the ends of his planet, trying to coax Zar out.

I plop into the empty comms chair just in time to hear Shadow asking *Thing* if he needs our help. I jump, my body's visceral reaction to hearing Zar's

voice, when he says, “I wonder, Captain, if I could partake of more of your hospitality? Might I catch a ride with you to your next port of call?”

“One moment,” is Shadow’s response. He looks at me, his face filled with compassion. “Can you bear it, Anya? Having that... thing back onboard?”

He calls him *Thing*, too? Heartwarming.

My mind flies, zipping from possibility to possibility, brimming with ideas and permutations on how to handle this.

“Does he have credits?” I ask, knowing the answer. He told me he’s completely cared for by the Council.

Shadow enquires. *Thing’s* answer is, “They gave me a meager severance, but I can pay.”

“Tell him we don’t want to dip into his small supply of credits. Tell him we’d be happy to transport him and will find other ways for him to provide payment.”

Bam! Just like that, I’m optimistic. His payment? It will be a hell of a lot more than tolerating a few dinners. Zar is in there, and I’m going to coax him out.

CHAPTER SIX

Anya

“Certainly this isn’t what Captain Shadow meant when he said there would be other ways to provide payment,” *Thing* says, then purses that beautiful mouth.

If Zar’s in there, he’s suppressed very deep down, because Zar would never, ever be caught dead pursing his masculine fang-toting mouth.

Stop it, Anya, I scold myself. You’re not allowed to even think the “D” word.

“Actually, this is exactly what Shadow had in mind.” I toss my curls in defiance.

Zar loved that. He told me one night during pillow talk when we were making long lists of what we loved about each other. He said when I was pissed and tossed my head like that, it made him want to stop whatever argument we were having so he could throw me down and ravish me. I toss my head again, for good measure, then motion *Thing* to the table.

We're not in his cabin tonight. We're in mine. And when I say mine, I mean ours. I'm no longer avoiding the cabin I shared with Zar. I'm rubbing *Thing's* face in it.

"I want to make it clear, Rynn." God, I hate saying that name while looking at Zar's face. "We're going to do things differently tonight. You no longer have authorization to ignore me and allow me to do all the conversational heavy lifting. You no longer have the excuse that you have to go inside your mind and curate your information. No one will ever utilize your knowledge. You've been canned."

I give him a steely look. Yes. I'm rubbing it in that he received his pink slip from his lifetime employer. Sucks to be him.

"Canned?"

Oh, I wish he'd quit with the pursed lips. I can barely keep from rolling my eyes.

"You have no need to curate a million years of history from a hundred civilized planets. You might even want to jettison some of the more boring parts." That way, there will be more room for Zar to hear what I'm saying.

"You will converse with me like a civilized male."

He's smart enough not to argue. He just cocks an eyebrow, which elicits a little clenching pain in my heart. When he does that, he looks so Zar-like. I'm crazy. I can't stand when he looks so *other* in Zar's body, nor can I tolerate when this foreign, invasive enemy acts like Zar. It's a no-win situation.

"Oh," I say as if it's an afterthought, "and you'll be feeding me dessert. I hope you washed your hands."

"Of course I washed my—" His eyes pop open in surprise when he perceives the full import of my statement. The operative words being

“you’ll be feeding me dessert.”

“Tell me some of the most interesting stuff in your head,” I say as we take our first bites of *anwar sheshwah*. It was one of Zar’s favorites.

He makes a little “yum” noise in the back of his throat, finishes his bite, then launches. I thought *Thing* would be a horrible conversationalist and was fully prepared to endure the most boring dinner of my life. Which I imagined I would cope with by fantasizing about the body across the table from me.

Instead, I have to admit, *Thing*’s head is full of amazing stuff. And he doesn’t just rattle off fact after fact. He, like a seasoned raconteur, pulls stories together from interesting anecdotes from around the galaxy and rolls them into an interesting patchwork of tales that somehow go together. And bonus! I can listen to him *and* fantasize about the body across the table, anyway.

Dinner took far longer than I’d anticipated and was so much more enjoyable than when he was employed by the Council.

“Dessert,” I announce.

Perhaps he spent so much energy being a great conversationalist because he thought I would forget the other part of our bargain. Nope. I won’t let him get away with that.

We’d been sitting across the table from each other, but for this I scoot my chair next to him, accidentally on purpose sliding my thigh next to his.

“There are those on board who would kill for the light and tasty treat, Paragon cake,” I say as I picture Stryker elbowing people out of the way so he could get the first bite of his mate Maddie’s home-baked confection.

“But me? I’m partial to Anathen cake. Which do you prefer?”

I have to close my eyes for a second as my tummy rolls in a sexy way. Clenching my thighs to stem the tide of my arousal, I try to push away the picture of Zar and me sharing a slice of Anathen cake in bed. In all honesty, I think Paragon is ten times better than its competitor. But Zar loved Anathen. The way he fed it to me, then smeared the icing between my folds and licked them off, will be chalked up to one of the ten best things in the universe.

I force my eyes open and stare at *Thing*, anxiously awaiting his answer.

Rynn

“I, uh.” I stop talking all together. Did she ask me a question? I’m... I’m having trouble thinking. Did she *drug* me? I’m lightheaded. Cake? Are we talking about cake? All I can think about is the feeling of her thigh on mine. Is she doing this on purpose?

What is that smell? That’s not cake. I’m in Zar’s body. This is not like a Boklorn body. Not in the slightest. I’m just getting used to the muscles and the swagger and the... tail. But... I take a breath in through my nose and then do something I’ve never done before. I open my lips, hoping I’m being subtle, and breathe in through my mouth.

I can taste the smell, and it’s definitely *not* cake, nor pastry of any kind, for that matter. I don’t know how I know, but I do. I’m certain what I’m smelling, no, what I’m *tasting*, is female arousal.

I’m a smart male. Some would say brilliant. Why then do I have to confirm with myself that the scent of female arousal is coming from Anya, the female sitting so close her thigh is touching mine? Of course the scent is Anya. Who else could it be coming from?

I should be outraged. No, I should be appalled. Instead, I breathe in again through my mouth, rolling the scent, the taste, on my tongue.

I realize just how different Ton'arr and Boklorn bodies are as right this moment my cock, my thick, heavy feline cock which is so different from any I've possessed before, is punching against my pants.

I've never had one of these before. An... erection. And for 56 lifetimes I've been very proud and happy about that fact. Many times I've gloated that I never had to deal with the inconvenience of such a thing "popping up" at inopportune times. How often did I thank the stars I didn't have to feel what were described as compelling, primitive emotions? I was so happy to be blissfully asexual.

And now this!

My erection is so obvious to me, it has to be obvious to her. Right?

"Rynn?" she asks softly.

She knows. She must know. This is embarrassing. I don't know how to deal with it.

"Your part of the bargain? You were supposed to feed me."

Am I imagining it, or did her voice just dip low? I'm a repository of civilization's information. I know what this means. She's aroused. Is she aroused? I'm hopeless at this. I wonder if I can escape.

She slides the plate closer to me and lifts an eyebrow.

I swallow as I pick up the fork, all the while coaching myself that I can do this. I can feed her. It's a simple matter of placing a piece of cake on the fork and transporting it to her mouth. How hard can this be?

I didn't think it was possible, but she wiggles closer, her hip nestling against mine. Then she turns to me, closes her eyes, and opens her mouth. Like a baby bird.

I freeze. I'm paralyzed. My cock twitches against my trousers in a most insistent manner. If that weren't bad enough, my eyes will not look away

from her mouth.

That mouth. Pink lips that are flawlessly bow-shaped, white teeth that are perfect and straight except for a tiny chip on the front one. A mauve tongue. I don't know if I've ever seen that particular shade of dusky rose before. And there it is, as if it's the most important discovery ever made. I'll call the color "Anya" in my repository—not that the information will ever download to anyone in the future.

Her eyes flick open and gaze directly at me. "Rynn? Dessert?" she prompts. Her eyes shutter again, but I'm certain she caught me. She knows everything. My... erection. How could she miss that? And my fascination with her mouth. She saw that. Right?

Perhaps the cake will make her forget what she just saw. I scoop a big piece of cake onto my fork, push it past her teeth, and deposit it on her tongue. This will distract her.

The piece was huge. I can see her struggling to chew around it, get it down to a manageable size, and finally swallow it. When she opens her eyes, they're blazing with anger.

"Were you trying to choke me?"

"N-no. I..." She thinks I was trying to choke her? How awful. Although, I guess that would serve as a distraction.

"Here. Let me show you how it's done."

Good. The pressure is off. I snatch my napkin off the table where I had placed it when I thought dinner was over, then cover my erect penis. Now that she'll be feeding me, this whole horrible disaster will be over. I can't wait until we get to our next port of call. It won't be soon enough.

"Turn your chair to face me."

I do as I'm told, placing the table at my side so I can face her. She gets up to move her chair so our thighs are touching as we face each other. My heart sinks as I realize this may not be the escape I was hoping for. This might be worse.

"Close your eyes." That tone isn't normal for her. It's deep, commanding. Is she trying to seduce me? That couldn't be true. I told her the other night I couldn't have relations with her. She must remember that.

I'm looking longingly at the door to her room, dreaming of escape, when she repeats, "Close your eyes."

I comply. At least I won't be forced to look at her Anya-colored tongue for a moment longer.

I open my mouth, assuming a bite will be on its way soon. I'm not a lucky male. Perhaps I'm being punished for invading this body without an invitation.

I'm sitting here with my mouth open and she's not moving. If I didn't have a raging erection jutting from my lap, I would open my eyes and perhaps stand to leave. How can I do that now? It would call attention to my predicament. I simply wait.

She's moving. Good. Perhaps this torture session's end is in sight. But, no. Instead of feeling a cake-loaded fork invade my mouth, I feel her hand on my thigh. On. My. Thigh!

It's soft, like the brush of a bird's wing. Just a graze.

I have the repository of many worlds' worth of information, eons of it, and I never knew a touch this soft could command my awareness in such a compelling manner.

I clear my throat, trying to catch her attention, remind her she's supposed to be feeding me. Although there is one thing and only one thing I know for

certain right this moment—I am not hungry.

“Hungry?” she asks.

Her voice is so low, so... rough. Does she know what she’s doing to me?

She already tipped her hand. She asked to sleep with me before I met with the Council. Is she... trying to allure me? That couldn’t be true.

Finally, I hear the fork scrape the plate and then feel the air stir as she brings it to my mouth.

“There you go,” she says after delivering the food into my mouth.

The taste bursts upon my tongue, but I can’t describe it. I can’t pay attention to it. All I can focus on is what she’s doing. She places the fork on the plate with a soft clink, then rests her hand on my thigh.

How am I supposed to eat, or think for that matter, with a female’s hand resting so near my penis? My erect penis? The penis that seems to pulse with every beat of my heart?

“Good?” she asks.

Stars! Her voice was too close to my ear. She’s not still sitting in the same position she was a moment ago when I closed my eyes. Her breath actually ruffled my hair. I mean my mane.

I finish chewing, then force my eyes open. She’s sitting against the back of her chair, one hand in her lap and the other still innocently holding the fork.

No, not innocent—angelic. Did I just hallucinate the caress on my thigh?

The breath that swept through my mane?

“Ready for another?” she asks. The question is accompanied by a raised eyebrow.

This female isn’t an angel. I’m now convinced she’s the devil’s spawn.

Certainly she’s cast a spell on me. I’m mesmerized.

“Close your eyes and open your mouth.” Although it’s spoken as a whisper, it feels like a command. I comply, and she places another bite of cake onto my tongue. After she deposits a small bite, but before I chew, she asks, “How are you managing with your fangs? It must be a shock to eat with them.”

Why did she mention my fangs? It throws me off, confuses me, makes me pay so much attention to them that I forget how to eat. I may not have a sexual appetite, but I’ve always had a healthy appetite for food. Now I’ve forgotten how to chew.

After I swallow, I open my eyes and say, “Let me feed you dessert. Just as you desired.”

The word “desire” lingers in the room, echoing off the walls and circling back to me, sounding more sordid and sexual and arousing with every iteration. Will this interminable dinner ever end?

I’d hoped she would resume her previous position, facing the table, but she sits right where she is—facing me.

“Close your eyes,” I say, keeping my voice all business.

My breath catches in my lungs when, in the process of reaching the fork to the plate of half-eaten cake, I catch a glimpse of my lap. The napkin is still there. Yes, that’s true, but Zar’s manhood is so... enormous, and my pants are so loose that it’s sticking up like a flagpole. The blindingly white napkin does nothing but call attention to my condition.

I swear to the stars that when this is finally over, I will not leave my room until we have landed on the next planet and I can hurry out the exit.

“Yumm,” she says after she chews her first bite, then opens her mouth for another.

I can’t shove the next bite into her perfect Anya-colored mouth fast enough.

“All done,” I say a few bites later, just as I’ve observed mothers say to their infant children.

Pushing my chair back—far back—I stand and stutter, “Th-thank you for your hospitality.”

On my way to the door, she asks, “How did you like the Anathen cake?”

I’m not sure what possesses me to turn to speak to her. Common courtesy, I suppose.

“Delicious,” I reply, although if a laser were pointed at my head, I wouldn’t be able to describe the taste. Well, yes, I could. Sawdust.

“I enjoyed our... talk,” she says sweetly, then grants me a smile with her perfect mouth. “Same time tomorrow, then?”

Anya

I count to ten slowly, then count to ten again to make certain he’s all the way down the hallway. Then I stand up and fist-pump the air. Never leaving well enough alone, I jump up and down, then pump my knees in happiness.

“Rynn had a boner!” I exclaim, then make a little song of it, “Rynn had a hard-on, Rynn had a stiffy. Yes!”

Did he or did he not tell me less than a day ago that he didn’t get them? He could have been lying, trying to rebuff me without breaking my heart, but A, I don’t think he cares about breaking my heart, and B, by the way he handled said hard-on, I think it was his first.

Don’t most guys figure out in Junior High how to keep them at bay? Or at least mitigate the circumstances by how they pack it? I mean, he was sprouting some major wood and the white napkin was almost as effective as a neon sign.

I get serious all of a sudden, remembering this isn’t a game. It isn’t a battle of wills. This is a fight for my mate’s life, and I think I just proved beyond a

shadow of a doubt that the big guy is still alive in there—the *very big* guy. I need to strategize. The stakes couldn't be higher. For the millionth time since that avalanche, I recall the fight for our freedom. Somehow, this battle seems even bigger because this time I have even more to fight for.



7

CHAPTER SEVEN

R_{ynn}

I hurry to my cabin, slap my hand on the palm plate to close the door behind me, and stand with my back to the cool metal door. I'm not surprised to find myself rhythmically banging the back of my head against it.

My behavior *should* surprise me. I'm almost 3,000 *annums* old. I've lived lifetimes, learned more knowledge than can fit into a cherribyte hard drive, and supped with kings and presidents. Here I am, reduced to childish head-banging behavior.

Captain Shadow was kind enough to leave a bottle of the finest Sillerian whiskey on the table of my room. I thought it was generous, considering he thinks I killed his best friend. I've never been a fan of imbibing spirits. It muddles the brain, and keeping my thoughts straight is the highest purpose of my life. Or at least it *was*.

I sit down, grab the glass, and pour the whiskey to the top. I've already had one singularly humiliating first today—an unwanted erection. Perhaps I

should work my way to the second. Like every other being in the galaxy, perhaps I should find out what it's like to be roaring drunk.

I toss back half the glass, then set it down with a clink. Before I drink myself into a coma, maybe I should check out what's going on beneath my trousers.

An emotion courses through me like I've been shot with an arrow. I've experienced more feelings in the last few days than I have in several lifetimes. Sitting here, with my trousers tented in my lap, I scour my internal databases for the correct identifier of this shimmering energy flowing along my synapses.

Fear.

I need to walk into the refresher, pull down my pants, and conduct an examination of my new equipment. It's terrifying.

I've been the male gender in 100% of my lifetimes. I've always had a penis. It's always been a utilitarian gray Boklorn penis. All 56 of them urinated upon command. Well, except for numbers 28, 36, and 51. At a certain age, there was a little dribbling that accompanied end-of-life issues.

Boklorn hosts were chosen for many qualities, one of which was their placid nature and commitment to celibacy both prior to and after the melding. All of my hosts were virgins. I did not absorb any memories anywhere near as... intimate as those I observed in Zar's memory banks. After what happened in Anya's room, and my inability to control my male appendage, I need to get a handle on what this body is capable of and how to control it.

I walk into the refresher. Well, this body doesn't walk so much as it stalks. It's full of swagger and bravado. Truth be told, it deserves to be used that

way. It's magnificent. I pull off my shirt, pull down my pants and close the refresher door so I can get a good look in the floor-length mirror.

I've spent my entire life repressing my feelings. I have the ability to examine things dispassionately. That part of me can look at the golden-furred male in the mirror and admire what I see. Not only are there bulging muscles, but the male I saw in his memories had a strength of character that couldn't be denied.

Now that I inhabit the body, some of the swagger is gone, but there are still echoes of what once was.

The face, initially so foreign, is growing more familiar. I doubt I'll ever become accustomed to the sharp fangs or the look I project when I snarl. I lean in until my face is a hand's breadth from the mirror, then snarl, surprising myself at the effect. Anyone with half a brain would be an idiot to challenge a male who looks like this.

I cup my chin in my palm. It's a new habit I've developed. I like to stroke the soft tuft of fur that grows there. If I were a vain person, I might adorn it with beads and feathers as Anya did last time the pair visited Paragon. They had just had... relations on the grass in a secluded meadow and Anya took the beads from the bracelet that had become unstrung in the couple's passion and braided them into his hair and beard-tuft.

I haven't worked up the nerve to examine the cock still jutting from my hips, but looking at this memory causes it to kick. I allow myself just a moment more to watch Zar's memories. Not the intercourse they engaged in, but the look in his female's eyes afterward. What would it feel like, I wonder, to be the recipient of that look? To actually feel deep love from an adoring, worthy female?

Zar's feelings leak through the memory to give me the answer. It made him feel like a god. I snatch a sliver of that feeling even though if I were still a Recepticon it would be forbidden. I slide in and experience just the tiniest fragment of what it was like to live in his skin, under this fur, and have Anya look at me like that. I now understand why people kill for this. Why wars are fought for it.

I shake my head, needing to come up for air from this heady feeling. *I have more urgent things to do*, I think as I look down at my cock. It's looking up at me. This is certainly the first time I've seen a sight like this in my own body—an erect cock standing tall and proud and pointing to the ceiling. And why is it weeping? Is this ejaculate? Have I ejaculated? I've read about these things. Shouldn't I have experienced more pleasure than what surged through me when Anya was feeding me sawdust cake?

I have to touch it, I decide. Hesitantly, I reach for it, swipe a dab of the fluid onto the pad of my index finger, then bring it slowly to my face and sniff. It smells harmless enough, although the consistency is sticky. I poke out my tongue, this burred tongue that still feels so foreign in my mouth, then I dip the tip into the shiny puddle on my finger.

My head kicks back to get away from the taste. I keep my tongue out of my mouth for a moment so I don't bring the contaminant inside myself.

I play a few of Zar's memories. I know it's intrusive and I'm breaking every rule I've ever lived by, but I watch not one but two interludes between the two mates. Anya seemed to genuinely enjoy placing her mouth on him. Perhaps that's why she enjoyed the sawdust cake. Perhaps human taste buds are different from other species. Certainly no one could go back for a second helping of *this*.

My sac is growing heavy, and a feeling of urgency courses through me. I'm not naïve. I know the mating habits of millions of species—sentient and not. The biological imperative is powerful. The growing unpleasant feeling in my testicles is nature's way of encouraging me to mate.

That will not be happening today. Nor will the usual alternative—masturbation. A lifetime, well, 56 lifetimes of observing the non-masturbation prohibition, will not fall to my prurient urges after a few days in this body.

I riffle through my database and find an acceptable alternative. I flick the offending appendage with my finger. Ooph, that is unpleasant. When that doesn't do the job, I keep flicking it until the engorged rod of flesh recedes. There. This just proves there are civilized ways to handle baser drives.

Anya

I've gotten soft over the past three years, soft and lazy. That's not true. I work as hard as anyone else on this ship. In addition to being Zar's advisor, I help everyone on the ship. I decided to cross-train on every post. I have a passing ability to do almost everything except mechanical. That's Savannah's province and is above my paygrade.

Otherwise, I even have a passable knowledge of cooking, hydroponics, piloting and navigation. That I'm good at none of them isn't the point. If pressed, I could perform them all.

Even more important, I see myself as a den mother. Not only do the women come to me for advice and a shoulder to lean on, some of the males do too. But the drive I felt after my abduction, the burning need to do something extraordinary at any cost—even my own life—I haven't experienced that in years.

I feel it now.

I awoke with a purpose long before my alarm woke me with ever brightening artificial lights and the sound of birds chirping. This den mother is going to recruit the help of every person on this ship.

No one is more beloved than Zar. There isn't a soul here who wouldn't do anything for him. I'm going to organize a conspiracy. We're all going to try to bring Zar to the forefront in whatever way possible.

By the time most of the crew is in the dining room for breakfast, I've come up with a plan. Moving from table to table, I enlist everyone even as I make a note of who's absent. I'll catch up with them later.

I've completed my task and am taking my first bite of a breakfast casserole made from the last of the *pren* eggs we brought on board after our last trip to Sanctuary. The room grows silent so quickly you'd think we were a choir and the choral director just put up a fist to tell us to shut up on cue. Before I turn around, I know Zar-Rynn has entered the double doors.

I made many decisions last night and this morning. One is to call him by the name he requested. *Thing* was disrespectful and not very nice. If I'm trying to connect with him, to make him let his guard down, to gain his trust, I can't think of him as *Thing*, or the enemy. So Zar-Rynn it is.

Besides, even his naming convention suggests Zar is in there somewhere. Otherwise, why keep the "host's" name? Why not just assimilate him like the Borg?

I join him at the buffet table and greet him.

"How did you sleep last night?" I ask sweetly as I dish myself seconds I have no interest in eating.

His head tips back in surprise, as if he didn't anticipate me being pleasant. If that's the case, I need to try harder to be nice.

"Fine," he says, his voice clipped, jaw clenched.

What I *want* to do next is ask what crawled up his butt. What I *do*, though, is point out the items on the table. Usually when I do this, I'm introducing a human to space food and make comparisons (it tastes like chicken) or recommendations (this one tastes the least like ass). It's hard with someone like Zar-Rynn since I don't know his frame of reference.

"Which do you like the most?" he asks.

When I tell him, he pointedly spoons up the other dishes. I wonder what that's all about.

Since he's in a contrary mood, I don't invite him to my table. I simply wait for him to take a seat—he chooses an empty table at the far end, just as I assumed he would—then I grab my plate and slide in across from him. I try not to get my feelings hurt when the corners of his mouth turn down.

"What did you have planned for today?" I ask.

If I can read him right, he looks surprised, as if he'd never pondered such a question before.

"I..." He looks like a robot that seized up. Finally, "I've never had to answer that question before. My whole life, almost three thousand *annums*, I've had one thing and one thing only to do with every waking *hoara*. The accumulation of knowledge."

He looks forlorn. No, he looks lost. For a moment, he allows me a glimpse of the sheer turbulence of his emotions.

"I read or watched vids and soaked up information for the first half of my day, then stored and organized my internal files until the body demanded sleep. At some points during the day, acolytes brought the body sustenance. That was my life."

I want to hate this male, at least the non-Zar parts, but right this moment that's not easy to do. His life doesn't sound fun. Purpose is great, but it has

to be tempered with... living. For three millennia, he's only had purpose and nothing else.

Why this question pops into my mind over the ten thousand other, better questions I should ask I have no idea, but I blurt, "That cake last night, had you tasted cake before?"

He looks offended, then answers, "Of course not."

"Of course not?"

"Each host's life is precious. The melding is taxing for both the host and the symbiont. It is imperative to keep the host body in good condition for as long as possible. It eats only balanced, nutritious food from the moment it is placed into the pool of potential hosts. No cakes or cookies or non-healthy foods have ever invaded a host body."

Invaded?

I get little flashes, glimpses of what his life must have been like. Yes, he was cosseted away and honored every minute of his life, but at what cost? He's never had sex, never been kissed, never even had ice cream, for fuck's sake.

I make another vow, equally serious as the one I made this morning when I decided I needed to remind him exactly who Zar is. I vow to show the Rynn half of the Zar-Rynn duet every wonderful thing he can do with that body of his.

"You don't know what to do with yourself today? I've now taken control of your agenda until we arrive at your destination. Shadow told me you're researching where you want to live. We have a few days until you need to make up your mind, then a few more until we transport you there. You're scheduled to spar with him this morning. Later, we're going to make ice cream."

He hikes an eyebrow toward his hairline.

“And buddy, you’re going to enjoy it.”

Rynn

I think I offended her when I didn’t take any of the items she recommended for breakfast. I can’t blame myself, though. Anyone who would willingly taste ejaculate a second time? I don’t believe anything their palate enjoys is something I want to put into my mouth.

This morning, I awoke in a gooey mess of a puddle. At first, I wondered if this body urinated on the bed. It didn’t take me long, though, to realize it was a nocturnal emission. Some species do this, of course. I’ve read about it. Boklorns don’t, or at least none whose bodies I’ve inhabited.

I guess the biological urge is strong in this one. When I denied it last night upon my inspection in the refresher, it found another way to meet its needs. It overtook me in my sleep. I had to strip and make my bed by myself with the extra sheets from the top of the closet.

Ugh, physical bodies can be disgusting. I’ve never done laundry before, so I put them in the hamper in my closet. At least one other person on this vessel is going to know my shame.

As an Arclite, my gaseous form would be so much more pleasant with none of these humanoid needs, desires, or urges. Yet, when I entered into my first joining, I made a lifetime decision. Once joined into a physical body, I can never return to my original state. I can only survive outside of a body for ten *minimas* before I perish.

Becoming a Recepticon was an act of altruism. I thought I would be doing important work for the universe. I never believed I would be cast out by my peers in such an ignominious manner.

I glance at my table companion. Anya's different today. Where before I felt her clear dislike, now I feel a genuine interest. Without this change in her attitude, I would have refused her suggestions of what to do today. I would have eaten my breakfast and returned to my room to ponder what to do with the rest of my life. However, since I have nothing better to do, I'll see what she has in store for me.

I avoid looking at her pretty mouth, or her pretty face for that matter, and make it through the meal without my body doing anything embarrassing. "Okay," she says brightly when I've finished breakfast. "We're off to the *ludus*."

Ludus, another word for a gymnasium, commonly used for gladiatorial training. Although I'm not supposed to have opinions on any subject, I privately do not approve of slavery and especially despise forcing sentient beings to fight to the death. Looking around at all the former gladiators onboard the ship, I imagine all of them agree with that sentiment.

"Why are we—"

"Detour. You can't fight in those pants. Let's go to Shadow's and he'll loan you a loincloth for today. I'll bring Zar's to your cabin later."

Loincloth. My bodies have always been clothed in soft, white robes, unless I travel out of the monastery to accumulate knowledge. I was on one such mission the day of the unfortunate rockslide. There were one-of-a-kind books the monks allowed me to read in a small, dark antechamber of their temple. I never did have a chance to slot that information into its proper category. Breathing deeply, I realize it isn't important now. No one will ever have access to my internal files.

Anya stays outside of Shadow's room when he ushers me inside.

Shadow holds up a strip of beige cloth. When I don't take it immediately, he steps closer with it. Reluctantly, I take it, then shrug.

"You'll need to shuck your pants," he says.

I should have stayed in my cabin. Everyone on this ship has reason to hate me, although I entered Zar's body believing I'd been invited. In my distilled form, I'm a gas. A sightless wisp of air. How was I to know the being who breathed in my essence was not a willing host?

Anya and Shadow have the most reason to hate me, though. I imagine they feel I've stolen someone they care about. I get the feeling Shadow would rather not be sharing his room with me right now.

I pull down my pants, then reach for the piece of cloth.

"I haven't a clue," I admit with a shrug, the loincloth hanging limp from my hand.

His face hardens for a moment as his nostrils flare.

"Say it," I encourage. Perhaps if he yells at me, it will get the anger out of his system.

"Say it? You want me to tell you how bizarre it is that a male who wore one of these every day of his life doesn't know what to do with it? The body retains some memories, doesn't it? Hold it in your hands, male. Shut off the... Rynn part of your brain and let Zar's hands wrap this around his waist."

Ahh. I understand. Perhaps this explains Anya's apparent change of heart this morning. They believe they can coax Zar out, bring him to the front. I have thousands of *annums* of experience. Don't they understand? It doesn't work this way.

Since all my protests and explanations didn't convince them, I'll try to do what they ask. They'll only be able to watch me fail so many times before

they realize the truth of it. Their friend is never coming back. He's gone for good.

I close my eyes and open my mind. Perhaps there are fragments of Zar inside. I've had 56 Boklorn bodies in the past, never a Ton'arr. Opening my mind, I beckon Zar through. When I feel nothing, I move my arms in front of my body, loosening my muscles, watching, waiting to see if this flesh and blood and fur knows what to do.

"Nothing."

When I open my eyes, expecting to see anger, I watch as Shadow's face crumples. For a male not used to emotions, I have a visceral reaction to this display. I watch as blood rushes into his skin, changing its color. His jaws tighten and he swallows. His eyes, at least his humanoid eye, the one that's not prosthetic, waters.

As if by magic, I find myself feeling some of this male's emotions. He's in agony. I feel an echo of it in my own viscera.

"He's really not in there, is he?" Shadow backs to the bed and sags onto it as if, for the first time, he believes his friend is gone.

"He's here in memory," I say. It's my way of trying to soothe this giant, muscular gladiator who is using every fiber of his strength not to cry.

"Yeah. Memory," he says as he stands. His face is back in the tight, angry visage he usually wears. "Here's how to put it on."

He removes his loincloth, then, with his back to me so I can follow his movements, he walks me through the complicated routine of twists and turns to fasten it to his body.

After only two tries, my loincloth properly covers my genitals and we walk out the door. Moments later, with Anya at my side, the three of us enter the *ludus*.

All the males are here except the doctor and one of the pilots who must be doing his job on the bridge. They all watch as Shadow spars with me. Each of them is eager to see their captain fight. I'm told he sparred almost every day with at least one of them. I assume that's how he kept his body in peak condition.

During the course of my sparring, I watch as, one by one, their excitement dims and hope fades from their eyes. Just as with the loincloth, this body remembers none of it.

"That's enough for today," Shadow announces through gritted teeth after an agonizing series of moves where I've been thrown to the ground repeatedly. When I turn to leave, I see Anya sitting near the door. I don't need to wonder if she's been in that shadowy spot the whole time. The tears streaming down her face announce it quite clearly. It would be so much easier on her if she'd believed me from the start. Zar is dead.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Anya

I'm not giving up, though a girl can cry, can't she?

I came here every day with my mate and watched him spar. I never tired of watching him, his muscles sliding under his fur as he exerted himself, the grunts when he thrust with his three-foot *gladius*, and his tail flicking in excitement as he fought. He usually won every match, but just by an inch, so each opponent believed next time they'd have a chance.

Watching this... disaster was grueling. What about muscle memory? That old riding a bicycle adage that the body always remembers. Why doesn't Rynn even know how to hold a fucking sword?

"We're going to make ice cream," I tell him, trying to keep my voice light even though I know he saw the tears streaming down my face.

"That's not necessary. You can go to your cabin. Have a rest."

"Idle hands are the devil's playground," I tell him. "The last thing I want is quiet time in my cabin. I imagine you could say the same. Am I right?"

"Yes," he answers begrudgingly.

I don't think he knows what to do with himself if he's not cataloging and categorizing his information.

"Ice cream it is," he announces.

After a quick trip to the bathroom—yikes, I look like shit—I meet him in the kitchen.

"Everything you need is right there," our chef Maddie announces, pointing to the counter. "I'll pick some berries from the hydroponics lab. If you want, you can add them in. Otherwise, I'll make a syrup out of them to pour on top for dessert tonight."

"How about vanilla today with the syrup?" I reply. Vanilla was Zar's favorite.

Several months ago, Dax, our resident woodworker, and Savannah, our mech, created this old-fashioned ice cream churn. Almost every mated couple here has taken a turn making the frozen concoction. It's fun and gives us something to do.

Because the guys on this ship eat like elephants, we have to make half a dozen batches, so by the time the project is over, it's a good excuse to go to our cabin to recuperate.

My cheeks heat when I think of that. My little experiment with Zar-Rynn isn't going to end in a bedroom make-out session today. That's for sure.

Maddie loudly says, "I'm going to the hydroponics lab, then I'll take a nap before I come back." She does all but give me an exaggerated wink to ensure I know she's leaving us alone for my nefarious purposes. No need to worry, though. Rynn is clueless.

I have him pour the already measured ingredients into the ice cream maker's drum, then I hike my ass onto the industrial metal table that takes up much of the kitchen. Together, me sitting cross-legged and him standing,

we pour layers of ice and rock salt around the exterior of the drum into the surrounding wooden tub.

“Okay, big guy. Crank until your arm can’t take it anymore.”

He lifts his eyebrow in a heartbreakingly Zar move, then shrugs and starts cranking. It’s not exactly rocket science, sitting here cranking, but he seems completely absorbed in his task. I figure it’s a great time to ask more questions.

He’s so busy multitasking he doesn’t protest or hesitate to answer my enquiries about why he was on Paragon. He warms to his task as he elaborates on the treasure trove of information he found in some ancient tome in the temple Zar and I never reached.

This morning, I decided I had a couple of missions. The first is to do everything within my power to get Rynn to link to Zar. Not just to connect with Zar’s memories, but Zar’s personality. The second, more difficult, task is to find things to like about him.

Not only is Rynn almost devoid of a personality, I don’t *want* to like him. It makes me feel like a traitor. But in order for this to work, I need him to open up. And in order for him to open up, he needs to feel I’m not hating or judging him. I’m working hard to make that happen.

Although he’s the king of lists, I’m developing my own: Things I Like About the Devil. No, strike that, that’s a surefire setup. How about: Things I Like About a 3,000 Year Old Guy Who Has Never Had a Life of His Own? Number one on the list? He’s hella smart. I mean, the guy knows all the known information in the freaking galaxy. Number two? He’s a hard worker. By this time, Zar and I would have already traded places twice. Rynn just keeps winding the crank.

“My turn!” I announce. I laugh at his obvious relief.

“I told you to tap out when your arm couldn’t take it anymore. Why’d you keep going?”

“I thought you meant literally couldn’t take anymore, like I couldn’t lift my arm.”

Okay, number three. He’s trying. I’ve got to give the guy credit. He’s not much happier about this situation we’re stuck in than I am.

I grab the wooden handle, which is warm from Rynn’s hand.

“Am I going to hate this... ice cream?” he asks as he peers over the top of the bucket, although there’s nothing to see. The creamy confection is safely covered and separated from the awful rock salt/ice slurry.

“Why would we work so hard for something that tastes like ass?” I ask.

His gaze flies from mine. I mean, he literally turns his back to hide from me. Oh, this is going to be good.

“Now I’m dying to know what’s going on,” I demand.

He turns to me, still avoiding eye contact, and stammers.

Number four on the list? Despite reluctance, when I ask him to do something, he does it. I think Rynn is trying to be a good sport.

“Spill,” I command.

“We have different taste,” is all he’ll say.

“You liked the *anwar sheshwah*, right?”

He nods.

“The cake?”

He nods, although this time less wholeheartedly.

“Why do you think we’d be working so hard,” my gaze flicks to the crank,

“if it didn’t taste good?”

He shakes his head. It starts as a shaggy refusal, then morphs into big, adamant swivels that go from one shoulder to the other. I am a dog with a

bone. I'm going to be like the Terminator. I will not stop until I force an answer out of that beautiful mouth.

Finally, after minutes of relentless questioning, he caves.

"You won't like what I have to say."

There's something about the deep timbre of his voice that breaks me. It's Zar's apology voice. I can refuse him nothing when he uses it. The poignancy of this moment brings hot tears to my eyes. Nothing, *nothing*, he can say could cut me deeper than the pain of missing my mate right now. I float away to another space for a moment, to get away from the immediacy of my grief.

He knew it. He knew I faded away, and he waited for his big reveal until I returned. Despite our shitty beginnings and horrendous situation, Rynn and I are developing a weird connection.

"Tell me," I say, my voice hollow.

"You'll hate me." It's his last-ditch protest.

"Out with it," I say, but I'm not forceful. I don't have a clue what he's going to say, but I fully believe this might make me hate him more than I already do.

"I had no desire to trespass upon your privacy," he says, his eyes focused on the shiny metal table. "What you shared with your mate should be inviolate, yet I wanted to know him, to honor his memories. I walked the razor's edge to avoid intruding, yet by observing his memories, that is exactly what I did."

He pauses for me to absorb his words. It takes a moment. I guess in the back of my mind I knew this. I knew he had access to Zar's memory banks, but what he's going to tell me has to do with me. That's for certain.

"Go on," I prod.

“I am so sorry.” He works up the courage to glance at me, then gazes away.

“I saw some of your... intimate encounters with your mate.”

Embarrassed heat blasts through me. What a surreal experience to be talking to the body of the male I love that’s inhabited by a fucking stranger who, with scientific detachment, watched the beautiful intimacies I shared with the male he killed.

“I don’t know whether to admit,” he dips his head and pauses, “that it was beautiful to watch the tender expression of your love, but it was. As a celibate, I never could have imagined the act could be... transcendent. I’ll even admit to envy, Anya. I am so sorry for taking that from you.”

When I work up the nerve to look at him, his eyes are shining. There’s something human in there—well, Ton’arr—something emotional. He’s more than a repository for information.

Despite my efforts to the contrary, I feel a connection growing with this odd, foreign entity. Then I remember what brought this on and can’t imagine what this has to do with ice cream.

“I watched you use your mouth on him. You looked entranced by the act. Last night, I—” his teeth clack shut as he censors himself, his eyes wide with surprise at his own words.

“You can’t stop now,” I tell him.

“I had my first erection. I tasted myself. It was terrible. I assume our taste buds are different.” He rushed through that last revelation and ended it with a shrug.

The icing on the cake of this surreal experience is the look of horror on his face. Well, the look of horror and surprise and embarrassment all rolled up into one. This prissy prig of a male who acted so above it all, so above *us*,

just admitted over a tub of churning ice cream that he tasted his own ejaculate.

I laugh. Until I cry. All the while, I hold his gaze.

Ever since I was stolen from my bed on Earth, nothing has been “normal,” but this, this conversation is the penultimate abnormal thing ever conceived in the mind of the maddest mad scientist. If God has a sense of humor, this is his crowning glory.

I reach across the tub, grab his shoulders, and pull him toward me. I strong-arm him closer, so our heads are tipped and our foreheads touch. Then I giggle at the absurdity of the moment, despite the fact my cheeks are slicked with tears.

This is number five. Mr. By-The-Book just told me about licking his own cum. Life is a rich tapestry, and man, this is the richest.

I pull back and am not surprised to see the look of panic on his face. He must be wondering if I’ve lost my ever-loving mind. If I’m going to race to the drawer with the butcher knives and cleave his head from his neck.

“Let’s finish the ice cream,” I say, tipping my head toward the crank. “If you stop for more than a moment, it gets messed up.”

Something changed between us, I notice as we finish batch after batch. He admitted to spying on me, which, really, I should have already guessed. But the poignant part was how genuinely remorseful he felt about it.

I think his admission that he licked his own ejaculate was his way of leveling the playing field. Giving me leverage over him, since he has so much of an advantage over me.

It still tickles me to picture him doing it. I can even imagine the look on his face as he did what I imagine every thirteen-year-old boy has done since the dawn of time.

I feel freer. It's not like being with Zar. Not even close. But we've destroyed a barrier, and that is, after all, what I'd hoped for.

"Now?" he asks.

"Now what?"

"My arm might need amputation. Haven't I earned a taste?"

Number six. I think Rynn might be developing a sense of humor. It's in its infancy, but he's making a nice start.

"I'm sorry. I've taken a dozen samples. You haven't helped yourself to a taste?"

"I was waiting for... permission."

Number seven. He's so earnest. It's not a trait I've ever admired before.

Maybe because it's so much like me. I'm attracted to a certain level of impulsivity. But on Rynn? It's sweet.

"I'm glad you waited," I say. "Because I'm going to feed it to you."

His eyes pop wider in surprise. No. Not surprise. Fear.

As I hop off the table to grab a spoon, my mind sorts through every interaction since I've known him. Fear of what? Ahh. Fear of feeling good. Fear of attraction. Fear of another boner.

I hate to tell ya, Zar-Rynn, I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure you get another one of those.

Rynn

"Hop up," she says as she pats the table.

When I don't immediately do her bidding, she pats it again. Then she shakes her head with all the vehemence I used recently when I refused her request to tell her my shameful secret. She's a powerful force. I find it difficult to refuse her.

When I'm sitting, I see her head tilt as she assesses the predicament she's placed herself in. She won't be able to feed me because of our height imbalance.

"I'll just feed myself," I offer, relieved.

"Not on your life, bro," she says as she hops up next to me. Just like last night, our hips and thighs touch. And, just like last night, I feel extra blood flowing to my member.

"Anya," I say, wanting to protest that I'm going to lose control of this new body I'm wearing. I'm caught, though, with the awareness that this is the first time I've said her name. It feels delicious, intimate, on my tongue. This isn't good. For a male who was devoid of feelings for millennia, it is dangerous to acquire so many all at once. That, combined with these physical aberrations, is not something that should be inflicted on me and certainly shouldn't be imposed upon anyone else.

"Close your eyes," she instructs with a smile.

It's all I need to hear. Just like that, I comply, opening my mouth and waiting for the spoonful of cold, white ice cream.

She deposits the taste on my tongue, and I pay attention to many things at once. The first is the burst of cold that startles me. Then the taste, with its layers of deceptive complexity, then the creamy texture that coats the tongue and begs for, "More."

Spoonful after spoonful gently land on my tongue. As soon as I swallow, I open my mouth and Anya dutifully loads my mouth with another taste without my needing to ask.

It's delightful. Not just the taste, but the company. Knowing that the only thing Anya is paying attention to is me. That she's attending to my every

desire—which is very narrow. It’s singularly focused on obtaining another bite.

“Delicious,” I pronounce in a deep bass voice I’m still getting used to.

When my eyes pop open, my first awareness is her proximity, but immediately after that, I see her tears.

Her face is wet. While I’ve been swimming in bliss, the female less than a handspan from me has been drowning in sorrow.

I slip to the floor, step in front of her, and fold her into my embrace. It’s what people do for each other, right? People who have relationships with each other? People who... care?

Pulling her to me, I press her head to my shoulder. Instead of providing comfort, this sets her off. Her silent tears transform into loud, heaving sobs. I’m lost. Should I step away? Leave the room? Apologize again for ruining her life? I flash through pictures of vids I’ve watched that were recorded after natural disasters. People hug their friends tighter. They pat their backs. They offer words of encouragement even at times when life looks hopeless. I do this. I step even closer and run my palm up and down her spine. I’m no longer a Recepticon. I’m not duty-bound to keep emotions at bay. I allow myself to slip into my feelings and wonder what I would like to hear if I were in her place.

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through,” I say as my mind casts about for a way to finish the sentence. “I just want you to remember you have friends. I’ve watched the people on this ship. They all love you. I’ve only just met you, and I’ve wronged you so deeply. But, Anya, if there’s something I can do to help you through this, I will.”

My claws descend without my bidding, and I draw them through her hair like a comb. I’m not sure how I knew to do it, but this soothes her. I do it

some more, combing, then stroking, then combing, in what I hope is a soothing rhythm.

Her tears are running in rivulets through the fur on my chest. This sweet female is in agony. I'm terrible at this. I wish I could help, but all the information I've accumulated can't make this better.

She lifts her head from me, her gaze seeking mine.

"Kiss me," she says, her voice a whisper.

I rear my head back. I don't know much about emotions. I'm a babe at this, but I know with every fiber of my being this is a bad idea. Terrible.

"I'm not Zar," I remind her, my heart hammering in my chest. It's equal parts fear and desire. It doesn't matter, though. She's in emotional distress. Now is not the time for her to ask for this. She's in no shape to make such a decision.

She blinks slowly, then shakes her head and leans back. Good.

"I... you're right. Bad idea."

Anya

I know I woke up wanting to call Zar to the front, to lower Rynn's defenses so I could find my mate, but this is wrong.

Rynn keeps telling me Zar is dead. Kissing Zar's lips when he's not inside the mind is a recipe for disaster. There was something about him combing my hair with his claws. Zar used to do it to help me sleep at night. It was so loving. It spurred me to ask for the kiss. Temporary insanity.

I clear my throat, then jump down. Going to the sink, I wet a cloth and wipe the tears and snot from my face, then busy myself, looking under the cupboards for containers.

"Let's clean this up. I need a nap."

I've got to get ahold of myself. My behavior isn't doing anyone any good.

CHAPTER NINE

Two Weeks Later...

Anya

“Zoey, I never would have taken you for a card shark, but look at you,” I say as I point to her stacks of poker chips. She can barely play her hands around the mounds of chips in front of her.

“Lexa’s been giving me lessons over comms,” she announces, a bright smile on her face.

“Maybe she should give us all lessons. It would level the playing field,” I say, almost under my breath.

Most of the crew is in the solarium at the back of the ship. It’s a bullet-shaped room bounded on three sides and the roof by windows. It’s game night, and I actually caught myself laughing a few times.

Grief is an interesting thing. Sometimes it envelops you like a thick, heavy blanket. It almost steals your breath and makes it hard to do the simplest chores. Sometimes it disappears and for moments you forget it’s even there.

There were several times tonight I got a respite. I'd forget I'm a widow, and that, as Rynn insists, Zar isn't here. I even had fun playing games.

"A few more hands," I insist. I need a chance to get my chips back.

Zoey is beaming. She was here at the beginning, when ten of us women woke up on the floor of the slaver ship, were paired with alien gladiator males and forced to mate. She was, and continued to be, the shyest person I'd ever met until a few months ago when something changed for her. It's been a joy to watch her gain confidence. It's almost worth losing a week's wages to her at the poker table. Well, they call it *klempto* here in outer space.

The only other person at the table who has more than a few chips left is Rynn. I guess it doesn't hurt that he has all the information in the galaxy at his disposal. He knows everything from game theory to string theory. He learned *klempto* like a champ.

It's been amazing watching him these last few weeks. Rynn is brilliant and picks things up quickly. Well, everything from the neck up. From the neck down is another story.

He's still hopeless in the *ludus*, although he spars with one of the males every day. He's not much better than he was that first day.

After I demanded he kiss me in the kitchen, he avoided me for a day. Which was lucky, because I was embarrassed. I'm over it now. I've just chalked it up to grief.

After a day of separation, we went back to spending time together. I try to keep it cool. I think I've been subtle. I don't think he's caught me looking at him like a starving man looks at a buffet. My list of Things I Like About a 3,000 Year Old Guy Who Has Never Had a Life of His Own has grown to over thirty, and now I've quit counting. Rynn's grown on me.

The only thing making it tolerable is that he's basically the anti-Zar, or maybe the un-Zar. Zar doesn't just look like a lion-man, he *is* a lion-man. He's part beast. It's something I love about him—loved, I correct myself. He was power and grace and action. Never impulsive, he was more of a doer than a thinker. Although he wasn't when we first overthrew our masters, he soon became at ease with the crew. He was kind, thoughtful, and a natural-born leader.

Although Rynn's millennia old, he has a charming vulnerability and innocence about him. He seems incapable of lying, although I still wonder if he's telling the truth about whether Zar's in there or not. Actually, I know he's telling the truth. I just don't want to believe it.

I've taught Rynn a lot about the ship, as well as making certain he met every member of the crew. He's accepted our offer that he stay on board until he figures out his next move. I had to strong-arm Shadow into that. There isn't one person on board who can look at the male walking around in Zar's skin and not harbor resentment. But we've all agreed he can remain with us until he has time to sort out his wants and needs and decide upon a planet that will suit him.

In the meantime, I've taught him some things I've been cross-trained on: the hydroponics lab, the kitchen, comms. Savannah has even been giving him lessons in the engine room.

After a few more hands of *klempto*, I bust out. I watch as Rynn goes all in with a full house, only to be beaten by Zoey's four twos. When I look around, I see we're the last four people in the room. Steele, Zoey's mate, has been sitting by her side since he lost all his chips to her in the first hour of play. He's beaming with pride at his Zoey. A sharp pang pierces through me as I realize how much I envy their love.

“I’ll put everything away,” Rynn offers.

That the two wanted to rush back to their room to have sex wasn’t lost on him. Perhaps he has Zar’s sense of smell and knew Zoey was in a hurry. Rynn and I wordlessly put the chips back into their container, then neaten the chairs and put away a sticks game someone left out on one of the tables. I’ve been so engrossed in the *klempto* game, I haven’t looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows in hours.

When I glance at Rynn, he’s doing the same thing.

“I’ll never tire of it,” I say as I drink in the beauty of space. Sometimes it’s just diamonds studded in a field of black velvet. As if that wasn’t amazing enough, tonight we get a double treat. There’s a swirling purple nebula off to our right, and one full of greens and blues to our left.

Zar and I used to love spending time alone in this room. We’d just sit on one of the comfy couches placed in front of the windows and stare wordlessly at the endless beauty.

Rynn’s put everything away and has gravitated to one of the couches, quietly gazing at the view. Will I ever get used to glancing at him out of the corner of my eye and thinking, just for the swiftest moment, that my Zar has come back to me? It’s such a knee-jerk reaction. Even though my wise mind knows it’s not true, my nerves and synapses register what I’m seeing as Zar until I order myself to stand down.

I grab a seat on the other end of the couch and silently stargaze. I need to let it go. I need to believe down to the marrow of my bones that Zar is gone, just like Rynn has insisted since the first moment he awoke onboard the ship. I’ve got to let my hope go.

My gaze moves from the beautiful bounties of space to the male next to me on the couch.

Think, Anya. What would help you know, fully and completely and until the end of time, that Zar won't be coming back?

Then it strikes me. A kiss.

Did I just say that out loud? Because Rynn's lion-like head slowly swivels toward me as if he just heard my thought.

Rynn

I'm adrift. Looking out this window into the vast emptiness of space reminds me of how insignificant I am. I've always believed my job, and by association myself, was meaningful. Now I'm just a person aimlessly wandering through life. I'm homeless and jobless and lost.

Throughout my life, I had another Recepticon assigned to me, someone who had more experience. I always had someone to call upon if I encountered a problem. Now I'm utterly alone except for the strangers onboard the ship. And Anya, who feels less like a stranger with every passing *minima*.

I have no illusions about her feelings for me. She has none. Oh, there are a lot of emotions she expresses when she gazes upon me. Affection, yearning... lust. But they're not for Rynn. They're for Zar.

Right now, she's giving me the look she wore when she asked for a kiss as we made ice cream in the kitchen. Her desire for her mate makes me sad and guilty. I'd never admit to another living soul that it also makes me... want.

I'm almost 3,000 *annums* old. Shouldn't I be allowed to experience a kiss? What would be the harm? If she asks again, I might say yes.

I have to admit to myself how much I like this female. How close I've grown to her. In quiet moments in the middle of the night, I wonder what it

would be like to have her with me longer than it will take to fly to my next destination. I'd be a fool not to develop affection for her.

She's scooting in my direction. Is this it? Is she going to ask me again? She reaches out as if she's going to lay her hand on my thigh, then pulls her arm back at the last moment. It's sitting on the couch now. If I wanted to, all I'd need to do is reach over and place my hand on hers.

"I know you're not Zar. I know you're Rynn. I want you to kiss me even though it's not fair to you."

Not fair to me?

I pause a moment, paralyzed. Not fair to me? Although my brain is barely working, I'm certain I want this. But poor Anya. I think it will confuse her more than she already is.

"It's a terrible idea, Anya. You're going to regret this."

"Maybe. But it's what I want. I'd never want to harm you, though. I forgive you. I..." she pauses and thinks. Whatever she's about to say, she's not taking it lightly. "I absolve you, Rynn. I know this happened without Zar's knowledge or consent, but it happened without yours, too. Take that to the bank. You're forgiven."

I hadn't known how much I regretted what I'd done to Anya until this moment, but her heartfelt forgiveness feels like a child stuck a pin in a balloon. It's as if a weighty thing inside me is freed, leaving me somehow lighter.

"The kiss," she says. Her gaze has never left me.

I weigh and measure and assess and compute the pros and cons of this action I'm about to undertake. Abruptly, I stop, shut my mind off, and for the first time in my life, I step into my feelings.

I grab her hand and focus on the warmth of her skin pressed to mine. The way her muscles have relaxed with just my gentle touch.

Breathing in through my nose, I catch her scent. When I saw her pretty tongue, I dubbed the color Anya. Now, I'm giving her scent a name, too. The Anya scent. It will forever be in my memory banks as the most wonderful smell in the galaxy.

There is no undertone of her arousal-scent. No, right now it's full of grief and longing and poignancy. I don't understand emotions except from afar, but if this good female wants a kiss, if it will help her get closure or heal, I will provide it.

Instinctively, I know she isn't just wanting my lips on hers. For once in my life, I let my impulses guide me. Dipping my head, I breathe in the scent of her hair. It smells like the *apoka* blossoms in the back country of Numa. Sweet, but not cloying.

I stand and pull her to me, then sway with her, my cheek on the top of her head. Her curls are so pliable. They smash with the weight of my embrace. My hands roam her back, from waist to hairline.

"This is okay?" I ask. Although I'm new to this body, I'm well aware my voice sounds different, deeper, rougher than I've ever heard it.

She nods as she sways with me.

My penis is hard, engorged, impossible to hide. She knows my body better than I do and has to be aware of it. She doesn't pull away, so I won't worry about it.

Her arms had been caught between us, her hands splayed on my chest. But now she circles me with them, petting the fur on my back.

She's crying silently. Perhaps a better male than I would pull away, stop this madness, but she doesn't want that. She's clutching me to her. One hand

slides up to snag in my mane. Her fingers comb through it, then tug me closer.

“Are you sure?” I try to appeal to the sane part of her mind that has deserted her.

“Kiss me.”

I want to close my eyes, but instead I keep them open, memorizing her features. Her luminous, tear-filled eyes are looking at me as if I am the bringer of happiness. I know it’s an illusion, but I want to do this. I want to be the male who makes her happy.

Maybe there is a God, and maybe this is God’s plan. To forge something good out of this awful situation.

Her hands seem urgent now, pulling me more desperately. I shutter my eyes, lean in, and brush my lips against hers. The feeling is overwhelming. To touch someone, be connected physically in such an intimate way, makes my knees weak.

I dip my knees, steady my stance, and firm my resolve. I don’t know why she wants this kiss, but I’m going to give it to her.

Plying my lips to hers, I kiss her as I try to get the lay of the land. This is my first kiss. I’m sure it would be awkward for anyone. That I just inherited this mouth full of fangs just increases the difficulty factor. I’m not sure what to do.

Her little hands fist my mane. She tugs me closer and takes over the kiss.

Her Anya-colored tongue snakes between her lips and licks the seam of my mouth. A throaty moan escapes me as lust punches through me. Could intercourse be more exciting than this? I doubt it. This kiss is so compelling, arousing.

Although I want to touch her everywhere at once, all I do is raise my palm to cup her silken cheek. Soft sounds of her mouth on mine drift to my ears. Then her tongue gets more insistent. For a smart male, it takes me far too long to realize she wants to enter my mouth.

The magnitude of this, that we're joining in this way, makes my head spin. I never allowed myself to dream of such intimacies.

Her taste! So much better than ice cream. It's hot and slick and raw. I moan from the intensity as her tongue strokes mine. She obviously doesn't mind the burrs. In fact, her own little moan of pleasure floats to my ears.

I worry about my fangs, fearing they'll hurt her, but then I remember she's navigated these for three *annums* longer than I have. Her hand mimics mine, pressing to my cheek as if I'm the most important thing in the universe.

My penis is throbbing insistently. Without giving myself permission, my hips grind against her. It feels so good I move my hands to her bottom to press us against each other. Our mouths are forgotten as we work together below the waist.

She's widened her stance, which lowers her frame. I dip my knees so we can stay connected like this.

When I thought about mating in the past, it always seemed there was an aggressor and a receiver, an invader and a defender. This isn't like that at all. We're equals as we exchange a wordless give and take.

I'm working myself against her, arousing her little pleasure button the way Zar used to do.

"Harder," she breathes against my lips.

Yanking her closer, my hands on the globes of her shapely bottom, I strike up a swifter rhythm. Her breath is coming in little stutters. Her hands grip

my shoulders as if she wants to ensure she's along for the ride. Is she going to find release this way? Still clothed? In the quiet splendor of the solarium? "Yes." She bites my lower lip. The sting of her flat-toothed bite feels... good.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders. She tosses her head back in pleasure, and moans as if she's in pain. I'm not fooled, not for a moment. This is her pleasure. I saw it on the screen of my internal memories.

Her noise is wordless, unfathomable. The sound of her pleasure is overwhelming. I have no ability to control my own corresponding detonation as my testicles tighten and I find my release. My lids pop wide, then shutter closed as I snarl with a torrent of pleasure. My fluid pulses out of me. Each spasm gives me more bliss than I've ever experienced. More than I ever could have dreamed of.

"Zar," she sighs as she rests her head on my chest.

I go from the heights of bliss to the depths of despair. How will I live through an emotion this devastating?



10



CHAPTER TEN

Anya

I've never seen this emotion on Zar's face before. Betrayal. And shock. His mouth opens and his eyes narrow as his hand goes to his chest. If I'd shot him with a bullet, he wouldn't be more surprised and hurt than this. "Was this...? Was this a manipulation? Were you... *playing* with me?" He slowly shakes his head. "Anya?"

Did I? Did I do this on purpose? I've been on a mission since he returned from his meeting with the Council. I wanted to find Zar, to do something to trigger his re-emergence. I hadn't planned this, but if I had, it would have been a brilliant move. To kiss his mouth, give him an orgasm, call his name. What could be more effective at calling Zar out from where he's buried than that?

"You will stay away from me," he says, his lips vibrating with some emotion so deep, so fundamental, I don't think it has a name. "If you wanted to break me, to pay me back for taking your mate, you succeeded."

“You used your wiles, your body, to make me open up to you. I’m defenseless. I’ve never experienced emotions before. You must have thought it would be child’s play to devastate me. Well, you’ve succeeded.”

“Rynn, I—”

“No words! No more words. I won’t hear them. I’m vulnerable and new at this, but I’m not stupid. You’ll never be able to do this again. *No one*,” those last words come out with so much vehemence he sounds feral, “will ever get past my defenses again. I’m a quick study.”

He turns on his heel and strides to the door.

“Rynn,” I call.

He holds up his hand, bent at the elbow, a clear gesture to shut the fuck up. I don’t blame him. I’m riddled with so much shame and anguish for what I’ve done. I feel like I’m boiling from the inside out. I never meant to hurt him.

“Rynn, your pants.”

He looks down and only now realizes the beige cloth is stained dark with his fluids. His shoulders slump. I imagine he’s wondering what might come next, what new level of degradation could add more insult to this injury.

“I could... walk with you. Casually step in front of you if someone approaches.”

He stands still. I imagine he’d rather die than get that close to me again.

“Yes,” is all he says, his head bowed, voice softened by defeat.

I need to make this better. I don’t know how, but I must. I’ll admit, perhaps I did this on purpose. I wanted to have fun with him, to have his muscle memory take over in the *ludus*, to have him laugh with me in the kitchen.

All of that was to call to Zar, who I hope is still alive deep inside him.

The kiss? That was just my impulsive self.

As I unravel this in my head, I realize I need to explain it to him. I have to find a way.

We walk side by side down the hallway to his room. About halfway there, Petra approaches us. I step in front of Rynn, face him, and engage in meaningless conversation until she hurries past. I knew she wouldn't interrupt us. By the sheen of perspiration on her chest, she was just practicing her rope routine in the *ludus*. She's probably in a hurry to join her mate, Shadow, in bed.

Rynn couldn't look at me. He stayed focused on my right shoulder, his head tipped back to avoid getting close enough to breathe my air.

We arrive at his room and he slaps the palm plate harder than necessary. His jaw is tight, his thinned lips forming an angry frown.

I slide in behind him as he slips into his room. When he sees what I've done, his eyes round. I don't know whether it's in anger or surprise.

"Out." He points to the door.

"Rynn, please. I want to explain."

"Out."

"You won't listen?"

He cocks an eyebrow, then shakes his head. He watches, arms folded across his chest, as he waits for me to leave. I hate myself for thinking it, but I can't help but notice how much he looks like Zar right now. His usual bland expression is a memory.

I take a step toward the door, not wanting to intrude. He's making his needs known. I should give him space. I've been wallowing in my own misery, focused on my own wants and needs, but he's been through a lot, too. His life has been turned upside down as much as mine has.

I stop, though, and turn toward him. At this moment, I decide there's too much at stake to just give up.

"Rynn? Please. I want to explain. May I sit down? Can we talk?"

He closes his eyes in defeat, then nods.

I sit with my back to the wall at the little corner table.

"Join me?"

He shakes his head even as he moves to sit across from me.

"You've watched our memories," I begin. "You've seen our meeting?"

He nods.

"How things progressed?"

He nods, his eyes on the table.

"How much we loved each other?"

"Yes. It surprised me how much two people could care for each other." His gaze flicks to mine for the first time since we left the solarium.

"Can you blame me for not wanting to give that up?"

He opens his mouth to speak, then snaps it closed. I think he was about to tell me again that Zar is dead. I'm glad he doesn't say the words.

"I cried for days. The whole trip to Boklorn. I'm still grieving, but it's so... crazy-making to see my Zar so close, to yearn to touch him, to miss his smile and his gentle touch and the way his tail always wrapped around my ankle when we sat together.

"I'm not sure if it would be easier to have watched his dead body jettisoned out the waste chute. But he's here. Not Zar. But his body."

Rynn's frame is so stiff, his muscles so tight. His gaze is everywhere but on me, as if the metal walls and bland furnishings are fascinating.

"When you returned from your meeting with the Council, I vowed to get him back, Rynn. I want it more than breath. More than life. I thought

sparring would awaken something in you, or having fun in the kitchen, or one of the other things we've done together. It was like a planned military operation. I enlisted all my friends to help."

A little feline huff of exasperation escapes from the back of his throat.

"I gave no thought to you, the sentient being Rynn. I was focused on Zar. Then it was so quiet and peaceful in the solarium. We've been having fun together, and I wanted a kiss so badly. So damn bad," I whisper those last three words. "I want him so much I can taste it."

Now I'm the one who's having trouble maintaining eye contact. I need to open my heart and mind to the male across from me. The male who isn't Zar.

"I've been laughing with you and having fun, and I wanted a kiss. I won't lie. I wanted to kiss Zar, but I think I wanted to kiss you, too."

There are tears in my eyes. I hate admitting it. I'm so confused. My feelings are whirling inside me. Honestly, I don't know what I want or how I feel.

"Are you playing me now, Anya?" he asks.

"No!" I say vehemently. "No more lies or deception."

"What do you want?"

Gone is his avoidance of me. He's scrutinizing me now, as if he could discern the truth from a lie by observing me closely. Good. Maybe he can.

"I want you to look for Zar one more time, Rynn. I want you to go inside and see if you can find him. I believe you when you say all the Boklorns who have gone before have disappeared, that they're only the sum of their memories inside you. But I want you to try to find Zar.

"Zar isn't a Boklorn. He's a strong personality. If anyone could live through the melding, it's him. Can you try?"

"Of course I will, Anya. I've done it many times. I'll do it again."

I breathe in relief. “Thank you.”

“And then? If I’m not able to find him?”

I’ve not thought this far. I don’t want to think past this. It means Zar is truly gone. My face heats with the realization that this will mean he’s not coming back. Ever.

I pause for a long time, eyes closed as I imagine a future without Zar. My stomach feels heavy, as if it’s filled with concrete. My answer strikes me with the force of a lightning bolt.

“I... like you, Rynn. Is it selfish for me to want you to stay? To see if you and I might be able to weave together a future out of the broken pieces of our lives?”

“Not selfish. Maybe crazy.”

He pauses for a long time. It’s such a long time, my anxiety rises. Finally, he says, “Maybe I’m crazy and selfish, too. I might consider such a thing.”

Rynn

She’s beautiful. Even in her anguish, she’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen. What we’re considering is insane. She’ll never look at me and be able to see anything but Zar. *Annums* from now, if she can bring herself to say the words I long to hear, “I love you,” she’ll never be saying them to me, Rynn. She’ll be saying them to a dead male—a memory.

I tug the tuft of hair on my chin as I consider her proposition, although I already know the answer. If she wants to try to find feelings for me, I’d be willing to let her.

She’s looking at me expectantly. Not for me. Not for Rynn to consider being her love, but for me to dive inside myself and try to find her mate. This makes my heart feel like it’s being squeezed by a giant fist. It does not, however, change my mind.

“Let me search,” I say as I close my eyes.

I take a series of five deep breaths, going into a meditative state. It usually clears my mind and allows me to sink deeply into calm. What always worked before does not work now. I’m no longer in a Boklorn body, no longer beginning in an emotionless condition, no longer dispassionately seeking information.

I know exactly what I want. I want to come back to Anya with the news that Zar’s consciousness is absent. Dead. Irretrievably gone.

If she’s right? If he’s in there? I could lie, deny his existence, keep him shut up inside me until he died of the loss and grief of being so close to his beloved and unable to see or touch her.

I’m not that male. I could never do such a thing. I’m going to go on a deep dive. I’ll look in every nook and cranny for him. And if I find him, I’m going to tell Anya and then do everything within my power to facilitate his full return.

The sheer idea of this decimates me. But it’s what I’m going to do. I’m a worthy male, and having feelings for Anya isn’t going to fundamentally change who I am.

My lids fly open, my gaze seeking hers. I don’t miss her excitement. I don’t need to be able to read her mind to know she thinks I’ve popped out because I’ve found him. This kills a small part of me. I have a feeling that’s what I’m signing on for if I stay with this female—a thousand little deaths when she looks at me and realizes I’m not Zar.

I’ll do it anyway.

“I’m going to try my hardest,” I vow to her. “If he’s in there, I’ll find him.”

“Thank you, Rynn,” she says, reaching for my hand, then snatching it back.

I close my eyes and delve inside. This is what I've done for millennia. I enter a meditative state and among the ethereal, formless filaments of my mind, I search for things.

I search the obvious places, the huge repositories of memories from the 56 who went before him. Nothing lives here. I riffle through Zar's memories from front to back and front again. There's not one clue that there's anything here but the remains of his memories.

Then I move to the stores of information. I look closely at every piece of factual information that is associated with the male called Zar: the Ton'arr race, his planet, gladiatorial facts, and other minutiae of the games.

Nothing.

Then I search down the back alleys and cul-de-sacs of my mind—any hidden corner where a consciousness might hide. I call for him with my mind. No answer.

I picture Anya, still sitting across the table from me, waiting in breathless anticipation for me to locate her lost lover. As much as I don't want to find him, I redouble my efforts, call louder, look deeper. I want to give her what she's asked for, even at my own expense. Still nothing.

Finally, I go to the very back of my mind, where I have laid to rest the essence of the males that have given up their lives so I can continue my work. I open door number 57, and the space is dark, lifeless.

I enter. It's something I've never done with the other 56. It would have felt... intrusive. Even though I explore the space, I see no hint of Zar's consciousness.

As much as I want Anya for myself, I'm filled with poignant sorrow. This is it. I can do no more. When I open my eyes, I'll have to tell her for the final time that Zar isn't here, that he'll never return to her.

Finally, I return to real-time. I notice my bottom and thighs on the chair, the temperature of the air on my face, the blood thrumming in my veins. Then I open my eyes to gaze at Anya.

She's crying. I wonder how she knows my search was fruitless, until I glance at the clock. I was searching for Zar for *hoaras*.

"Thank you for trying." She gives me the smallest, saddest smile. "I know you gave it your best effort. Rynn, I thank you for that."

This is a worthy female. She just thanked me for breaking her heart.

"While you were searching for Zar and the minutes were ticking by, I had time to think."

She wants no part of me. My mind tells me this is a good decision on her part. Really, how could anything good come of trying to forge a relationship with a stranger who lives in your mate's body?

I rise, but she grabs my hand and pulls me back into my seat.

"I'm selfish, but not stupid, Rynn. I fully believe Zar isn't coming back. I'll cry over this. Many times. But I want you to stay. I want us to try to... Shit. I don't know, but I'm not ready for you to leave."

I'm a thinker. It's what I do, have always done. I've only been in this body a few weeks, but I've come to some startling conclusions. One is that I'm a sentient, living being. Sentient beings have emotions, even me.

Two is that I have feelings for Anya. I'm attracted to her. Not just my cock, but my mind. She's brimming with love and life. I decided days ago that if I could ever be with a female, I would want to be with Anya. She may never be able to love me like she loved Zar, but I already feel her budding affection for me. If it grows, even a little, it will be more than enough.

"I'll stay," I tell her as I drink in everything about this moment: her beautiful face, eyes brimming with tears, and her earnest request for me to

remain on the *Fool's Errand*. “Emotionally, I’m like a babe. I’m having trouble controlling things. Between that and my cock, I’m floundering. I need for us to have ground rules,” I tell her.

“Yes,” she says eagerly, although I doubt she’s going to like all of mine.

“I will stay onboard for three *lunars*. I will dedicate myself to controlling my emotions, conquering my body, and getting to know you, Anya. I will take the biggest risk I’ve made in three millennia—I will allow myself to experience the emotions I’m developing for you. Do you understand my risk?”

“Yes.” She nods solemnly. “This could break your fragile heart.”

I nod in response. “I’m willing to do that for one reason and only one reason.”

I wait for her gaze to lock with mine.

“Someday I want you to look at me the way you looked at Zar. Not when you imagine he’s still inside me, but when you know full well you’re looking at Rynn. If, at the end of three *lunars* I’ve yet to see even a glimmer of that in your beautiful green eyes, Anya, will you agree that it’s best for us to part? If we can’t get to that feeling together, it will destroy us both.”

She fingers her cheeks and chin in the manner I’ve so recently adopted. Zar has affected us both.

“Yes, Rynn. That’s wise.” She squeezes the hand she hasn’t released in all the *hoaras* since she pulled me to sit across from her.

“Three *lunars* to get to know each other,” I say. “Not for me to watch old memories, but to make new ones.”

“Yes. That’s only fair.”

“And, Anya? Nothing sexual.”

I watch her face fall. I knew how good her sex with Zar had been. I didn't have to watch more than a moment of their memories together to know that. But the expression on her face shows me just how hard it will be for her to adhere to this guideline.

"You understand, right?" I ask. "It would tangle everything, confuse us both. It must be the rule."

Her pretty face, with its pointed chin, looks so forlorn.

"You're right, Rynn. So let's get this straight. Kissing?"

"No."

"Hand holding?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I can work with that." She gives me a brave smile, as if this concession is costing her.

"Can you plan some fun things for us to do? I want to start making my own memories. With you."





CHAPTER ELEVEN

One month later...

Anya

“Can I tell you again what a terrible mistake I think you’re making?” Petra says as she works the blush brush a bit too vigorously. She’s the hair and makeup artist onboard, but I should have never asked for a makeover before we arrive on Numa.

“I heard you the first five times, Petra. I got it. You think it’s stupid for me to spend time with Rynn.”

“No. Not stupid. Dangerous. Dang-er-ous! Your love with Zar was epic. He’s gone. Just what do you think you can create with Rynn that won’t be a pale copy of what you had with your *mate*? You’ll never get back the depth of emotion you had with Zar. Trying could destroy both you and the parasite.”

“He has a name. It’s Rynn. And we will never again be referring to him as a parasite, Petra. That’s just mean. He’s been onboard for two months. You

should have gotten used to him by now.”

“I’m making a point,” she says brusquely, her lips formed into a pout as she applies eyeliner. “Why are you making yourself up like this? You never did before. Do you think you have to make yourself into something you’re not just so he’ll like you? If he’s not into you already, fuck him. You’re a wonderful, beautiful person.”

She steps back to admire her handiwork.

“You’re right,” I say. What was I thinking? Eyeliner? That’s so not me.

“Wipe it off!”

“Not on your life, Miss Nash. You look mahvelous. Might as well keep it on.”

She tips the hand mirror toward me and I have to admit, I look great. You can hardly tell I was crying last night. I just scolded her for not getting over things, but I’m still mourning Zar.

“Are you ready, Anya?” I hear from down the hallway. It’s Zar’s voice, but of course it’s not Zar.

My heart flutters in my chest when he stands in the doorway. He’s never looked so Zar-like. Even Petra gasped.

He’s wearing the knee-high black boots, black leather kilt, and cross-body sash all the gladiators wear when we’re on-planet. He’s tall and strong and full of purpose.

When I had Shadow take him all of Zar’s clothes, I never imagined he’d wear this outfit. It even has the extra pocket-flap Dax added to the belt. It holds a small notebook and pen Zar used to write on when the mood struck.

“Rynn,” I say, to acknowledge his arrival as well as remind myself who resides behind his face.

“You look...” he says, then abruptly stops, obviously flustered.

“Beautiful?” Petra prompts.

“Painted.”

I laugh as my glance cuts to Petra, whose mouth quirks.

“This is what human females do when they want to look good for someone,” Petra informs him, her mouth pinched into a disapproving line.

“Well, Miss Anya, you’ve certainly succeeded. You look very good.” He nods happily.

“Just give me a minute. I’ll wipe it off.” I grab for a nearby towel.

He approaches me in two giant strides and pries the towel out of my hand.

“Petra is right, you’re beautiful. You don’t need to paint yourself for me, but the fact that you went to the trouble to do it makes me happy.”

He reaches for my hand, nods his thanks to Petra, and accompanies me to the gangway. We’re getting to know each other, and if this is any indication, he’s trying hard to make this comfortable. I squeeze his hand to let him know I appreciate it.

“I’ve rented us a hover,” I tell him. “Mind if I drive? I love it. I feel like I’m the star of a movie.”

“As you wish.”

Well, that’s a different movie, I think, remembering the line from the *Princess Bride*. I must have watched that movie a hundred times as a kid.

The rented hover is parked near our ship, and in a matter of moments, I’ve completed my pre-flight checklist, and we’re in the air.

“Numa’s a weird planet,” I explain, although why I bother, I don’t know. This male is the repository of all the information in the galaxy. “Invaders came to strip mine centuries ago. Half the planet is an ecological mess.”

I wave my hand at the view. Here near the docks, it’s a maze of crappy streets lined with crappy bars, casinos, and flesh palaces. In the distant

vista, it's brown, denuded soil as far as the eye can see.

"Luckily, the planet elders lobbied with the Federation leaders just in time to save the other half of the planet. It's still lush and beautiful there. That's where we're headed."

"How did you know I wouldn't be interested in the..." He leans forward to get a good look down below. "Golden Pussy Saloon?"

I have to snatch a quick look at him to ensure he's joking. He's got a close-lipped smile on his face. It looks good on him, and not because it reminds me of Zar, because it doesn't. Zar smiled wide with me, never trying to hide those fierce fangs. Rynn's smile is a bit more subdued.

"I like when you joke with me, Rynn," I tell him easily. This is what I'd envisioned when we struck our deal—an easy camaraderie. Well, I can't lie, I'd also envisioned sex. But he was smart to put a prohibition on that. Once we break that barrier, it can't be undone.

"I wasn't joking," he says with a straight face.

I don't need to even look at him this time to know he *is* joking. I keep my eyes on the screens, but reach over to pat his knee. It's as natural as breathing to touch him.

"Is this okay?" I ask as I pat him again.

"Yes. I told a joke—two of them. And you laughed—twice. This is fun." It's like there's a five-year-old in Zar's body. Rynn is becoming a person rather than a Recepticon. I'm happy for him.

We travel in companionable silence for a while. The moment the horizon turns green, we both release a deep breath.

"I organized a tour of a *drassah* plantation. It's the closest thing to Earth coffee we've found. I thought it would be fun to take the tour, then buy coffee for the ship."

“Coffee?”

“Oh, buddy, you’re going to love it. It’s delish.”

I feel my cheeks pinken when I remember our little discussion weeks ago when he admitted to tasting his own sperm because he had to explain why he thought our taste buds were different.

“I’ve discovered,” he says as he lays his hand ever so lightly on top of my hand that’s still resting on his thigh above his knee, “that our tastes are pretty similar with only one exception.”

We both laugh. He just found a tasteful way to banish the elephant in the room.

He’s not Zar, I remind myself. Zar is gone. But Rynn is a nice male with a developing sense of humor and a good heart.

“Tell me the nicest thing you’ve ever done,” I say. I want to get to know him, and we still have an hour’s hover drive.

He thinks for longer than I anticipated. When I pull my gaze from the screens, he looks deflated.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think I’ve done many nice things,” he admits, his mouth turned down at the corners, his brow furrowed. “I’ve been so consumed with my mission that I allowed my relationships to wither. I thought the good I was doing for the galaxy at large precluded a need to nurture my connections with others.”

He turns to me and pauses until I look at him. His expression is so earnest, his face is open and sincere. “I want to change that, Anya. I want to have friends and connections. I want people to care whether I live or die.”

“That’s what I want for you, too,” I say. I can’t stop my hand from cupping his furred cheek. My touch surprises him, but it’s clear he wants it. He leans

into my palm and nuzzles me.

He's lived a long life, but I realize now how utterly alone he's been. I've felt guilty since we came up with our interesting truce, our plan to spend three months getting to know each other. I figured the gain would be one-sided. But now I realize it's not. No matter how this turns out, he's going to benefit, too. He's going to learn who he is. And when all is said and done, he's going to have some friends.

"So, *I've* got an answer to my question," I tell him sincerely, then swing my gaze out the front window.

"You're going to tell me the nicest thing you've ever done?" he asks.

"Nope. I'm going to tell you the nicest thing *you've* ever done."

He lifts an eyebrow, then waits.

"You decided thousands of years ago to become a Recepticon, right?"

"Yes."

"If you hadn't done that, what would your life have been like?"

"We, my people, the Arclites, we live forever. Or we can, if we choose to. We're lighter than air. We fly and play all day. We can go anywhere with just a thought. I could have visited every planet and every shrine. I would have stayed in my gaseous form and been in my pod for my whole life."

"Pod?"

"Yes. Because we live forever, we aren't born in the sense you understand. Our family units are by proximity, not genetics, like solid beings such as yourself. We have pods. We keep relationships with our pod-mates our entire lives. We love each other. There is no war, no fighting, no want. We have no needs. We're perpetually happy."

He looks wistful, with a pensive smile and a far-off look.

“So instead of perpetual bliss and an unending lifetime of close relationships with your podmates, young Rynn chose to reject all that. He signed on for a lifetime of hard work that was so relentless he never got a break. Always in search of knowledge, he had a series of bodies he had to live in rather than the ethereal joy of formlessness. Those lives were spent without friendships or family. All so he could be in service to the galaxy. Um, yeah, I guess it’s impossible to figure out the nicest thing you’ve ever done.” I scowl playfully at him.

“I guess if you put it like that... I did something good.”

“And the Council didn’t know it, perhaps you still don’t believe it, but they gave you a reprieve. They commuted your sentence. You get to *live* now.

You get to develop friendships and relationships and find another purpose.”

I get serious for a moment because I’m so caught up in imagining the life he rejected. The formless existence of pure, continuous bliss.

“And Rynn, if this doesn’t work out...” I point between him and me,

“you’re going to find love. You deserve it.”

Rynn

It sounds believable when she says it. It resonates deep within me. Do I? Do I really deserve love? Due to circumstances beyond my control, I failed my mission to the Symbiont Council. But I can use all that information stored in my head for something good. I just need to figure out how to do that.

Knowing all the information in the galaxy means my mind is filled with many things. I have pictures of the wonders of a hundred planets, as well as the best art of the galaxy. I have compiled millions of anecdotes of people helping each other, caring for each other, loving each other.

Sadly, though, for every piece of knowledge I carry that extols the kindness of people’s nature, I have a hundred of how people are callous and abusive

to each other. I have exabytes of information on wars, killing, mutilation, rape, pillaging, and razing cities to the ground.

People can be monsters.

How lucky I'm sitting so close to Anya. She's a good person. Although everyone on the *Fool's Errand* might wish I were dead and their captain was still alive, they've all been kind to me. I've been learning from them. I'm going to be a better person.

I glance at Anya, and for the hundredth time I realize how beautiful she is. I vow that no matter if this works out between us or not, I'm going to make her life better. I can't bring Zar back, but I can help her during this transition. I can help her through her loss.

Squeezing her hand, I look out the front screen and notice how magnificent this side of the planet is. It's lush and green, filled with plants with huge leaves.

"I want to taste *drassah*," I tell her. I want to taste... life.



12



CHAPTER TWELVE

Anya

There are huge *drassah* plantations all over this sector of Numa, but I chose a relatively small operation for our tour. I wanted us to have a more personal experience. Besides, this place is known for the variant they've created that tastes like hazelnut. Well, I'm only guessing about the hazelnut idea, since that's an Earth taste no one would be able to describe. But by its description, I'm hoping their *melanga drassah* varietal tastes like hazelnut. A girl can dream, can't she?

We're greeted by a young girl who's either Morganian or human. She's carrying a distinctive Numan *drassah* pot and two copper cups on a tray.

"Hi, welcome to the Happy Fields Plantation. I'm Tru," she says with a head bow after we exit our hover.

"Human?" I ask, more excited about Tru than the *drassah*, and that's saying something.

"Yes. My adoptive father, Ssly'Vestril, runs this business along with other members of his family, my adoptive mom, Carrie, and me. Carrie's from

Earth, too.” She smiles at both of us and dips her head, urging us to grab a cup of steaming brew.

“Cream?” she asks, indicating a small pitcher of cream on the hammered copper tray.

“Oh, Tru. I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” I say as I pour cream into my cup.

Rynn looks clueless.

“You might want to try it black. If that’s too strong, pour in some cream,” I tell him.

As much as I want to be his guide and teach him the beauties of coffee, I can’t wait another moment to take my first sip.

“Mmm,” is all the effort I can spare before I take another.

“Tru, I’m sure you hear this every day, but this is amazing.”

After my third sip, I watch as Rynn dips the tip of his tongue into his cup. I can’t help but flash to the mental image of him tasting his own sperm with the same level of fear and expectancy.

“Mmm,” he says as he tips the cup for his first actual sip. “Good. Should I try cream?” He eyes it, unsure if he wants to mess with the deliciousness of black *drassah*.

“Here.” I lift my cup for him to taste.

“Ahhh,” he says after swishing the coffee from my cup in his mouth. “I like them both. Do I have to choose?”

“No. You can switch off,” I tell him indulgently. Yep, sometimes he’s like a five-year-old experiencing all of life for the first time. It’s fun to watch.

Tru escorts us to a small building where she introduces us to her adoptive parents. Ssly, as he asked us to call him, looks like all Numans, with thick

bands of flesh on his head instead of hair. He's strikingly handsome in a blue-green alien way.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I think Carrie's a bit older than him, although she's got a babe in her arms and a wide smile plastered on her face. It makes me happy to think that so many of us abducted Earth girls wound up with great mates and happy, productive lives.

A pang of sadness darts through me at that thought. I had that for three short years. It was stolen from me.

As Ssly conducts the tour, showing us plants in every stage of growth from seedlings in a hothouse, to being planted outdoors, to bursting with white flowers and finally, the maroon beans that become *drassah*, Carrie keeps up a side conversation.

"I feel as if I know you, Zar," she says. "The captain of the pirate ship where Ssly and I met used to talk about you and your ship. I hear you and the pirates had a difficult beginning."

Rynn must be aware of the story, since he has Zar's memories, but I take over the conversation, since I'm the one who lived through it.

"Captain Thantose caught our ship in a net and was in the process of extorting money from us when he discovered his long-lost cousin Devolose was on our ship. It was a tense couple of hours," I say, relieved that moment is in the past.

"I don't think Thantose has decided if he's a bad guy or a good guy," Carrie says. "For a pirate, he's generous to a fault."

Ssly nods his agreement, then brings us to the roasting area where he boasts about how they still roast their beans the old-fashioned way.

"We'd invite you to our house," Carrie says at the end of the tour, "but we have a previous engagement. If you want to take a walk, there's an amazing

view of the lake in that direction.” She points. “We have a hammock there. Feel free to nap before you get back in your hover to return to the dark side.”

We thank them for the great tour, pay them for several industrial-sized sacks of their beans that the males load into the back of our hover, and strike off toward the hammock on foot.

I hadn’t noticed during the tour, but it’s obvious that Rynn is irritated. Just like Zar, his nostrils flare and his lips press together when he’s angry.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Oh no he didn’t. Is he really going to act like an angry junior high school girl?

“You’re ticked. What’s up?”

He slows his pace, then stops altogether. “You let her think I’m Zar. I’m not. Why didn’t you give me a proper introduction?”

He’s right. She’d heard of Zar and I let her act as if that was who she was talking to.

The lake is to our left, and on our right is a hammock, just as Carrie described. It’s handmade out of the braided elephant-ear-shaped leaves that are so prevalent here. Grabbing Rynn’s hand, I pull him toward the hammock, and we both sit. With our weight on it, it dips in the middle, so our hips smash together.

“You’re right. I let it go. I’m not sure why I didn’t introduce you. Maybe it seemed too complicated...” Even as I say those words, I know that’s not the whole truth. Rynn’s a straight-shooter. I’ve never known him to lie. I owe him the same degree of honesty.

“No. It’s not just that it was too complicated,” I admit as I take his hand and twine my fingers through his. “Seriously, I’m not sure how to explain it to someone. ‘This is Rynn. He’s a symbiote that took over Zar’s body’.

Sounds pretty unbelievable when I say it out loud. So it just seemed easier to let her believe you are Zar. Maybe...” I work up the nerve to look at him. He’s not angry at me. I see that now. He’s hurt. Here he is, trying to discover the person he was meant to be, and I pretended like he wasn’t even there. No wonder I’ve bruised his feelings.

“Even though everyone on the *Fool’s Errand* knows who you are, maybe there was something about admitting it out loud to strangers that would have made it real. Obviously, I still haven’t completely accepted that reality. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Thanks.”

I feel his body stand down, as if all he needed was an apology from me. My heart swells with affection for him. Is that what’s happening? I’m growing fond of Rynn. This thought calms me. After all, it’s what I’d hoped for.

We work together to lie down in the hammock. It’s at the perfect angle so we can lie here and swing and watch the waterfowl land and swim and then fly away.

Although we hear insects buzzing in the background, they don’t come anywhere near us. We’re covered by a canopy of emerald leaves so thick that only tiny shards of light occasionally work their way to the forest floor. It’s calm and quiet and safe here.

I wiggle and pull Rynn’s arm to the side so I can lay my head on his bicep, then drowse.

Rynn

It’s happening.

As if every moment of my life was weaving together into a tapestry that after three millennia would look like this.

Anya likes me. She was genuinely sorry she hurt my feelings and then apologized easily. Look at her, asleep on my arm as if she belongs here. And she does. My heart feels so tender toward her. Looking at it from her perspective, I can see how difficult it is for her to explain this situation to others. We'll have to discuss this later.

I wish this moment would never end. I have a beautiful, kind female in my arms. We've navigated troubled waters and still like and admire each other. I won't discuss this with her now. We can let this peace we've developed grow between us. But for the first time since all this happened, I believe Anya and I could have a life together. I'm growing to love her, and, by the look of things, she's growing to care for me.

I smile a genuine smile for perhaps the first time in my long life. I feel happy, content, and optimistic as she moves in her sleep, burrowing even closer to me as she slings her arm around my waist. I could stay like this forever.

Anya

My eyes open lazily, and it takes a moment to remember where I am.

Usually, when something like this happens, I feel a moment of panic, but I don't now. I'm in Rynn's arms, and that makes everything feel safe.

Did I really just think that? Did I really think of him as simply Rynn? Not Zar? Not Zar-Rynn? Am I developing a relationship with him? Guilt slices through me so hot and quick and painful it feels like a knife. It's only been two months since Zar's been gone. Have I forgotten him so soon? Am I so willing to say goodbye to him and move on?

That's not fair, I scold myself. I'm in an insane situation. What good would it do to keep Rynn at arm's length? He's wearing my mate's skin. The fact that I'm attracted to him can't be helped. And he's so nice, so earnestly thoughtful and helpful. I could certainly do a lot worse.

We're lying together in a hammock, gently swaying in the breeze. My attention is caught by the waterfowl's brilliant, shimmering maroon, gold, and emerald feathers.

"Paradise," I whisper, assuming Rynn won't hear me. I figure he's asleep.

"Paradise," he agrees.

Tipping my head to look at him, I don't see Rynn. No. I'm in Zar's arms. I think Rynn and I could stay together a millennium and I'd feel that way.

This body, the furred bicep my head has been resting on, the brilliant white of his fangs, the golden orbs of his eyes—they're Zar's.

Rynn leans onto his side to face me, then slips his arm around me and tugs me closer. His eyes are at half-mast, almost unfocused, but his attention is fully on me.

"We want this, right?" he asks, tipping his head in question.

I could play stupid, ask him to explain, but I know what he's asking.

"Yes. We're developing a relationship. I feel good when I'm with you, comfortable. I trust you, Rynn." My eyes focus on his lips, and for the first time since we agreed to wait three months to explore a physical relationship, I think about kissing him.

Although I've kept it at bay, all at once a tsunami of need courses through my body. We're pressed together. The hammock has dipped, forcing us closer than we would have chosen. His furred arms are wrapped around me. His gaze is focused on my mouth. It would be easy to lean closer, graze his lips, then slip my tongue inside to taste him.

My gaze flicks between his feline mouth and his golden eyes. *Get the hint, Rynn, I think. Lean in, tilt your head, and brush my lips with yours.*

He's definitely contemplating it. His tongue swipes between his lips as if it's readying the playing field, but he's not inching closer. I stretch, arching my back so my diamond-hard nipple grazes his side. *It's a hint, Rynn. This is me telling you the runway is open and cleared for landing.*

Another lick of his lips, another far-too-lengthy look at my mouth, and yet more waiting.

I can't be the one, I scold myself. I cannot be the one who makes the first move. It has to be him. He's the one who decreed the three-month rule. He has to be the one who breaks it.

He holds his hand up, flicks his claws out, and combs my hair. It's half caress, half grooming. He nudges me away from him so I can watch the lazy lake activity while he pets me. I must admit, it feels heavenly. Just not the part of heaven I'd wanted to visit. I was hoping for the wild side, and what he's giving me is sweetness.

For a moment, I mourn his choice. I'd wished for kisses—and something more. But what he's giving me is perfect. I feel his devotion soaking through my pores. That he's following his own self-imposed edict means something, too.

"You're worth waiting for," he rumbles into my ear. "I want to kiss you, to taste you again, and to dive into the feelings I get when I'm with you. But we decided to wait. I never want you to regret what we create together. I want it to be perfect if it happens."

Hot tears spring to my eyes. I'm not sad. No, these are sweet tears. I'll never get Zar back. I've accepted that, but there are worse things in the galaxy than being with a male who is as sensitive and thoughtful as Rynn.

He kisses the back of my head, then a happy feline chuff explodes from his mouth.

“Perfect,” he says as his arm surrounds my waist and tugs me closer.

I must have fallen asleep again, because I wake to more kisses on the back of my head and Rynn’s softly crooned, “Anya. Anya, we should go.”

He’s right. It looks like the sun is edging toward the horizon. The last thing I need is to have to hover halfway across the planet in the dark.

Something changed for both of us in that hammock. He doesn’t let go of me as we walk to our hover. He’s either holding my hand or keeping his palm on the small of my back. It’s sweet and gentle, just like his personality.

I’m growing to like him more every day. He’s not Zar. As soon as I stopped expecting him to be Zar, everything began to slot into place. Zar? Zar was larger than life—a gladiator, a natural-born leader. He was decisive and fair and a person everyone looked up to.

Rynn is quiet, introspective, and thoughtful. He’s more of a rule-follower than a rule-maker, but not everyone can be a Zar. Rynn is kind and honest and fulfills his promises. He’s brilliant, but doesn’t make others feel stupid. He said it’s the first time in his very long life he has people who want to hear what he knows. I appreciate him.

I grip his hand tighter and swing it as we jog to our hover. I can enjoy the sweetness of this moment, because it *is* sweet, even as I know I’ll cry myself to sleep tonight like I have every night since the avalanche.

Rynn

“Is my flying scaring you?” Anya asks.

“No. You’re quite competent,” I tell her. I’m especially impressed with how she handles the hover in the dark. I blame myself for not waking her earlier,

but it was such a privilege to watch her sleep in that hammock. I let it go on longer than I should have. “I’m enjoying the ride.”

“Then why are you wiggling more than a three-year-old doing the pee-pee dance?”

It takes me a moment to parse through her idioms, but I finally understand her meaning. I don’t, however, know how to answer her question.

“You’re not freaked out by my driving?”

“No.”

“Do you need me to pull over so you can go potty?”

“No.”

“What’s up?”

“I’m ready to be back onboard the *Fool*,” is all I say.

She turns on the cabin light and glances over at me. No, it’s not a glance, that would be quick. This is more like scrutiny. Then she makes a humph noise in the back of her throat, turns off the light and focuses out the front screen.

“It’s been months,” she says, her voice level. “Certainly you’ve figured out how to deal with your... problem, right?”

“Problem?” I ask innocently. Does she know my secret?

“I’m not the galaxy’s biggest expert, Rynn, but I’m pretty sure I read somewhere that you could damage yourself if you have a hard-on for too long.”

“Don’t tease, Anya. Besides, I don’t have that problem.”

“Do I need to pull this hover over and inspect you?” she threatens. “It’s not like I haven’t seen it before. I was mated to the guy in that body for almost three years.”

She points at my genitals as if it weren't the most embarrassing threat in the galaxy.

"You wouldn't!" I smack my palm on my chest in consternation.

"I would," she says.

Luckily, she doesn't appear to be preparing for landing.

"Admit it, Rynn. You've got a boner."

"What?" I ask, even though I know what her little colloquialism means.

"You've got an erection, a stiffy, a chubbie, you're sprouting wood, pitching a tent, you're sporting a gallant salute, there's a party in your pants."

She said that as if she were reading out of the dictionary. Me, on the other hand, I turn my head from her and pretend to look out the side window. The dark night has turned the window into a mirror. I've never seen my shocked face in Zar's body before. It's scary.

"Admit it," she urges.

"Yes. I have an erection. I've been around a female all day whom I find very attractive and, due to my rather unusual circumstances, I believe I'm still experiencing adolescence."

"How sweet," she says. "You find me attractive."

"Of course. Should I have mentioned it earlier? I thought I'd made it clear that I find you quite appealing."

"Yes, but a female likes to hear that all the time. Read some more articles. *All the time*, Rynn."

"You're very attractive," I tell her earnestly.

"All the time except right this moment," she says with a smile. "Tell me at other times, like when I least expect it." She pauses as if she's done, then continues, "Except not when the mood isn't right, you know? Like when

we're having a fight or something scary or sad is happening. And probably not when we're just chilling with a bunch of our friends."

She's giving me pointers on how to make her happy. That's a good thing, right? How come it feels like she thinks I'm an idiot?

"You *have* figured out how to take care of yourself, right?"

Thank goodness. She's changing the subject.

"Well, I still couldn't cook for myself if I had to live on my own. I'll need a few more lessons with Maddie. And the laundry machines still baffle me, I'm sorry to say—"

"What are you talking about?"

"Taking care of myself. In case this thing between us doesn't work and I need to set up house on a yet-to-be-determined planet."

"Are you being dense on purpose?" She sneaks a look at me, her brow furrowed.

"Dense?"

"You *are* masturbating on the regular, right?" Somehow her tone sounds like mine when I'm discussing a dry journal article.

"Mastur—" I cannot say that word in front of Anya. It feels dirty.

"Masturbating, Rynn. Jacking off, polishing the bishop, beating your meat, wanking, choking the chicken, spanking the weasel, whacking the one-eyed worm—"

"I'm not stupid. I understand that word." In three millennia, I don't believe I've ever been so embarrassed I wanted to become invisible.

"And?" She persists. "Are you doing it?"

For the swiftest moment I consider not answering, but I'm afraid she'll launch into more synonyms for the act, and I don't think I could live through another round of that.

“No.”

“No? Seriously? We’ve been hanging out together for two months and you’ve never...?”

“I’ve lived a long time without such behavior. I figured I could continue to live without it.” I tried to say that with an even tone, but I botched it. I sounded defensive. No, I sounded prudish.

Anya just suggested I read articles on interpersonal relations. What she doesn’t know is that I have been. I believe I recently read a magazine from Aeon II that stated females don’t like their males to be prudish, especially about sexual matters. I’m hopeless.

“Zar and I were mated for three years. I am well acquainted with what his body does when he’s aroused. Rynn, how are you managing? I assumed you were rubbing one out several times a day.”

“I’m not.” Drat. I just sounded prudish again. One thing is certain, I’m definitely not going to admit I wake up every morning with wet, sticky sheets.

“Why?”

“It doesn’t feel natural. And... I thought if you found out, you’d think less of me.” Whew. At least that’s out in the open.

“Well, it’s the most natural thing in the galaxy, and it’s not healthy to hold back. Everyone does it. I wouldn’t think less of you.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“No. I do it. The body has needs.”

Anya... spans the weasel? My mind finds this disconcerting, yet my cock is punching against the front of my pants as if he wants to fight his way out. I’m dying to know how she does it. I actually bite my lips to keep myself from enquiring.

“You need to do it when we get back to the *Fool*,” she says, her voice matter-of-fact.

When I start to protest, she says, “Ask Dr. Drayke if you don’t believe me. Seriously, Rynn, it’s not healthy.”

Although I never needed to worry about these things before in my Boklorn bodies, I page through a few easily accessible scientific articles in Area 87,430, Section B, of my databanks. I hate to admit it, but she’s correct.

“Need some help?” she asks. Her voice sounds different, breathy.

I lean over to examine her expression to discern if she’s stifling a laugh or hiding desire. Perhaps a little of both.

“No.” Crap. That was my prudish voice again.

“We agreed no sexual touching for three months, right?” She asks in that way she has of getting me to trap myself.

“Yes.”

“We’re going back to the *Fool*, then we’ll have a good dinner, and take showers. Then we’re going to have phone sex.”

I pretend to look out the side window again, and yet again see my shocked visage as I scroll as fast as I can through as many articles on dating and sexuality as I can find. “Fonesex” is nowhere to be found.

Just as *don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask*, becomes my mantra, I ask, “What is this Fonesex?”

“You’ll be in your bed and I’ll be in mine. We’ll talk each other through it.”

“It?” Oh, crap. Prudish.

“We’ll spank the weasel together.”

Maybe I can blame it on the fact I’m in a relatively new body, but I actually choke on my spit.





CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Anya

I was starved. I imagine Rynn was, too. Neither of us ate more than a nutrition bar all day, yet we were humming with caffeine from the *drassah* tastings. I had no trouble shoveling food from my plate to my mouth, but Rynn just sat across from me at dinner with a wide-eyed, innocent look on his face. It was adorable.

After a while, I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"If I eat one more bite, I'll *choke*," I say as I look at him with a wink. Petra and Shadow are at our table like they are every night. At first, it relieved the awkward dynamic between Rynn and me. Now it makes the meal more fun and easygoing. Rynn can be a tightass unless we tease him out of it.

"One thing I wish we could find up here in outer space," I say to everyone as if it were a normal comment. "*Chicken*. I wish we could find some real chickens."

Rynn clears his throat and studiously examines his plate. Choking, chickens, what else can I say to tease the shit out of him?

“What’s your favorite chess piece?” I ask him. Dax carved a beautiful chess set out of *crema* wood and we’ve been playing several nights a week. “The *bishop*?” I ask innocently.

He sets his fork on his plate and shoots me his best “shut up” stare. It just makes me laugh and prompts me to keep going.

“So, Rynn, are you familiar with the Earth fairytale about *Jack* and the Beanstalk?”

This is interesting, I get treated to Rynn’s glower face. I know it should scare the shit out of me, I mean flashing his fangs and all, but it simply entertains me no end.

“*Jack* was a very inquisitive boy. He liked to get his hands on everything. Absolutely everything.”

I don’t know about Shadow, but Petra definitely knows something’s up. That woman has a sixth sense about stuff like this.

“Okay, you two. Get a room,” she teases. She has no idea how close she got to the truth.

“That hover ride and all that *drassah*,” Rynn says, rubbing his stomach. “I think I’ll take my leave.”

“Me, too,” I say as I spring up. “Sorry,” I tell him as we scrape our plates.

“I went too far.”

Rynn

“Yes. You did.” Crap. Prudish.

“Don’t be mad.” She looks me straight in the eyes, apology in her glance. “I like you. I wanted to make you laugh, lighten the mood.”

“Really? You weren’t trying to make me feel... stupid?”

Her chin lifts in surprise.

“I feel affection for you, Rynn. I wouldn’t ever want to make you feel stupid. We’re going to do this. I just wanted to help you see it as fun, not a chore.”

“Not a chore,” I echo, nodding my head.

“I’ll call you on your comm in half an hour. Take a shower, uh, keep your towel handy, and wear a smile when you say hello.”

I take the quickest shower of my life even though I’m still getting used to dealing with a furred body complete with tail. She didn’t tell me whether to get dressed or stay nude. As I contemplate this, I picture her getting ready for our fonesex.

Zar’s memory banks are replete with thousands of pictures of her. Perhaps it isn’t fair for me to page through them. Would that be cheating? It’s using information I shouldn’t have access to. Yet, she can picture my body. She was mated to it for three *annums*.

I allow myself the pleasure of imagining her taking her shower, picturing the water glimmering in the low lights as it sluices over her perfect, heavy breasts. Her face is beautiful. I’ve admired it a million times since we’ve met, but I’ve never looked at her nude form before.

I’m fascinated by the tuft of light brown hair at the juncture of her thighs. I don’t allow myself to look between her legs. That seems too personal, too intrusive. If we ever get that far, I’ll explore on my own.

“Rynn?” It’s Anya’s voice on my wrist-comm.

“Yes?” my voice barely sounds like my own. It’s deeper, breathy.

“Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I admit.

“On Earth, we have a little trick. If things don’t feel right, if you need time or want to stop altogether, just say red. It’s all you need to do and we’ll

pause, or if you want, you can terminate the comm. Nothing to be worried about. I'm nervous, too."

"Really? All that talk about choking the bishop? In front of your friends? And you're nervous."

"I've never had phone sex before. And, let's face it, our relationship is something for the record books. It's uncharted territory. So, yeah, I'm nervous too."

Somehow, this puts me at ease.

"What are you wearing?" Her tone is different. I think the preliminaries are over. I think we're having fonesex.

"Nothing."

There's a long pause until I realize I should ask her the same question.

When I do, her answer is, "I'm wearing white lingerie. It's a filmy, see-through top and a scrap of panties."

I swallow, suddenly parched.

"Anya, I think I'm cheating. I have pictures in my databanks of you. They're from Zar. I can't get them out of my head even though I'm trying not to invade your privacy."

"That's okay." There's a smile in her voice. "You can't unsee it. I can imagine you, too."

"Tell me." I have to lick my lips to continue, "Tell me what you see."

"Perfection."

That word hits me like a punch to the gut. This is how she sees my form?

For the first several weeks I wore this body, I resented it. It wasn't a Boklorn body like I've been used to. To hear how much she likes my form makes me feel proud, confident. It's freeing.

I pad to the full-length mirror on the back of the refresher door and watch as she continues.

“Your mane, so masculine. Your eyes, so compassionate. Lately, when you look at me, your gaze is filled with affection. It’s allowed me to... breathe again. To not want to cry every minute of every day.”

At first, I resent this intrusion. She’s bringing Zar into our fonesex. It doesn’t feel right. Then warm emotion cascades through my body. She loved that male—still loves him. She always will. She’s the perfect, loyal female. I admire that about her. Zar will always be here. He can either be between us, or a valued part of our dynamic. I choose the latter.

“You feel my affection because it’s as real as the air we breathe, Anya. I’m glad I’m helping you through the most difficult days of your life. And if you want to cry, I’ll be there for you through that. I’ve never experienced emotions before, but I’m learning as fast as I can so I can help you through this.”

“That’s one of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me.”

She pauses. I think she’s turning her mind so she can pay attention to the fonesex.

“When I look at you, I see your vulnerabilities, your insecurities, and I see what a good male you are. I like your thick muscles, and the tiny dots that mark where each whisker emerges.”

I lean toward the mirror to examine that. I hadn’t noticed it before.

“And your fangs. They terrified me at first, but I love them now. That they’re dangerous yet will never hurt me. It makes me feel precious.”

“Precious, Anya. That’s what you are.”

“Is your cock hard?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Are you lying down?”

“I’m on my way,” I tell her as I make my way to the bed.

“Turn down the lights and tell me what you feel when you stroke your cock.”

Deciding to start at the least messy end, I grip the base.

“Solid.”

I slide upward toward the tip. For the first time, I’m not touching myself with utilitarian contact. I’m allowing myself to perceive the feelings.

“Are you stroking?”

“Y-yes,” I stutter.

“I’ll just wait. Tell me whatever you want to share. I’m getting wet just watching you in my mind’s eye.”

My hand stops moving as I imagine her getting wet. I force myself not to look at the pictures provided by Zar’s memories. It would be trespassing. Instead, I imagine her pretty Anya-colored folds the way they are displayed in one of the guides to human anatomy I have stored in my brain.

“Someday,” I force myself to say the words that are on my tongue,

“someday I want to taste you there.”

“Mmm, that made me shiver with excitement.”

Maybe this won’t be as difficult as I’d imagined. Maybe if I just say the thoughts that pop into my mind, this will all work out.

“Stroking my cock feels good,” I share, “but when I picture things I want to do to your body, it feels so much better.”

“What things are you picturing?”

“I want to taste you everywhere. Would you like that?” Although I’m still getting used to my new voice in this body, it sounds different, deeper, rougher.

“Yes. I’d like it if we explored together and found the places we both like best.”

“I want to feel your nipples beaded in my palms.”

“Mmm, that made pleasure slice right through me.”

“I want to lick them and suck them.”

“That would feel amazing.”

“I picture myself licking my way down between the valley of your breasts, past your umbilicus, and through your patch of hair.”

“You’re a natural at this, Rynn.”

“I like when you say my name. It feels intimate to hear it on your lips.”

“Tell me how your cock feels now.”

“Pressure. Longing. Desire. My hips are pumping. Striving for something.”

“I’m going to swirl my fingers around my clit while you keep striving,” she says, her words coming out in swift, short huffs. “You keep striving. Rynn?”

“Mm?”

“Let me hear you breathe. I want to hear your pleasure. I want to know what it sounds like when you come.”

I picture in minute detail everything I just described, imagining it down to the pores on her skin. This body has an acute sense of smell. I throw the scent of her arousal into the mix.

My hips pump higher, my fist grips harder, and a deep huffing growl escapes my mouth on every exhalation. My testicles tighten and white light bursts behind my lids as I feel a release so potent and powerful it rips through my body in waves of pleasure more intense than I could have ever imagined.

My moans and a quiet sensual chuff take me by surprise as I feel my essence jet out of me and land on my chest.

I'm deep in a haze of bliss, but not so lost that I miss the sounds of her release. Her pleasure is distinctly feminine as she sighs and moans into my comm. She's quiet now, but I imagine her stretching in pleasure.

"How ya doing?" she asks, her voice sleepy.

"Amazing. I'm picturing your beautiful face with the expression of complete satisfaction curving your mouth into a smile. Thank you for sharing yourself with me."

"Good, Rynn. 'Night."

I listen for long moments, hoping she didn't close our link, wishing I could still hear her breathing on the other end of our connection, but it's dead.

Now I understand what the towel was for. I wipe myself with it, then rise to walk to the bathroom so I can do a better job.

It can't be over. I refuse to let a moment so intense just end without another taste of our connection.

I slide a wet cloth over my sticky skin, then put on a loincloth. It's second nature to me now and only takes a moment.

Without donning shoes, I make my way to Anya's cabin. I'm an idiot. What was I thinking that first day when I insisted they house me as far from her as possible? That day she offered to sleep on the floor at my side. Now, only a few months later, I'd offer to do the same.

Although I don't want to wake her, I need to connect. Rather than banging or knocking, I unsheathe one claw and scratch slowly, then tap.

"Open," I hear her instruct her door.

I didn't think farther ahead than this. My feet were driven here by the sheer need to see her, to get a glimpse of her pleasure-tousled hair. I'm not sure

what to do now, but I know I should never cross her threshold. That would be too forward, especially after what we just shared over comms.

She's sitting up. The bedclothes pressed tightly to her sides cover her breasts. Her lovely shoulders are on display.

"Rynn?"

"I had to see you. I couldn't go to sleep without checking on you."

For a moment, I wonder if she's angry at the interruption, but the look on her face is... beatific.

"Sweet."

She rises and pads to the door, dragging the bedclothes with her as if they're a queen's robes trailing behind her.

"Lovely," I breathe.

Her eyes are sparkling with happiness, telling me my trip to her door wasn't a mistake after all. I watch as she rises on her toes, clearly intending to kiss me.

"We have *lunars*, Anya," reluctance is obvious in my voice. "I don't want to take things too fast. I just had to see you."

She closes her lids and I wonder if I just ruined things. My stomach tightens when she opens her eyes and they're shining with unshed tears. I assume I've messed up everything until she gives me a wan smile.

"It was a great choice, coming to see me," she says. "I'll see you in the dining room in the morning for a cup of *drassah*."

She palms the door closed and leaves me standing in the hallway. I have to look down at my feet to make sure they're on the floor. It feels like I'm floating on air.

Anya

I know we agreed no touching until I'm ready, but I must admit, Rynn and I are growing closer. It's hard to deny my affection for him. He's not Zar. No one will ever fill Zar's place in my heart.

It's been two months. At times I still feel guilty that I'm even considering moving on. Other times, though, I think Zar would encourage me to find happiness. I imagine it would break his heart if he knew I still cried myself to sleep every night.

But Rynn is good and kind and tries to always do the right thing. He started out as a stuffy, straight-laced asshole, but he's so much more human now. Well, of course he's not human, but he's real. And the expression on his face when he looks at me, it's so close to how Zar looks when he... Shit. Zar's dead. I'm so confused I'm still thinking of him as if he's alive.

For the first few weeks after the incident, I spoke with Lexa on comms almost every day. She's mated to Sextus and travels with him and the pirates we're friendly with. She was days away from getting her PhD in psychology when she was abducted. She doesn't like to counsel people because she says she's not good at it, but was kind enough to help me through the worst of my grief.

She suggested I should have a ceremony to say goodbye to Zar when I am ready. At the time, I wanted to reach through the comm and choke her. Ready to say goodbye to the love of my life? I couldn't imagine that ever happening.

I'm not over Zar. I'll never be over him, but I can't deny my fondness for Rynn. Sometimes I think it would be amazing if I could have them both. No. That's crazy. As Lexa suggested months ago, I think I'm ready to close the chapter on my great love affair with Zar. What we had can't be denied or erased, but it has to be relegated to the past. I'm going to write him a

letter, put all my love onto the page, document the love affair of a lifetime, and then slot it into a different place in my mind.

Napoleon and Josephine? Bogey and Bacall? They had nothing on Zar and me. I'm going to pour my heart onto the page, document it, and let it go.

Lexa's right. I need to do that in order to move on.

I can't imagine loving Rynn as intensely as I love Zar, but he's a good male and we get along so well. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe lightning *can* strike twice. Perhaps, at some point in the future, he and I can have something close to what I shared with Zar.

But even if we can't, even if things don't work out between us, I need to make a clear statement to my mind that Zar is never coming back.

I locate a paper and pen, which makes me tear up as I think of Zar, forever using his written notes when he had something important to say.

Dear Zar,

Just writing those two words brings tears to my eyes. Knowing I'll never be able to say those words to you again, that I'll never be able to tell you how much I love you, how wonderful you are breaks my heart.

I strike through the word and change it to past tense—were. It takes me a moment to be able to see through my tears to keep writing.

It's the saddest thing in the universe.

You were my light in the darkness, the one thing that made life worth living. You completed me. When I felt weak, you helped me be strong. When I was at the end of my tether, you lengthened the rope.

It's no secret you scared the shit out of me the moment we met. Those were hard times, yet your compassion pulled me through. You'd crawled so deep inside yourself you concealed your feelings at first, but you couldn't hide from me for long. We were meant to be together.

I have to stop for a moment and take a break. After walking to the bathroom, blowing my nose and wiping my face, I return to the desk and continue. I want to finish. I need closure.

You were taken from me way too soon. I thought we'd have years together, or at least I'd hoped for that. We were on a warship, running from enemies. I knew we might die young, but I always thought we'd go together.

Nothing prepared me to lose you.

But I have lost you and I can't wallow in grief. It's killing me and I know if you were here, you'd want me to move on. You might even want me to find love again. I doubt you'd want me to sleep alone for the rest of my life.

You will never be far from my thoughts.

I love you more than words can say, and I always will.

Anya



14



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Zar
It's dark. I'm disoriented. I don't know where I am.

As I try to cast my mind back to the last thing I remember, I'm not sure why the thought at the top of my mind is that my left knee doesn't hurt. It's been a constant dull ache for over a decade. It's a throb I don't think I've ever mentioned to Anya. Just something I constantly live with.

And it's gone.

I reach to rub where it usually hurts on the outside of the knee and realize I can feel neither my leg nor my arm.

Panic!

I want to thrash, to right myself, to get my bearings, but I can't feel a thing.

Am I paralyzed?

I haven't felt this level of terror since I was sixteen and they threw me into the arena with a gargantuan, seasoned Anthen warrior.

If Anya were here, I could handle this. I could handle anything. But I don't hear her.

I can't speak. I can't see. I can't move. Is this death? It's anything but peaceful.

I'm terrified.

Rynn

I've never felt this good before. I don't even have words to describe it.

Peaceful, yes. Happy, yes. But it's so much more than that. Could this be joy? Optimism? Exhilaration?

I never realized before, but I've been a machine, an automaton. A thing of flesh and blood that goes about his business like a robot. And an Arclite of all things! We're born to be such free spirits. I wanted a higher purpose, but at what price?

Was all the knowledge in the universe worth the loss of myself? I've walked through life without emotion.

The cost of my loss became crystal clear last night. The sacrifice was not only my happiness, but my ability to bond. My ability to *love*.

I love Anya. It's clear now. Even a fool should have understood that weeks ago. I guess that makes me worse than a fool. But I understand it now.

I take a shower while I search through thousands of pages in my database. How to woo a female, how to court a female, how to tell a female you care about her.

I soak up the information, storing it in my frontal lobes. I know I have a head start because I'm wearing the body of Anya's mate. But I won't let myself get complacent. If anything, I'll redouble my efforts to do right by her. After all she's been through, she deserves it.

I towel dry and dress with care. Although I bring my loincloth to spar after breakfast, I wear one of the black leather kilts Anya likes so much. I may be new to this body, but I've read about human body language. Her eyes lit

with pleasure when she saw me dressed like this yesterday on our trip to the *drassah* plantation.

I vow to make those lovely green eyes spark with arousal every time she looks at me. When this self-imposed three-*lunar* waiting period is over, I want her to agree to be mine in every way. And I want to be worthy of her affection. Every spare moment, I want to read more about what females want from their males. And I want to provide those things for her. All of them.

I hurry to the dining room, wanting to pour her a cup of *drassah* and add the perfect amount of cream. Perhaps if I'm early enough, I can deliver it to her in her room. She'd like that.

I can barely hide my disappointment when I see her already sitting at our table. Not that I don't want to see her, I'd just set my heart on bringing her a cup of the hot beverage she hovered across half a planet to buy.

Not only did she beat me here, she has a steaming cup of *drassah* waiting in the empty seat across from her.

"For me?" I ask, unable to hide my smile when she nods. She did this for me. Is it too much to hope she carries some of the same affection for me that I feel for her? It would be the answer to my wishes.

She's wearing a big smile, her eyes bright with happiness. When I reach to tug on my chin hair, I can't help but notice I'm wearing the same grin.

"Did you sleep well?" I ask, my voice deeper than usual. I hope none of the interested bystanders have figured out what we did last night. That should be between us. A secret only two people share.

"Yes. Good sleep for the first time in weeks. And you?" No one eavesdropping would know how loaded her question is, unless they saw

that at the last moment her eyebrow winged up in a decidedly naughty movement.

“Never better.” I give her my attempt at a sly wink. I’ve read about this. These private little conversations heavy on subtext. It’s what couples do. What lovers do. Is that what we’re becoming? Wouldn’t that be wonderful? We both deserve happiness, don’t we?

“I added cream for you this morning. You seemed to like it this way.”

“Delicious,” I say after a quick sip. I hope she gets the thousand extra layers of meaning. Wouldn’t it be amazing if in a few *lunars* I get to taste another delicious delicacy? I can’t wait to taste Anya. If I had millions of credits, I would bet them all that Anya would taste better than anything else in the galaxy.

Our breakfast conversation differs from anything we’ve ever shared before. Every sentence is fraught with double and triple meanings. All of them dirty. No. Dirty isn’t the correct word. Nothing between two people who care about each other can be dirty. I’ll call it sensual from now on.

After breakfast, Anya seems happy to walk with me to the *ludus* for my morning sparring session. I’m clumsier than usual as I grapple with Stryker. He’s one of the most competitive people I’ve ever met. Usually, he pushes me hard and gives me pointers as I go, teaching me something every time we meet. Today, I can’t pay attention to anything other than Anya’s attentive expression.

“I think you need a nap,” she says after I return the mats to their place. “See you tonight at dinner.”

Although I didn’t do well during my session with Stryker, my body feels good. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I feel as if my physical form matches the thoughts and feelings in my head. I believe I was born to be

competent and powerful. All of my Boklorn bodies were top-heavy with spindly necks and wobbly heads.

In the shower, for the first time in my life, I don't repress my sensual yearnings. My cock grows thick and heavy and I feel no shame when I grip it and rhythmically tug. I explored last night, but now I discover other techniques to bring myself pleasure. If I'm to give Anya bliss soon, I'll need to learn how to delay my gratification. I'll work on that tomorrow. Right now, I dive into the physical pleasure I've denied myself for far too long.

After my release, I barely take the time to towel off, then sag into bed. I imagine Anya naked and sprawled before me like the galaxy's most delicious buffet. When my cock gets hard again, I'll see how long I can tease myself before I allow myself to experience pleasure.

I didn't get much sleep last night. I was too busy playing and replaying our fonesex. I'm right on the cusp of sleep when I feel something stirring inside me. I don't have words to describe what is happening. It's like movement. No, that's not right. It's just a strange awareness.

I visit the stacks of the database I've set up. Rooms and rooms, stacks and stacks, folders, and sub-folders—nothing is out of place. Everything is as it should be.

I use my comm to text Anya. *I'm trying to take a nap, but my thoughts are consumed with you. Anya, I hope you know how important you are to me. What's happening between us is the best thing in my lifetime. You are the most wonderful person I've ever met.*

It's only after I push send that I'm seized with second thoughts. Was that too weak? The articles say to be strong and masculine. A few suggested never letting a female know how important they are to you, that you'll lose

your power over them. I don't want to have power over Anya. I want us to be equals. Loving equals. Has my text ruined everything? My hands turn clammy in fear as I wonder if that message ruined everything.

You put a big smile on my face, Rynn. What's happening between us is in its infancy, but its promise is very sweet. And so are you.

I release the breath I'd been holding. In the future, I'll need to remember to read the experts, but to trust my heart—and trust Anya to see beyond my social gaffs to know the very real, very loving emotions residing in my heart.

Receiving that message puts me at ease. All my worries sink away and I slide into that state between waking and sleep.

Something isn't right! I can't put a name on it, but there's a disturbance deep inside me. Nothing is out of place as I investigate, looking through my hoard of three millennia's worth of information.

I don't know what pulls me toward the 57. I keep their information, their personalities, separate from the facts I curated. I felt it was a way to honor them for their service, their sacrifice.

As soon as I make my way down through the tunnels to where the remains of their lives are housed, I know I'm headed in the right direction. My heart almost seizes in my chest when I realize, without a doubt, exactly what I'm going to find.

I've insisted it was impossible, that it couldn't be done, but before I see any proof, I know it's true. Zar lives. How is this possible? He was not here when I did a deep search. Could it be the truemate bond? Anya's unwavering love that kept the bond alive and pulled Zar back from the beyond? It is completely unprecedented, but the only explanation that makes sense to me.

Zar

It's only recently I've begun to contemplate the existence of a higher power. I've mentioned the possibility sometimes, especially when I officiated at matings. But I'm still not sure what I believe. If I don't believe in a god, I certainly shouldn't believe in a malevolent power. Whatever is happening to me, though, has to be the work of the devil. What else could explain my state?

I can't move, can't see, can't hear, can't feel. I can think, though, and that is pure torture.

I don't know how long I've been in this condition, but it feels like an eternity. My thoughts are spinning, spinning, going nowhere. I'm a gladiator, a warrior at heart. I can't tolerate what's going on inside me—the fear, terror really, of the unknown.

If only Anya were here. If I could hold her hand, hear her voice, feel her love for me, it might make this torture tolerable. Her absence is the worst part of my condition.

Rynn

I pass numbers one through fifty-six, ensuring each and every one of them is dead, that no life survives behind the closed doors. Each lifetime of memories I pass, I know with certainty that all of them are dead, except for Zar.

Before I reach the room that houses Zar's memories, I realize what is going on. If he *is* alive, he's just a thought-form. He's just a being with no physicality. He can't see, hear, taste, or smell. He doesn't even know I'm here. I could just walk away.

I imagine how he's feeling: his terror, horror, panic. I could just return my attention to my life, go to sleep, and allow the tiny filaments of his being to

dangle in nothingness until they finally wither and withdraw until he perishes.

As I stand outside 57's door—I don't want to even think of him as Zar—I imagine the life I could have if he were truly dead. I watch in my mind's eye as Anya and I grow closer every day. I picture myself doing all the things I've been researching, performing a myriad activities designed to show her how much I care.

It wouldn't take long for her to let down more of her barriers, to allow her grief to fade. One day she would look at me, perhaps over a cup of *drassah* I prepared for her with care, and give me that look. The look I've envied since the first time I observed it in Zar's memory banks. The look of love so real, so deep, so beautiful it shines with otherworldly emotion.

One day, all of the love I know she's capable of would be focused on only one person—me. Rynn. Zar would finally be buried. Just a memory.

I imagine our days passing in bliss as we share our hearts and souls and dreams. We'd share not only our physical passion, but our entire beings. I'd find a way to provide for her, to make her life even better than it is.

I watch all those hopes and aspirations and lovely imaginings spin out and spool onto the ground. That lovely life I just imagined in detail? The life I want so badly I can taste it? The relationship I truly believe I could have if I just walk away and allow Zar's spirit to die a long, agonizing, and lonely death? No, I can't do such a thing.

I'm a good male. I gave up a life as a free-spirited Arclite to better the future of everyone in the galaxy. It's who I am.

I take a deep breath and watch my future—one of many possible futures—fade into blackness. What I want more than anything in the world? To be

with Anya, receive her love, have her look at me the way she once looked at Zar?

If I walk away now, that future would be a lie. I wouldn't be able to look at the love in her eyes knowing I deprived her of her greatest wish—to have Zar back. If I walk away now, I will be killing him. A second time. Only this time it would be with my full awareness and consent. I fold up those hopes and dreams and shove them into the dark recesses of my mind.

With Zar alive, I'll never achieve this dream. But bringing Zar back to the living is the right thing to do. It is within my power to do this for Anya.

There is no longer any question or debate. My love for Anya outweighs my own desires.

I reach an epiphany. The true understanding of the meaning of love. To make her happy even at my own expense.

I open the door to his memories, but it's quiet and still in here. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I don't have to surrender my dream of a happy, fulfilled future with Anya. But then I see it. A sparkle of light no larger than one of Anya's teardrops. Zar's essence.

Although I've never encountered anything like this before, I somehow know what I must do. I walk to the spark. It's so dim, I'm certain it's close to naturally guttering out, like a candle that runs out of flame.

A quiet voice in the back of my head encourages me to walk away, but I step forward, take a deep breath, and touch the little spark even as I know what I'm doing will change my life's path forever.

Zar

I... feel something. For the first time in perhaps aeons of endless nothingness, I feel... a presence.

It's as if I'm being cupped by a benevolent entity. Am I in the hands of God? I feel emotions coming from somewhere. They're not my own. Mine are filled with terror and loss. What I'm receiving is compassion.

If I had a physical body, I would weep from sheer relief. To connect with something, even something malevolent, would be a respite from the endless solitude. But to feel nurtured—rescued—is the sweetest thing I've ever experienced.

It's as if some of my senses are coming back online. I feel movement, then I hear.

Amidst the echoing footsteps, I hear a male's voice. It's tender, compassionate. *You're alive. I will tend to you. I'll help you recover. You have... a lot to look forward to.*

I don't know where I am or who this male is, but gratitude fills my heart. I may not know what happened to me or what type of hell I've lived in for who knows how long, but I know I'm being rescued.

He promises I have something to look forward to. That's impossible. I believe I'm dead, and the only thing I could possibly look forward to is being reunited with my beloved, my Anya. I don't want to see her here in the afterlife. I want her to live.

I've never done this before, my rescuer admits. *I don't know how to give you form.*

Ahh. Yes, I was correct when I believed I was formless. Is he suggesting I can have a form?

Although I don't know what I am, or what I now look like, I focus all my attention on my previous form. I spent most of my life not knowing exactly what I looked like. Gladiators weren't given mirrors. We weren't valued for

our looks. We were valued for our muscles. But since I fought for our freedom, I've had plenty of opportunities to look in the mirror.

I picture myself down to the minutiae of the little dots I have on my face where my whiskers emerge. Anya used to count them aloud, always with a lazy smile on her face. It was usually in the quiet glow after we'd made love.

I could think of her endlessly, but I need to focus on my body. If I can be more than this formless being who can only hear and feel vague movements, perhaps I could make more sense of my life.

I picture my deep brown mane, my golden eyes, and my rounded ears. I imagine holding my arms out and watch my claws extend from my fingertips. Thinking of my Anya, I imagine a purr rumbling from the center of my chest.

I can see you, my guardian says. Open your eyes.

That I have eyes and can open them overwhelms me with emotion. I've been through so much sadness and trauma in my life, I thought I was strong enough to weather the darkest days. Nothing, nothing prepared me for the sheer isolation of being formless and alone with my thoughts for that long passage of time.

I open my eyes and immediately search for my savior.

Human. Perhaps I should have known. I've never seen a human male before, but I imagine this is a perfect one. His skin is the same tanned color as Anya's. His brown hair is wavy and hits his shoulders. His face is as beautiful as any male's face has a right to be.

I'm captured by the emotions I see there. There is a sadness so deep and poignant it almost makes me forget my own pain.

Welcome, he says as he attempts to pull his features into a smile. *Have a seat.*

As I look around, I'm still not certain whether I'm in heaven or hell. It's fantastical, almost as if we're inside the center of a gigantic carved-out tree. Closing my eyes, I breathe in the scent of a deep forest. It's slightly humid and smells fertile. The furniture is made from logs and bark. Everything is roughhewn and, when I sit down, it's as if the chair forms to comfortably fit my body.

I nod. Understanding that wherever I am, this place is magic.

He sits at the table across from me and inspects me. His expression is an odd combination of surprise, affection, and... fear.

He strokes his chin the way I've seen males do when they first grow a beard.

Was your time peaceful? he asks.

The eons I spent in a formless, silent, void? No. It was millennia of endless terror, I admit.

I'm sorry to hear that. He scrubs his chin again. *Might I suggest you take a moment to enjoy your newfound freedom while I pour us a cup of drassah?*

A copper *drassah* pot and two matching cups magically appear on the table and I watch, mystified, as he pours us cups of the steaming brew. Then I breathe deeply and force my shoulders to relax.

Whatever's coming next couldn't be as bad as what I just endured. He's right, I should enjoy being set free and living in this body. I burrow into it as if I'd been separated from it for a while. I guess I was.

Looking around, I marvel at the colors I see, the smells I'm breathing in, and, as I take a sip of the hot beverage, I roll the taste around on a tongue I thought I'd never get back. Yes. I'll take a moment to enjoy this.

I imagine you'd like an explanation, he says. If he were a female, he'd be considered beautiful. As a male, I can only think of him as otherworldly. I nod.

Before I begin, might I remind you I just saved your life?

Yes. I was dying—a long, slow, agonizing death—and he carried me to this magical tree.

I should have already thanked you, I admit. *I apologize. I'm still getting my bearings.*

Let me explain.

Instead of telling me, he turns the round wooden table into a viewing screen and shows me the avalanche, the gray body with the spindly neck I tried to resuscitate, my body collapsing, and the wild hover ride to the *Fool*.

I'm emotionless as I watch. It's as if the drama is happening to someone else. I experience no pain. It's as if I'm watching a vid—except for the agony of my mate, my beloved, my Anya. Her pain becomes my pain, except within me it increases tenfold. I wish I could take her misery. I'd gladly bear it for her.

Watching, I'm confused as my body lies in the *Fool's* medbay and speaks words that initially make no sense to me. It's telling of hosts and symbionts. I understand clearly, though, when my lips state, "Zar is dead."

My mind shuts down for a while. It simply stops processing. When the vid stops, I ask my host to play it again.

Finally, after I observe the second complete viewing of the information, everything slots into place.

You're Rynn, I say, my voice flat, emotionless.

Zar-Rynn, he corrects.

I say nothing. I just allow my eyelids to close as I watch the entire vid inside my head a third time, still gleaning new understanding upon each retelling.

If this body were real, if it were flesh and blood, my stomach would empty, splattering the walls of this cozy tree-dwelling. But my body isn't real. Nor is this tree. Nothing is real. Nothing but the pictures playing in my mind and the fact that I don't own my body anymore.

I've been motionless for too long. The vid made it hard to understand exactly how much time has passed, but it was interminable.

I stand so quickly, the heavy, carved-out stump I've been sitting on falls backward. Reaching across the table, I grab Rynn by his shirt. When it rips, I grab him by the neck and pull him so close our lips almost touch.

You killed me, I accuse so angrily spit flies out of my snarled lips. That it's imaginary spit makes no difference to me.

I'm choking him with one hand, my palm crushing his windpipe. As a trained gladiator, even without a weapon, I could kill this male in a hundred different ways. This, though, slowly crushing the life out of him one breath at a time, feels righteous, just.

I watch as the light goes out of his eyes. I let up a bit so it can happen even more slowly. When he's finally dead, unable to gasp one last breath, I release my grip and watch his body flop onto the table.

If I were a nicer male, I'd say that gave me no satisfaction. But it did. It pleased me immensely.

Rynn's lids pop open. He sits in his chair as if nothing just happened, and he has the audacity to ask if that felt good.

Terrific.

Do it again, he says, leaning forward and tipping his chin to give me better access to his exposed throat.

I shouldn't. Obviously, it was a fool's errand to try to kill a formless being. But I take him up on his offer.

There's an axe leaning against the wooden wall. I fleetingly wonder if it was there moments ago or if my host was generous enough to provide this for me, knowing my intent is to kill him. I don't ponder the question long, though. I stalk to the weapon, grab it, and am about to swing when I think better of it.

I don't want to kill him from behind. I want to heft the axe from in front, so I can see the light go out of his eyes again.

I do just this, my chest bursting with joy the moment I separate his head from his neck. When I hear the wet thud of his head hitting the dirt floor, I experience another thrilling flare of excitement.

It's only mildly irritating when the head eventually drifts to the body, rolls upward and onto the neck, and reattaches itself.

I kill him five more times. Each less satisfying than the last. By the final time, I have to give the male credit for humoring me.

Now we're seated in our chairs as if the mayhem never happened. I pour him some *drassah* as I sort things through.

Now what? I ask, unable to think past this very moment. I'm still not certain what's real and what isn't.

There's one more thing I'd like you to watch, he says.

His face was impassive during the seven times he was murdered, but as he asks me to watch something else, he can't hide the fear flashing across his face.

I want you to watch two things, actually, he amends.

As he begins the new vid, he says, *Feel free to kill me again. As many times as you wish.*

The agony and terror I felt as I dangled on the precipice of death for what felt like eons was like a drop in the ocean compared to the pain I feel as I watch this.

It's my body and Anya. Rynn shows me every interaction I shared with her. No. Every interaction *he* shared with her while I was in my formless state. I watch her hatred for him, and then her growing tolerance.

I know my beautiful mate well. She was trying to call me out, to bring me back from the dead. I don't begrudge her the kiss in the observatory, and I silently cheer when she calls *my* name afterward.

It's with horror, though, that I watch their budding friendship. I have equal parts hate and admiration as I watch him treat her with all the care and compassion I would have wished for had I been truly dead.

If I had died, I would have wanted Anya to move on, to find love.

Eventually. Not so quickly. But I would have wanted her to be courted and loved and eventually mated to a good, caring, noble male. Like the male sitting across from me.

I watch the vid again, saddened, as I see the glow in her eyes. The look that was reserved only for me is shared with Rynn. I feel gut-punched when I watch the look in his eyes soften to match Anya's.

My gaze lifts from the vid to the male I share this room with. He loves her. The *dracker* loves my Anya. If I wasn't heartsick, I'd kill him a few more times, but it doesn't sound cathartic. It sounds like a waste of time.

I wish you were dead. I say levelly, not even ashamed of my primitive feelings. *If I could figure out a way to kill you for real, I would.* There's no bite, no threat behind my words. I know any attempt would be futile.

I said I wanted you to watch two things, he says.

So be it. What new level of hell is this? If you shared a bed with her, I swear by all that's holy I will find a way to end you, even if it ends us both. I

picture what I just described—my body, making love to my mate with me nowhere to be found. My hands clench as my teeth grind together so hard I'd fear I would break a tooth except I have no teeth, I have no body, I'm just formless thoughts.

I know the vid is playing on the table, and finally force myself to gaze upon it.

I watch as Rynn wakes from a drowse, his attention caught by something.

He's searching for something in what I now understand is millennia's worth of information he's amassed. He hurries past dozens of doors which I eventually realize are the repositories of memories of his previous hosts.

He stops, and the vid somehow closes in on his face. The agony I felt in my formless state might be likened to a vacation compared to the look of sheer misery in his expression.

My mouth drops open in wonder as I watch him wrestle with himself, then see him open the door. Intuitively, I know this is where I lingered all those days and weeks. I see the tiny spark of light that must have been my consciousness.

I watch him as he considers what to do. It's clear as day he's considering walking back out of the room, letting me expire. I watch the sweetness of his visage and know he's imagining a life with the female he's grown to love. His eyes tighten and his nostrils flare as he plays out the possibility of letting me die.

Then I see his jaw firm as his hand reaches out to save me.





CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Zar
I should thank you, I tell him.

You should, he says. It's half accusation, half sarcasm—an acknowledgment that what I said wasn't actually an apology.

I hate you. My voice is level as I look him straight in the eyes.

He nods. *We have a lot in common.*

Somehow, we both laugh at this.

Perhaps we should let her choose, I suggest.

Sounds perfect. You're her mate. She'll choose you. I'm strong enough I can stuff you into a room in the basement of my mind, so you're gone for good.

She'll know I locked you away. Then she won't have you and she'll never forgive me. She'll be miserable for the rest of her life.

You're stronger than me now, I admit, but I'm not certain it will stay that way.

I've had that thought. It sounds like a great life for Anya. She can spend the rest of her days watching the two males she cares about fighting over her.

Because we can't be separated, Zar. If you get rid of me, you'll die. Rynn swigs the last of his cold *drassah*. *If we really love her, we should let her go. She can find true love with someone who isn't selfish.*

I could swear my heart actually stops in my chest when I consider, even for a moment, that I willingly let Anya go.

Unselfish. I just watched what Rynn did for me. He saved my life at the expense of his own happiness. He wasn't impulsive or under optimistic delusions that he could keep Anya to himself. I don't know why he did it. It makes no sense to me.

There's only one of us here who's unselfish. Him. Half of me is grateful he let me live, the other half thinks he's an idiot. If places were reversed, I wouldn't have done it.

Come, he says as he stands and walks to a staircase in the tree wall I hadn't noticed before.

I follow him up a winding staircase that rises high into the imaginary tree we're in. We walk up two or three flights of stairs in the dimly lit carved wooden interior.

When we arrive at the top of the tree, it's as if we've changed metaphors. Instead of being in a tree, we're in a high-tech round room surrounded by windows on three sides. There's a control panel near the front with a captain's swivel chair sitting near the middle of the console. Before my eyes, that chair moves to the left and an identical one materializes to its right.

Sit, he says with a flourish.

We're looking out through my eyes. I guess I shouldn't think of it like that anymore. They're not my eyes. They're ours. I can't help it when hatred spikes through me again. I nurse the images of killing him: once, twice,

three times, all the way through number seven. I imagine I'll be picturing my murder attempts a million more times before one of us manages to truly kill the other.

Our body is lying in bed in a cabin on the *Fool's Errand*. I watch as he lifts a fork from his bedside table and holds it in front of us.

Can you move this fork from the right hand to the left? he asks.

Idiot. Of course I can, I think as I watch the fork rest comfortably in his right hand. I can't move a finger. *Drack.*

I imagine this will change, he says. *Until then, I don't think we should see Anya.*

Our captain's chairs are close enough I can reach over to him and choke the life out of him without getting out of my chair. I can't help myself. I kill him again.

After he returns to consciousness and grabs a deep breath, he says, *You just proved my point. You won't be able to tolerate watching me and Anya. She likes me, Zar. I showed you the proof. She's begun to look at me the way she used to look at you. It is the high point of my life. Anya has become my reason to live.*

He said it so calmly, so affably. Doesn't he realize he's dealing with a gladiator? That although I never wanted to, I used to kill for sport? My hands fist even as I order myself not to choke him to death again.

You love her, he says. It's not a question.

Aye.

So do I. He looks me straight in the eyes. I can't deny the truth of it. *There is one thing and perhaps only one thing we can agree on.*

He's waiting to make his big announcement. I'm sure he thinks he's leaving me hanging, but I know the answer.

Anya's feelings must come first. Rule number one: we can't hurt her, I say. Exactly. I have a plan.

I shake my head, disliking how much I hate this male. And how much I like him. He's smart, he loves my beloved, and he's kind. Kinder than me.

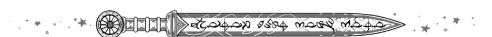
I'm going to comm Anya and tell her I'm not feeling well. I'll tell her we'll meet for breakfast in the morning and not to worry, someone is bringing me a dinner plate. I don't want her knocking on our door.

I nod, not certain how this is much of a plan.

Zar, we have until tomorrow morning to get our shit together. Even if you manage to take over the body by tomorrow and push me aside, that will be traumatic for Anya. We have to break the news to her together. At least at the beginning, we must present as a united front. We have fourteen hoaras to do that.

As I consider his words, I wonder if it were possible for him to turn back time and return to the moment where he reached out to save my life, if he would do it again. I doubt he expected my undying gratitude, but he probably didn't expect me to kill him eight times. For a male who kept his emotions in check for three millennia, I think I'm making him angry.

What do you propose? I ask.



Anya

Should I feel like a traitor for being so excited to see Rynn? Am I a terrible person to feel ready to move on after losing Zar so recently?

I would scandalize myself if it were anyone but Rynn, but can anyone blame me for falling for a great guy who happens to live in my mate's body?

I got to the dining room early this morning so I could have our *drassahs* on our table, just waiting for him to arrive. When he walks through the door, my heart thumps wildly in my chest.

Look at him. The handsome male I fell in love with three years ago. Zar was vulnerable then, angsty, and caught up in his past. He'd come a long way since I met him. Rynn is different—kinder, quieter, definitely more patient. He's more patient than me. If it were my decision, I would have jumped his bones the other night when he came to my door after phone sex. At least one of us has the good sense to wait.

I'm lucky Zar's body isn't dead. I'm lucky I get to keep a piece of him. And I'm lucky that gentle, thoughtful, loving Rynn has been here to support me. Loving. It surprises me when I use that word to describe him, but to be honest, I've known for weeks how much he cares for me.

I can't help but think of how wonderful it would be to have all of both Zar and Rynn's qualities in that sexy lion-man package.

He's taken to wearing black leather kilts. Zar used to say there was nothing more comfortable than wearing a loincloth. Well, other than wearing nothing, which he preferred. But Rynn wears this every day. I think he does it because I told him how handsome it makes him look.

He slowly looks around the room, not allowing his gaze to swing directly toward me, even though I'm sitting at the same table where we always sit. It's as if he's taking his time, like saving dessert for last. When he finally looks at me, his body relaxes, as mine does when I see him. It's ridiculous, I know. It's been less than a day and I feel as if I could perish if we don't talk right away.

He dishes us both a plate of breakfast, then slides onto the bench across from me. He's drinking me in with his gaze, as if he can't get enough of me.

It takes him half a minute before he shakes his head and finally sets the plates down.

“You look beautiful,” he rumbles. Leaning across the table, it’s almost as if he’s going to kiss me. Then he forcibly sits back and picks up a fork.

We make small talk while we eat, but something seems different. He keeps his fork in his hand, but although my plate’s already half empty, he hasn’t taken a bite.

“Ready to spar, brother?” Shadow asks as he approaches our table.

“Can’t wait,” Rynn says, rising and grabbing our dishes.

“Weird,” I say as we walk to the *ludus*. “You hate sparring.”

“Hate is a strong word. One best reserved for people who want to kill you,” Rynn says. “I don’t hate sparring. I just wish I were better at it. Maybe today I’ll show some improvement.”

I can’t put my finger on it, but he’s acting so oddly today.

The first few times Zar-Rynn sparred after the melding, every gladiator on board came to watch. We were all hoping the real Zar would feel the heft of a sword in his hand and come back to life—return to his body.

When, day after day, he struggled, having to relearn the basics, the males went back to their regular gym routines. It was demoralizing, seeming like proof positive Zar was as dead as Rynn declared.

The *ludus* is bustling with activity this morning: males on weight benches, males grappling, males grunting as they run on space-age treadmills until they’re dripping sweat. No one pays much attention when Rynn, Shadow, and I enter the double doors.

Rynn and Shadow go to the weapons room, as they’ve done for the past several months, and return with blunt wooden swords. Rynn has removed his leathers and is wearing the beige muslin loincloth he spars in.

I push away my sadness at my loss as I scold myself. I'd promised myself I would keep an even emotional keel today.

Rynn swishes the air with his sword in that way Zar used to do right before he sparred. I've watched him do it for years. It's almost as if you can see him diving into a fighting headspace in his mind.

"Ho!" he says, just like all the males do before a fight.

He attacks Shadow, something Rynn has never done. Rynn prefers to fight on the defensive. The two males' wooden swords clack as Rynn attacks and Shadow defends. Their footwork is twice as fast as it usually is. Their muscles are straining harder than I've seen in months.

This isn't an easy walk in the park for Shadow. For the past few months, he's trained a male who acts as if he's never held a sword before. Today, these two are going at it.

I can't take my eyes off the fight, but I notice all noise in the *ludus* has disappeared except for Shadow and Rynn's grunts of exertion and the dull clack of wood hitting wood. Gone is the noise of weights being pushed to their limits. The dull whirl of the treadmills has stopped.

When I tear my gaze from the fight, I see every male in the room has ceased what they were doing. They've all stepped forward and formed a ring around the match.

I rise and walk to the circle, edging between Dax and Stryker.

"He fights like Zar," Dax says what every person in the room is thinking.

Rynn performs what even I know is an advanced move as he thrusts, parries, and thrusts again, all the while keeping his opponent on the move. And he did it all backwards. With his final thrust, he grunts with his accomplishment.

"He grunts like Zar," Stryker says.

My heart is thumping in my chest, my eyes are wide in surprise as they follow every movement of the match.

Rynn has taken the fight off the mats where the two have been practicing for months. He's kept Shadow on the defensive and pressed him all the way to the far wall.

"Cede!" Rynn taunts.

I know it's Rynn, but the males are right. He grunts like Zar and moves like Zar. He's nothing like Rynn. Could it be my mate has returned?

"He talks like Zar," Steele says from across the circle.

"No!" Shadow shouts as he moves to headbutt his opponent.

"Cede!" my lion-man orders again, this time with the tip of his weapon at Shadow's throat.

Shadow throws down his wooden *gladius* in defeat. It's soon joined by Rynn's sword. I glance at all the males in the room. Their faces probably look like mine—shock, surprise, disbelief.

I'm not sure what I just observed, but my trembling hands are covering my mouth as hot tears hover on the edges of my lids.

Are we all crazy? That couldn't be Zar, could it? I close my eyes and pray, just for a second. It feels like I'm watching true magic for the first time in my life.

Shadow pulls Rynn into his arms and speaks softly into his ear. Rynn nods, gives his friend a hearty pat on the back, then stalks to me.

As I watched the match, I wondered a thousand times if this could possibly be Zar. He held the sword differently, fought differently, spoke differently from Rynn. I didn't dare believe it.

But now, as my lion-man's body strides to me, the look of a triumphant warrior on his beautiful face, I allow myself to hope. Has my mate returned

to me?

The males between him and me move out of the way, making a living corridor, as he approaches. Our gazes lock. Hot tears tumble from my eyes as my jaw tightens. My head tips up as I watch every expression on his face. How will I know if it's really him?

"Beloved," he says, with that deep timbre in his voice and the look of sheer animal desire I've never seen on Rynn's face. This is Zar. My Zar.

He tugs me into the shelter of his embrace and holds me so tightly for so long I lose all sense of time. When I finally open my eyes, it's just the two of us in the immense room.

"Is it really you?" I ask, afraid to say his name, fearing I'll jinx it.

"Aye."

"Zar?" Somehow, I need confirmation.

"I fought my way back to you, my Anya. I'm here. My heart is wide open, bursting with love for you."

I press closer and snuggle my cheek against his chest. As I kiss wherever my lips will land, I realize I'm weeping. The relief, the overwhelm, the swirl of powerful emotions is almost too much to bear.

I pull far enough away to inspect his face.

"It's really you in there?"

"Aye. Let's go to our cabin."

He lifts me into his arms in the bridal carry. How fitting. He is my mate, after all. Every person on the ship is lining the halls on the way from the *ludus* to our cabin. Even both pilots have left their posts to bear witness to Zar's homecoming. We don't just get a round of applause. We get hooting, foot stomping, and loud two-fingered whistles and "glad-to-have-you-backs."

After we've run the gauntlet and all our friends are behind us, Zar breaks into a jog, wasting no time getting us behind our closed door.

Is he going to set me on our bed? Make love to me? Cement our mating so it's stronger than ever?

It's only when he sets me on a chair, then sits across from me at the table, that I take the time to give a thought to Rynn. I feel like a shit for forgetting him. We have a bond, too.

Zar

Can you go to the room where you warehoused me? Hide while I make love with my mate? I ask Rynn, unable to hide my irritation that he's right here.

This is my mental setup, Rynn says. *I was busy setting up backdoors and redundancies for just this eventuality while you were grandstanding with your friend in the ludus,* he bristles. *We discussed this at length last night.*

No matter how strong you become, you won't be able to muscle me out. We are a team. As Earthers say in their mating ritual, 'Until death do us part'. It's interesting how I can go inside our mind, find him, and see his visage. He told me he chose it after meeting Anya. He thought she'd relate better to him, even though she would never see the way he looks inside. I'm familiar enough with all the Earth females to know the expression on his face is what they would call pissed. His eyes are narrow slits and his mouth is a thin line.

By the look on her face, it appears Anya's wondering why the two of you aren't horizontal on the bed right now. I'd suggest you fill her in on the finer points of our... relationship. The sooner the better. Or would you like me to do it? Rynn asks.

"Anya," I begin, then huff out a long sigh. The only thing that gives me any semblance of comfort is that none of us will be happy with the arrangement.

“It’s you, right Zar? You’re back? You’re alive?”

She reaches across the table and the simple touch of her hand on my forearm sends a bolt of calm through me. With her at my side, we can weather any storm.

“Aye, Anya. It’s me. Me *and* Rynn.”

Her pretty pink lips pop open in surprise.

“How...?”

I wanted to control this conversation. Perhaps three *annums* as captain have made me power hungry.

I hate to admit, I tell Rynn, you’re better equipped for this than me.

Rynn

I peg her with a firm stare before I say a word. I want to read her expressive features when I tell her I’m going to be a part of her life as long as she stays with Zar. I want to assess just how unhappy I’m making her.

“I thought Zar was dead,” I tell her, “but you were right, Anya. He’s a strong male. He somehow managed to live through the melding. It was pure torture for him in the state he was in. He clung to life in the dark, unable to move, or see, or hear. He told me the only way he hung onto life was by thinking of you.”

Why do you have to be so damn noble? Zar hisses inside my head. I killed you eight times and you sing my praises to the female you care about. It defies common sense.

I ignore him and refocus on Anya.

“The moment I felt him, I searched for him and brought him to safety. He was no happier about being my host than you were when you found out, but the fact remains, getting rid of me isn’t an option. If I’m removed, the body will die.”

“So, you’re both in the body?”

“Yes.”

“You can talk to each other in there?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“I’m betting it’s... awkward between you two?”

“That’s an understatement,” I admit with a sigh.

“So Zar’s in charge of the body now? He fought like a lion today.” She giggles. I look at Earth reference material, see what a lion is, and get her joke.

“Zar and I spent all night last night figuring out how to organize ourselves. Inside my mind, I’ve made a cozy living space along with a modern technical hub. We’re going to share it. It suits us both.

“We’re brand new at this, but we’ve developed a system, kind of like a relay race, where we pass the baton back and forth. Whoever has the baton will run the show. Zar sparred with Shadow. I’m speaking with you.”

She’s quiet for a moment, then folds her arms on the table and leans her forehead on them. I can smell her tears.

Perhaps it’s because I share the body with Zar now, but I’m bolder than I’ve ever been. I stroke her hair, combing my nails through it.

“You know I want to kill you when you touch her, right?” Zar asks, his slitted eyes and exposed fangs shouting the truth of his statement.

I’m not sure how I manage it, but I continue to stroke Anya’s head while I seethe, *I’m here, Zar. I’m not going anywhere.* Just to make my point, I throw him a picture of her initiating our kiss. For good measure, I show him a vid of her explaining fonesex. *If you and Anya are ever going to have marital relations again, I snap, it’s going to involve **three** people. Figure out a way to tolerate it.*

I must have pushed him too far, because he steps close and chokes me, this time not retracting his claws first. My severed head falls to the metallic floor of our tech hub, then rolls up my body and reattaches on my neck.

Zar, you've had a hard couple of lunars, but you've got to get a grip.

When I turn my attention to Anya, she's giving me a piercing stare.

"What's going on inside?" she asks. "I don't believe for a moment it's all sunshine and roses between you two."

It's a good thing she can't see inside our mind. As much as she loves him, I doubt she'd take kindly to him decapitating me every time he gets angry.

"This isn't easy on any of us," I say as I squeeze her hand. "You and I have had *lunars* to adjust. Zar's had less than a day. He's furious. I'm hoping things will improve over time."

You think I'll get over this? he fumes. *I'll hate you with my dying breath.*

I tug the hair tuft on my chin, exasperated.

Anya

They're fighting inside. Rynn's face is expressive. One of his ears flicks every time Zar says something inside his head. I love my mate beyond measure, but he can be cutting when he's pissed.

I've dreamed of being reunited with Zar for months. In all of my fantasies, we'd already be naked in bed by now. I guess I didn't take into account that we'd be having a threesome for the rest of our lives.

I slump my head onto my forearms and give expression to my emotions. Relief floods me. My mate is alive. I'd given up hope weeks ago. He's back.

I offer up a prayer to whoever is listening. I believed Rynn. Unless I'm a terrible judge of character, he told the truth as he knew it. He never lied to me. He truly thought Zar was never coming back.

The sweetness of having my mate back, of watching him spar with Shadow, of him lifting me into his powerful arms and running to our cabin—I'm the luckiest female in the galaxy.

Maybe I'm also the most selfish, because I want this to work. I will not accept second best.

I sit up and pin whoever's in Zar's body with what I hope is a withering stare.

"I masterminded a fucking insurrection." My voice is powerful and I hope my use of profanity captures their immediate attention. "I may have gotten soft in the past three years. Being drunk with love will do that to a person. I had the best relationship of anyone I've ever known. It was a love for the ages. Something authors write about."

I grab his hands tightly in mine.

"I don't know how this is going to work. I don't have control over anything that happens inside that beautiful head of yours. I'm powerless over that. But I'll tell you one thing, Zar-Rynn, I. Will. Not. Settle. For. Second. Best!"

I pause for effect. I can only imagine they're inside their fur trying to eviscerate each other. I want to make certain I have their undivided attention.

"There are only two things I want right now. I'd love to be in that bed with you. I've yearned for it and cried for the lack of it. But what I want even more than that?" I wait for their ear to quit flicking, ensuring they're both listening.

"I want you two to get along. Figure out how to play nice in the sandbox together."

Their eyes close. An ear flicks. They're arguing right this moment.

“None of us could possibly be happy with this situation. We didn’t sign on for it. Yet here we are. I’m a realist. It didn’t take me long to figure out there was only one way out of slavery and that involved an armed insurrection.

“I’m not going to take months to figure this out, either. The problem is clear. Your side of the bed will remain empty until you two get your shit together. Pull up your big girl panties—well, loincloth—take a deep breath, realize the reality of the situation, and make it work.

“I’ll wait. But we don’t share that,” I glance toward the bed, “until you two share the body in peace.”

I’ve made my demands clear, but I want to go on the record about my feelings.

“I love you, Zar, and I’m falling in love with Rynn. This crazy situation can work. If *you* do. When you get it together, let me know. In the meantime, get out of my room.”

I stand, take a step back so they can cross to the door without touching me, and point to the palm plate.

Their face shows shock and perhaps a hint of anger. I understand. I’m usually the soft, pliable, peacemaker, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I don’t want to fuck around. They need to know the stakes are high.





CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Zar

I'm not even gone for three lunars and Anya's a completely different person. What did you do? It's not a question so much as an accusation.

*This! This is what **you** did. The seething anger? The constant sniping? The **beheadings**? For the first time, I see Rynn's angry face. He's so furious I half expect him to close the distance between us and choke *me* for a change. Think for a moment, I say, *If places were reversed, would you just welcome a deadly parasite into your world with open arms?**

When the word parasite is out of my mouth, I realize it was a low blow. I can't take it back now.

*You **did** welcome me. At least I thought you did. You opened your mouth and accepted me. I was sightless and had no idea you weren't my acolyte. I do not invade bodies by force. I was dying and a willing host put his mouth to mine to accept my life-form. Blame yourself.*

The door to my cabin, well, I guess it's Anya's cabin now, has barely closed behind us when I step into Rynn's space and grab him by the neck again.

Really? he asks. *Your mate just gave you marching orders to find a way for us to get along and before we're three fiertos from her door you're going to kill me again? Don't you think there might be a better way?*

I need to go to the ludus. I do my best thinking there, I say as I drop my arms to my sides.

I'm hungry, he complains, as if I give a shit what he wants.

I try to turn left toward the *ludus*. Rynn tries to step right toward the dining room. We're standing paralyzed in the middle of the hallway. If this were a vid, it would be a comedy. There is nothing funny about this, though. Our constant battling is what Anya didn't want. I don't blame her. Who would want any part of our clashes?

Rynn, let me think. Give me a little time. Compromise with me.

I hit him below the belt. He seems like a good male. I know he'll agree to my request for cooperation.

Very well. It's as if his will to go to the right fades and I have full control to hurry to the *ludus*.

Moments later, I'm on my back, my arms quivering as I bench press less weight than I've lifted since I was an adolescent.

You didn't work out at all in the lunars I've been gone? I accuse.

I sparred every day. I'm miserable at it, he admits ruefully. *There's a technique I read about. It's from the outer belt of the Dashon colonies. It's a series of moves with a sword conducted while meditating. Can we try it?*

The repetitive lifting of weights is boring me to tears.

You could always leave, I snipe.

Suddenly, for the first time since he reached for me and brought me back to life, I'm alone. It's silent in my head. For a moment I feel sweet relief as I wonder if my bitter words spurred him to evaporate. Then I realize he's left

the tech hub. He's gone somewhere inside his mind-labyrinth to lick his wounds.

We talked last night while he helped me take control of my body. I went from being unable to pick up a fork to being able to beat Shadow in our match. During our downtime, he told me about his life. Although I'm his 57th host, he's never had to struggle to get along with one before. I guess this is a bitter new reality for him, too.

Rynn! I call to him inside. *Come back. Show me this technique.*

He appears at my side as if by magic.

I still don't understand the physics of this mind meld. There are two consciousnesses inside the body. Although the body looks like Zar to everyone on the outside, inside, we each wear the visage we're comfortable with. I'm still Zar, a Ton'arr male. He's chosen to look human.

We can teleport from place to place inside, and I assume if I wanted to, I could rearrange things in here. Just to prove my point, I decide to change the color of the upholstery of the chairs in the control area. At the speed of thought, they switch from green to crimson.

It's an improvement, Rynn says as he eyes my attempt at decorating.

I have to admit, he's trying. I'll try, too.

We grab my favorite three-foot *gladius* from the weapons room, and Rynn shares pictures of the technique.

I've never done it, just read about it. I thought it might help us both to think, he explains.

The stances and beginning moves are child's play, but I don't belittle him. He wasn't trained as a gladiator his entire life like I was. This is probably challenging for him. He's spent millennia in pasty gray bodies with spindly necks and large heads.

By the time we're on the twelfth battle form, I'm seeing the challenge.

Look in the mirror, Rynn says. See how your left shoulder dips too low to accomplish the proper angle to make the second slash?

I watch, correct my form, perform the move twice more and move on to the next.

These movements are new to my body. I have to concentrate, which I guess is the point. Rynn called this meditative. He watches in the mirror as I perform, gently correcting me and helping me achieve a better form.

By the time we get to the final movement, I'm calmer inside than I've felt since he brought me out of the darkness.

I meet my eyes in the mirror. It's an eerie feeling because I'm not only looking at myself, I'm looking at him. We're both sharing the body without fighting or argument. No one had to hold the baton in the system we worked out last night. We just worked together for an *hoara* with no bickering.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and admit, *You're a good male, Rynn. I've killed you nine times and you just return my hate with kindness. I'll try harder.*

I turn my attention inside where our thought-bodies are in the command center. He gives me a level stare and says, *"I'm not happy with this situation, but it's our new reality. We don't have to love each other, just cooperate. This is going to work. You know why? We both love **her**."*

Anya

I almost skipped dinner. I don't want to see Zar-Rynn before they find a way to work together. It's too hard to be near the body and not want to do dirty, dirty things with it. I'm too smart for that, though. And too strong. I will not let down my guard. I'm going to hold the line.

If I let them keep bickering, we'll never be happy. One of us will give in first. I swear by all that's holy it won't be me.

I understand Zar's reluctance. I'm getting what I think is going to be twice the love. By Zar's way of thinking, he's going to get half. I'd be furious if I were him. To him, it's a zero-sum game, and he's going to be the loser. But there are only two choices. We either work this out as three, or we separate completely.

There he is. Of course I notice the moment he crosses the threshold of the dining room. No. Not he. They. There are two of them in that sexy-as-sin body.

Should I go to an empty table so I can be alone with them? No, it's only been a few hours since I've seen them. I'm certain they haven't quit fighting in such a short amount of time, and I don't want to reward their bad behavior. I won't allow us to be alone together.

Instead of going to a private table, I sit with Shadow, Petra, Dr. Drayke, and Nova. The males will be on their best behavior and I won't have to worry that they're eviscerating each other inside that gorgeous head.

They sit across from me, say hello to everyone, then tip their head toward me. "Beloved," is said with affection.

Maybe this can work, and maybe I'll even be able to tell them apart. This has to be Zar, right?

Dinner is festive. Not just the people at our table, but everyone in the room is ecstatic that Zar is back. No one had the nerve to ask about Rynn. Perhaps they all assume Zar muscled him out. We'll have to explain the mechanics of their permanent two-fer soon, but not today.

Who knows? People might want to remove Zar from the captaincy. They might fear Rynn's influence could be dangerous. People can be strange,

although I can't believe the people I've bonded with over the past three years would abandon Zar. You never know, though.

I don't want to worry about that right now. I'd rather soak up the joy of having Zar back.

"A toast!" Shadow says as he stands. He raises a bottle of the finest Sillerian whiskey we keep hidden for only the most special occasions. Today certainly qualifies.

When everyone has a full glass, we all raise them and toast.

"To Zar!" Shadow says with gusto.

I'd thought this could wait a few days, but I need to address it now. If our arrangement is going to work, we must acknowledge Rynn.

Before people can repeat Shadow's toast, I stand. "To Zar-Rynn!" I amend. Everyone dutifully repeats my toast, then takes embarrassed sips.

"What's this?" Shadow hisses.

"We're all thrilled at Zar's return. He's really back, and no one is more delighted than me," I tell him. "Nothing has changed, though. Rynn's consciousness can't be removed or Zar will die. They're a package deal." The joy drains out of Shadow's face and his brow furrows as his attention turns to Zar-Rynn.

"Tell me she's wrong, brother."

"There are two of us in here, *brother*. If that offends you, if you doubt my loyalty or ability to captain this ship, just ask. I will step down." My lion-man's face is as serious as I've ever seen it. His slitted eyes are trained on his best friend, challenging him to argue.

Holy shit. I did not expect a pissing contest tonight. I especially did not anticipate the threat coming from Shadow.

Shadow leans so close to Zar-Rynn their noses are inches apart.

“You’re strong, Zar. I’ve spent time with the parasite. He’s weak. Tell me you’ll be in charge from here on out. I trust you.”

Zar-Rynn, instead of withdrawing from Shadow’s angry visage, leans forward. “He and I are a team, Shadow. We’ll make decisions together. I’ve got balls. I’m a strategist, a gladiator. You know my strengths.”

The room is so quiet all I can hear is the hum of the engine. I don’t have to glance around to know every eye is on the power struggle playing out at this table.

“Rynn’s brilliant,” Zar continues, “He’s patient, and no matter the challenge, he lets nothing get between him and his goal. He just keeps pushing forward. We’re a formidable team.”

Did Zar and Shadow cook this up this afternoon? Is it a trick they concocted so I’ll let Zar in my bed, or did the answer to my prayers just unfold right here at the dinner table?

I’d been wondering how I would know when—or if—Zar and Rynn began working together. It’s as if the universe conspired to give me a sign. No, more than a sign. It’s as if the universe gave me a notarized document of authenticity.

It’s like the clash of the titans as my lion-man and his huge, muscular best friend stare at each other, taking each other’s measure.

“You’re certain we can trust the symbiont?” Shadow asks, as if it’s the most important question he’s ever voiced.

“He’s one of us now, Shadow. I already trust him with my life. He saved it.”

One more long moment passes as the two stare each other down, then Shadow nods. “Welcome back, Captain,” Shadow concedes. “What are we to call you?”

“Zar-Rynn.”

Rynn

Maddie, the chef, announces, “Zoey and I baked an Anathen cake—Zar’s fave. I imagine Rynn will like it, too. Everybody help yourselves.”

While the room devolves into a free-for-all of dessert-seeking and gladiatorial boasting, I replay what just happened. Zar didn’t just acknowledge me in front of every friend he has in the galaxy, he praised me.

Since he awakened, he was so full of rage, I’m surprised he had the mental capacity to take a measure of my worth, but he just described me well: smart, patient, and relentless. He’s been watching me more closely than I expected, although it didn’t take a genius to notice I ignored all the times he decapitated me.

I wait toward the back of the throng, watching as Dax and Stryker good-naturedly strong-arm their way to the dessert table.

You stood up for me, I say to Zar. It’s half comment, half question.

I might have judged you too harshly, he says. *It will take me longer than a day to not hate you, to forgive you for interloping into my life. But I already admire your intelligence and courage. You could have killed me and you didn’t. That earns you my eternal gratitude. Besides, as you were so quick to point out, we both love **her**.*

Anya

I can’t stay here another minute. Not another second. I’m going to break down in tears and no one would understand. I don’t want anyone to see it. I hurry to Zar-Rynn, grab their hand, and pull them toward the door. Then I realize it’s Zar’s favorite cake, and goodness knows, he deserves a bit of pleasure after all he’s been through.

“Grab two pieces of cake and let’s go,” I say as I release him.

Within seconds, we're out the door and hurrying toward our cabin. If he wasn't carrying a plate loaded with cake, I know I'd be in his arms.

By the time we reach our cabin door, we're jogging. I slap the doorplate and we both slip into the room the moment it slides open.

"You two did it?" I ask, breathless.

He tosses the cake on top of the dresser and folds me into his arms. This is it, what I've hoped and prayed and dreamed of for months. I don't have the bandwidth to stifle my tears, nor do I want to.

The moment is so deep, so poignant, I just allow relief to flow over me. I'd given up hoping that I'd get my Zar back, yet here he is.

Clutching his shoulders, I tug him closer. He lifts me and snugs me against him, then rocks us back and forth.

"Dear God, Zar. I missed you so, so much."

I taste my tears on his lips when I finally, finally kiss him. We're both too consumed with this kiss, with our reunion, to pay attention to my disgusting bodily fluids.

I melt into his embrace, memorizing every beautiful detail of our reconnection. How could I have forgotten how soft his lips are? The quiet clicks our mouths make when his fangs accidentally clash with my teeth? The way my fingers clench into his fur without my bidding, as if it's the most elemental thing since breathing?

His loincloth-covered cock is at the perfect height to nudge my clit and I allow myself to sink into the erotic quicksand of desire.

I slaked my arousal the other night with Rynn while we had phone sex, but this is different. It's a tsunami of delight. It's want and need and hunger that's been a long time coming.

I lean back to get a good look at him. It's as if I want even the deepest recesses of my brain to receive the message that Zar has returned. That I'm really in his arms.

Zar

Rynn told me I was gone for almost two *lunars*. It was so disorienting, so devoid of input, I wasn't exaggerating when I imagined it had been *annums*, decades, eons. There were long stretches of time when all I could think of was this—my Anya.

I replayed every moment of our time together. Her fear when we first met, her terror when I almost died, and then the bliss we've shared since then. There were *hoaras* on end where all I could focus on was a picture of her beautiful face.

The best moments, though, were when I replayed our lovemaking. We would turn the lights low in our cabin. There was something about the glow of her skin in the soft lighting that made it even more beautiful.

I'd watch as, over and over, she would remove her clothes for me. I'd always been the one to tear them off until one night she ordered me to lie down, then stood at the foot of the bed and performed what she called a striptease. It immediately became one of my favorite things.

I stayed in that formless, sightless, soundless state with only my thoughts for company, no responsibilities to distract me, and grew more in love with Anya than I'd ever been before.

I can't really blame myself for wanting to kill Rynn. While I'd been isolated, terrified, and holding on to the one good thing in my life—memories of Anya—he'd hijacked my body and moved in on my female. It's still a bitter pill to swallow.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I refocus on the soft female in my arms. I grip the perfect globes of her ass and grind my cock against her until she moans in pleasure and nips my bottom lip.

She grips my wrists and places my hands on her breasts. My cock punches against my loincloth when I feel the weight of them, the hard buds pressing against my palms. Groaning in sheer pleasure, my fingers unerringly find and grip her nipples, plucking with just the amount of pressure I know will make her squirm in need against me.

Suddenly everything grinds to a halt in my mind. Even if I could force Rynn to the bottom of the treehouse so I could be alone in the command center. Even if I could ensure he couldn't see or hear or feel what transpired with Anya, I'd know he was there. And so would she.

I brush her lips softly with mine, and allow her to slide down my body, then place my palms on her shoulders to keep her at arm's length.

"What?" Her eyes take a moment to focus on my face, a confused question on her beautiful features.

I grip her hand and bring her palm to my lips for the softest kiss.

"There are two of us in here, beloved. I can't tolerate him watching us make love, and I can't force him to leave. Letting him touch you? Watching him enter you? Watching him receiving or giving pleasure? It will kill me.

"I won't ask if *you're* ready for it, Anya. *I'm* not."

She furrows her fingers through my mane, her gaze never leaving mine.

"We'll get there, Anya. We'll sort this out. I vow it. We have to, for all our sakes. But not tonight. There might not be a right way to do this, but there are definitely wrong ways. We need to avoid those."

Right this moment, I love her and hate him in equal measures. If life were fair, I'd be tasting my beloved right now and sheathing myself in her wet

channel before I went to sleep.

As the galaxy takes pleasure in proving, over and over, life is not fair.

“You’re right, my mate. I want to rush into this, but we need to do this in a way that can work for the rest of our lives.”

Anya

I hate that he’s right, but he is. Sex is going to be weird. There will be three of us. I can’t even imagine what that will be like, and I have no idea how the two of them are going to “pass the baton” without killing each other in there. It will take time before this has a snowball’s chance in hell of working.

“Zar? Rynn? I understand the need to wait. I don’t want to, but it’s necessary. If we can’t sleep together tonight, though, I’ll go insane. Do you think we can share a bed tonight?”

I’m playing with fire, but there’s no way I can sleep alone in this bed for even one more night. Truth be told, I wouldn’t say no if sexy times started in the middle of the night and we had a “whoops moment,” although I doubt either of them would let that happen.

“I’d like you to sleep with your t-shirt and leggings on,” Zar says as he heads to the closet and grabs a pair of black cargo pants he always despised. A minute later, we’re in bed. I have to keep reminding myself that things have changed. My body wants to snuggle with my husband and hope something “pops up” as we’ve done almost every night since we won our freedom.

But Rynn’s in there. I can practically feel him peeking out, watching, assessing with that inquisitive mind of his.

“Rynn? Are you okay?”

“I’m good, Anya. Zar stood up for me in front of everyone on the ship. We spent a whole *hoara* in the *ludus* working together. We’re making progress. And he’s right. None of us are ready to have sexual relations. I believe you’ll regret it.”

This moment is so sweet, my chest tightens. I’m the lucky one. I have two males who love me.

“I need to know who’s talking, who’s in control of the body, who I’m kissing. Can we develop a signal for that?”

His fingers gently circle my wrist as he says, “This is Rynn. When I’m out, I’ll keep my hand right here.”

“And when I’m out...” Am I mistaken, or is Zar’s voice slightly deeper, raspier? “I’ll keep my tail on your ankle.”

Definitely Zar.

“And you can share the body sometimes?” I ask as I snuggle my back against their front and try not to wiggle my ass against the still-rock-hard cock riding me.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you could do that now, as you hug me to sleep.”

I feel slightly smug as I drift off, congratulating myself on making them share me. Rynn’s palm is gently wrapped around my wrist, as Zar’s tail grips my ankle. I’m going to make this work or die trying.





CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Anya

I've never slept so well—never. Perhaps I took Zar for granted in the past, although I don't think I did. I was grateful every day for what we shared. But now, after losing him, having his warm, furred body hugging tightly to mine all night? Well, that was sheer heaven.

I ease onto my side and look at him. That fierce face looks so peaceful in sleep. I hope we get our shit together soon. Being this close to him and not being able to express my love physically is going to kill me.

I'm not going to lie. Having sex with two males in one body is going to be weird. I know people have threesomes all the time, but you have to admit the dynamics here are different. Knowing Zar's inside, begrudging Rynn every touch, every kiss, will hurt my heart. All three of us deserve to be happy.

I think of them as two separate beings. I have to admit I had to turn around to remind myself I didn't wake up in a tangle of six arms and six legs. It's just three people in two bodies.

Their eyes pop open and the hand around my wrist tightens—Rynn. He smiles at me in a gesture so sweet, so poignant, it's touching.

“Sleep well, Anya?”

“Yep, and you?”

“The best night of my life,” he says simply.

I don't have to ask why. It's obvious. He loved holding me. I can't lie. I loved it too.

Zar's tail squeezes my ankle. How about that? The three of us are cuddling.

“I have a proposal,” I announce. “I'd like to contact Maddie and see if she'll have someone bring us food for the next couple of days. I wondered if we could stay here and work on things. Kind of like a honeymoon without the sex.” I can't hide my sardonic frown.

“You'll get no complaints from me, mate,” says Zar. “I can catch up with the rest of my life later. I'd love to spend time with you.”

“And Rynn,” I add.

Zar's eyebrow lifts as he reminds me, “He and I don't have to be locked in this cabin together. We do everything together as it is. Including taking a piss. Come on, Rynn.”

He rolls off the bed and heads to the bathroom. I wonder how long it will take before he's no longer salty with his roommate.

An hour later we've showered—separately—and are sitting at the little table in our cabin and tucking into the mountain of food Shadow brought. Not only did he bring sustenance, he brought a sincere apology delivered not to Zar, but to Rynn. Wow. The Shadow I met years ago wouldn't have apologized to anyone for any reason. He's come a long way.

I'm clueing in to subtle tells about who's in control of the body. The person eating with unrestrained gusto? Zar. He didn't eat for months and seems to

be making up for lost time.

The person who's now toying nervously with his food? Rynn.

When we've finished eating and have set our plates on the floor outside our door, Rynn sits, pats the seat across from him, and says, "We need to talk." Crap. I've always maintained those are the four worst words in the English language.

He scrubs his face with his hand, then toys with the tuft of hair on his chin. Whatever's coming is going to be bad. He's telegraphing just how bad by how long he's stalling.

"Spit it out already," I tell him.

If anything, this makes him delay longer. "It's not you I'm worrying about," he says.

Zar's tail grabs my ankle. I'm not certain whether it's to reassure me or to use me as a lifeline. Rynn slips his hand into mine.

Zar

Sentient minds are an interesting thing. Since humanoid brains take annums to fully develop, early memories are lost. The memories are all in there, they just aren't accessible to you, Rynn begins. His anxiety is so high it's seeping into me.

As an outsider, I can rummage in my hosts' minds and dig deeper, go farther back than even they can.

He takes a deep breath and pauses.

Keep talking, I urge. In my experience, dawdling doesn't make things easier.

Early in the meld, I looked at all your memories. It is part of the protocol and is actually why the Council removed me from my duties. They deemed your traumatic history too disturbing to allow me to do my job

dispassionately. They believed it would affect my world view. As a side note, they were right. I certainly believe slavery should be abolished even more than I did before.

Get on with it already.

There are things I saw from your childhood that will disturb you. You do not have access to these memories, but I can give them to you. They're distressing, but the choice is yours.

You obviously, I begin internally, then speak out loud for Anya's benefit.

"You obviously think I should know about this or you wouldn't have brought it up."

"Yes."

"Then spit it out already." I wonder if my symbiont has a flair for the dramatic. What could he tell me that I haven't already imagined? What type of mother sells her child into a lifetime of slavery? A prostitute or a drug addict. Or, as I've long suspected, a drug-addicted prostitute. This will hardly be a surprise.

"You were the child of King Valeris and Queen Avania, the rulers of planet Ton'arr."

I sag into my chair, all my muscles going limp. I take over the body without argument and now it's my hand holding Anya's. I'm squeezing her tightly even as I keep my eyes closed and play Rynn's words over in my head.

Say it again, I urge.

"You heard me correctly, Zar. You were born a prince, the heir to the throne."

I don't know how long the room is silent. Rynn pulled his consciousness far from mine, so I could be alone with my thoughts.

I've spent my whole life getting comfortable with what I assumed were the humblest of origins. A prince? That certainly never crossed my mind. Shaking my head, I ask, "What do I do with this information? It changes nothing."

Anya slides into my lap, her hip nestling against my belly, one arm around my neck. She's the perfect partner, somehow knowing instinctively I need her close to keep me tethered.

"I've had *lunars* to think this through," Rynn says. "You've had *minimas*. You have choices. You're right, this information can change nothing. On the other hand, this could change your life."

"How?"

"I'm a researcher by both temperament and trade. I've crawled through the Database. I can share information with you now, or later, or never. Or you can do the research yourself. You may not trust me, Zar, and I know you don't much like me, but I want you to be happy. I've messed up your life enough. I want to help. Tell me what you want."

I bite back the words that are on my tongue. I want to tell him to leave, to give me time and space to process this information. Not only is that impossible, it's not nice.

"Tell me what you think I need to know," I tell him.

"My unique position allows me to look at memories you can't recall, but everything is filtered through the eyes of an infant. It's not clear. I'll show the memories as I received them and narrate for Anya."

I see a Ton'arr female looking at me in the singular way I've only experienced once before. It's the expression in Anya's eyes that loudly telegraphs how much she loves me. It's as if my heart is being squeezed in a

wise to watch this, to know there was a being in the galaxy who loved me, who wanted me from the moment I was born.

To think I had this, that it was my birthright, and it was stolen from me for thirty-five *annums* until I met my mate. So cruel.

Now I'm pressed to my mother's teats, being rocked. Over her shoulder, I see the same expression on a male's face. He's serious. The white flash of his fangs, except for the adoring look in his eyes, would have frightened anyone. To think I was cherished by both a father and a mother makes me grind my teeth at the depth of my loss.

That they were highborn means nothing. The expression on their faces, the obvious love in their hearts, it's agonizing to think this was stolen from me—and them.

Images are rushed after this. I imagine Rynn is pacing this for my comfort, speeding through the difficult things, so I can glean the information without feeling the emotions. I have to keep reminding myself what a good male he is.

I watch as what must be a lady's maid scurries through hallways, down stairways, and takes me into a boat. I slept and fussed and at one point she pinched my nose to make me stop crying and shut up. That was the beginning of my training to shove all my emotions deep inside and learn to be compliant.

A pouch, evidently money, changes hands, and I'm whisked away by a male, then hovered, then taken aboard a space vessel. I'm carried to a stark room with cribs where my enslavement began in earnest.

"I don't need to watch more," I say, my voice so soft and hollow it doesn't sound like me. "I know the horrors heaped upon me in all the *ludi* they imprisoned me in after that. I don't need a replay."

I set my chin on the top of Anya's springy curls and rock her. No. I'll be honest. I'm not rocking her, I'm comforting myself.

She strokes the back of my neck with her fingers. She and Rynn allow me my thoughts. Good. I have many to sort through.

Anya

We move to the bed and spoon in a position we've seldom used before. I'm behind him, my arm snuggled across his chest, my lips on the back of his head, my leg slung over his hip. I don't know what's going on in his head, but his body has to know I've got him covered. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere.

Shadow brings lunch, but I call from the bed, instructing him to set it on the floor in the hallway. When he brings dinner, I wait until he leaves it, then bring it in and put it on the table. Zar might want to eat later.

When I join him in bed, he turns me around and spoons me from behind. "Tell me what you found on the Database," he whispers, talking to Rynn and keeping me in the loop.

"That same day, there was a coup, organized by your uncle Kato. I'm sorry to tell you, your parents were presumed dead." There's something about Rynn's voice that hints at something more.

"Just say it, Rynn," Zarr chides.

"It's my own repository that makes me doubt this information. The facts inside my mind are stored and collated differently than the Intergalactic Database computers. Every fact in my mind has been collected and curated by me. I see things in a way the Database can't present it. It's just a theory, mind you—"

"Rynn! Don't make me lop off your head again!"

Again? I'll have to ask about that another time.

“I’ve had little to do since I was relieved of my duties by the Council. I imagine I overstepped my bounds, but I’ve been researching your origins for *lunars*. I believe your parents escaped, then hopped planets until they felt safe. My theory is they made a home on Algaron IV.”

“Explain.”

“I tracked shipping documents, travel records of distant relatives, and enquiries about a certain Ton’arr slave. If my research is correct, I believe they escaped the coup staged by your Uncle Kato with little more than the clothes on their backs and a handful of jewels.

“They started an import/export business and did well for themselves. Many loyalists supported them—still support them if my hunch is correct.

“Zar,” Rynn continues, “I think they never believed you were dead.”

Zar looks at me and presses his palm to my cheek.

“Just like your beloved Anya never stopped looking for you. After decades of searching, they were on their way to Hyperion with the aim of buying you when you overthrew your masters and commandeered their ship.”

My stomach feels like it sometimes does on the launch into hyperspace when you feel like you leave your guts behind. I’m the one who masterminded the insurrection. If I hadn’t done that, might he have been reunited with his parents three years ago? Did I fuck everything up?

“I know what you’re thinking, mate,” Zar says between kisses on my head.

“Nothing could be better than the last three *annums* with you. Nothing.”

Changing his tone, he asks, “Do you know where they are on Algaron IV?”

“No, but I’m pretty sure I can figure it out. If that’s what you want,” Rynn replies.

“Anya, I know you wanted us to stay locked in the cabin for a few days, but I’d like to get back on the bridge.” This is Zar. His tail tightens on my

ankle. “I want to find out what’s on our itinerary, and cancel whatever’s not necessary so we can make our way to Algaron IV.”

“Absolutely,” I say. I’m buoyant, filled with hope. Rynn’s appearance stole something from my mate. I wonder if this new information might fill that gap and, dare I hope, give him more than he’s ever had before.





CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Anya

I don't know why I'm so tired. I've done very little over the last three days but watch Zar-Rynn talk to himself. Well, themselves.

That's not actually true. I'm their touchstone, their harbor. Zar's emotions are cast adrift. He's the most solid, steady person I've ever met, but this news on top of the unexpected melding with a symbiont, has put him off balance. I haven't just been eating bonbons, I'm helping him feel supported. I imagine the news of his origins is like the thousand-piece puzzle of his life has been dismantled and shaken up. Now he has to put it back together in a new way. What would I feel like if I found out I'd been abducted from a royal family at birth and thrown into the most miserable life imaginable? I wouldn't be handling it half as well as he is.

We're in the dining room with all the males and Savannah. She was a marine back on Earth and wouldn't hear of a war council being held without her.

“Let’s review,” Zar says as he rises from his chair at the head of the table and stalks from one side of the room to the other. “We arrive on Algaron IV under false call letters. Shadow and Dax make their way to the Maylore Spice Company, which is owned by my parents. They—”

“Stop at *nothing*,” Dax interrupts, his voice vehement, “to get an audience with your father.”

“If it comes to using your strong arms, so be it, but let’s be clear,” Zar says, “no permanent harm can come to my parents or anyone associated with them.”

We had discussed the direct route—backchannel comms to his family announcing Zar’s presence—but it’s far too risky. This must be done in person, and Zar has to be protected by his best males.

“The *Fool’s Errand* has to be on red alert the entire time. I want every male and female on board armed and ready to fight or flee at a moment’s notice. Do we understand?” This is Rynn, I think. His demeanor is serious, but doesn’t have quite as hard an edge as Zar. “I want someone within five *fiertos* of Anya every moment. If anything goes wrong, if the King’s guards feel we’re a threat and decide to attack, no harm can come to my female.”

He pierces every person in the room with a glaring gaze.

He’s changed a lot in the days since he disclosed Zar’s history. After moving from complacency to fact-finding mode, he’s now in full-on protection mode. Most of it is focused on me. I bite my cheeks not to smile. What woman, deep in her heart, doesn’t want to know her male is willing to go to any extreme to protect her?

“Dax and Shadow will arrange a meeting, probably several of them, as they move up the chain of command. When King Valeris and Queen Avania

agree to meet, we review our protocol to ensure it will be as safe as possible.”

Everyone hashes out details for another hour. As we’re about to disperse, Rynn asks, “How can a warship have so many females on it? It’s not safe.” Savannah gives him a withering stare, but he continues, “We have two ships, the *Fool’s Errand* and the *Devil’s Playground*. In the future, we should consider splitting the ships into a warrior ship and one built for other business. I hate putting non-combatant females at risk.” He glances at Savannah, hoping he’s assuaged her pride. She gives him a curt, accepting nod.

“Although that’s not our first order of business,” Zar says, his tail tight on my ankle, “that is an idea we should pursue.”

When we disperse, we know all this planning will go into effect tomorrow when we touch down on Algaron IV.

We take separate showers and lie in bed, our bodies rigid, our thoughts on our worries.

In some ways, I’ve never felt closer to Zar. We’re working together to change his life for the better. In other ways, we’re as distant as a couple can get.

Zar and Rynn haven’t figured out how they fit together yet. I understand. I don’t believe I would have assimilated another person inside me this quickly, and my temperament is much calmer than Zar’s.

If Rynn weren’t here, we’d have made love a dozen times in the past few days. It would have not only relieved our stress, it would have reconnected us in the way only sexual intimacy can.

They’re spooning me from behind, Rynn gripping my wrist, Zar’s tail curled possessively around my ankle. I’m glad they’re sharing the body this

moment as opposed to one of them being inside in what they call the control room. That they're both out will make what's about to happen a smidge easier.

I flip on my other side to face them and place my palm on their cheek. Their muscles tighten. I've broken the unspoken contract we've been following since Zar came back—no face-to-face contact in bed.

"I want to kiss you," I say, trying to keep my voice flat, not to reveal the extent of my need or that I want this so badly I'm ready to jump out of my skin.

Someone inside tosses his head in the gentlest expression of "no."

Jerking back, ensuring no part of my body is touching theirs other than my palm on their cheek, I say it again. "A kiss."

Their eyes flare wide, a silent expression of someone's fear. Fear of getting too close? Zar's fear of having to share? Rynn's fear of Zar's anger?

"Don't you want to?" I try to keep my voice from being tempting or seductive. If this is going to go forward, the decision should be made from reason, not lust.

"Aye," Zar says. "I want so much more than a kiss, Beloved. I just can't... share."

I say nothing, hoping the two are hashing things out on the inside. Their flicking ear tells me the answer.

"Rynn, I know you can leave me alone," Zar's voice is rough, direct.

"When I've been upset lately, you've left the room. Do that now. Let me have time with my mate."

A week ago, I might have agreed to this, but I won't allow it. There's too much at stake.

“We’re a triad,” I say. “We have to go forward as three. I love you more than life, Zar, but we must make this work in a sustainable way. We can’t push Rynn back every time we get physical. We have to go forward *together*.”

Zar

I should be worried about tomorrow, about meeting my parents, about keeping every soul on board this ship safe. I’m not. I’m consumed with my beautiful mate who’s less than a handspan away from me in our bed, our mating bed.

I’ve relieved myself several times a day since I returned to my body. It doesn’t satiate me. I want to be inside her. Alone. I’ve never wanted a threesome. The idea of sharing her makes me physically sick.

“It’s been *lunars* since we’ve slaked our needs together, Anya. Let’s do this, just the two of us, to remind ourselves what it’s like. To reunite. Then maybe later...”

“No, my love. I’ve given this a lot of thought. Rynn can’t start out as a second-rate part of our relationship. We have to find a way to make it work *together*. I think we should try a kiss.”

Drack. I can’t smooth-talk my Anya. This female knows what she wants. She may even be right, although it doesn’t feel like it.

She’s mine, I tell Rynn.

He’s not here. He’s moved to the command center. It’s where we go for serious discussions. It’s not dimly lit and homey like it is at the bottom of the treehouse. It’s built for thought and concentration. The fucker is smart. He wants me in my logical mind.

I don’t have to climb the steps to get there. I learned how to travel inside as a thought-form. A moment later, we’re both in our captain’s chairs,

swiveled to face each other.

He's grown since I've met him. His personality is stronger. Too bad. The male I originally met would have surrendered to my every demand. He stands his ground now, though.

Tell her you don't want to kiss her. That you don't want a physical relationship, I say. I haven't cut off his head in days, but I hope the sheer intensity of my gaze tells him I'm ready to do it again. Not that it hurts him or really makes any difference, but it vents some of my aggression.

All three of us know I want to kiss her. I want much more than that, he says. *I'm not going to lie to her, Zar. I showed you what transpired between us, the kiss, the fonesex. It's not just **your** cock that's hard for her. **Mine** is, too.* I grip the arms of the chair and breathe, trying to convince myself I don't want to kill him, even though I do.

In through the nose, out through the mouth. I breathe for long moments as my mind casts about for an answer other than the obvious one—to do this together. I can't imagine another idea that will work.

How would we do it? I ask, defeat in my voice.

I'm not being completely self-serving when I suggest I go first, Rynn says. *Maybe not even a kiss. Perhaps a touch to her face. It will allow you to watch, to see if you can tolerate it.*

My stomach cramps at the thought.

I don't think I can do it.

Then let's wait.

Really? Just like that? We may be what he calls thought-forms as we sit here in our imaginary chairs, but he wants her. I feel his need, his desire, his arousal seeping into me. Yet he's prepared to wait.

How can you suggest waiting? Don't you want her? I ask, incredulous.

I'm inside you until this body dies, Zar. We're in this for the long haul. It has to work. I want us all to be happy. Rushing you isn't what I want. You may have decapitated me a couple of times, but I care about you and want this to work for you. For us."

A couple of times? Wasn't he counting? Anya would say he's giving me grace. Seeing the good in me even when it's hard. *Especially* when it's hard. *Tell me this, Rynn. If we're to take turns, how will it feel to you when I'm driving into her? When I'm balls deep and taking my pleasure?*

His response is to smile. Smile!

I will use every skill at my disposal and all the strength of will I possess to find pleasure in your pleasure, Zar.

If this were a real chair, my tightened grip would pull the upholstery off its frame. Instead, the furniture holds steady and I examine my thoughts. First, I look at him. He's not lying. He's looking me straight in the eye. He means what he just said.

Take pleasure in my pleasure? I need more information.

How do you feel when Anya has success? he asks.

Fantastic. Her— I was about to say her happiness makes me happy.

*Even when she wins when playing a game **against** you?"* he presses.

Yes. Watching her joy is more exciting than if I had won.

He's just looking at me, waiting for my own words to ring true in my brain.

All of a sudden it does. I need to take joy in her joy.

*I'll add one more thing, Zar, Rynn says. Not only will I take pleasure in Anya's pleasure as I watch her find bliss in your touch. I'll take pleasure in **yours**, too.*

Silence. Thunderous silence as I absorb that.

I'm not you, Rynn. I was raised a gladiator. To the winner go the spoils. I will never find pleasure in your pleasure.

Try a kiss.

“Not in bed, Anya,” I say out loud, my mind made up. “This isn’t going to be easy. I’m willing to try, but being in bed will make it harder.”

“Of course,” she says with a reassuring smile. She has been patiently waiting for Rynn and me to come to an agreement. Rynn’s right. I need to focus on her pleasure.

We stand and move to the foot of the bed. We’ve taken to wearing pajamas, something we never did before. She has on silky floor-length pants and a shirt that covers up to her neckline and down to her wrists. I’m wearing a loincloth *and* black pants.

Even with all this clothing, it’s taken enormous willpower not to mount her. Especially in the middle of the night when I’m not fully awake.

She stands, giving me a loving gaze. My tail wraps around her ankle, letting her know who she’s about to engage with.

“Zar.” She smiles. “I love you more than life.”

This soothes me. She won’t be able to say this to Rynn. She may share her lips with him, but she can’t share our history. She can’t love him like she loves me.

I step closer, place my palm on the back of her neck, and close my eyes. Dipping my head closer to her, I breathe in, soaking in the floral scent of her hair. I feel her warmth and know she’s as eager for this kiss as I am. I’ve waited so long for this. I dreamed of this a million times when I was paralyzed in the dark. It’s such a relief. I feel all of my muscles relax as I hold her tighter.

Rynn's nearby. He has to be. That was the deal. I try to push away my awareness of him, but I can't. Then I do the opposite. I literally invite him in. It's one of the most difficult things I've ever done.

My lips brush Anya's so softly I think I might die from the bliss of just this innocent touch. Her soft sigh melts my heart. She's been waiting for this as long as I have. Normally, by now she would have stepped into my embrace, but we're experimenting. Taking it slow.

"It's heaven to be in your arms again," she says, her voice sweet and earnest.

Her words wash over me like a healing balm. If words alone could make this work, what she just said would accomplish the goal.

Her fingers slide through my mane and clutch me close. She's fully present. I try to be, too, even though I can't force Rynn's proximity out of my thoughts.

I kiss her again. Not just gentle brushes of lips on lips, but harder kisses. Ones that make soft smacking noises. My attention may be divided, but Anya's here with me. She tips her head slightly to have better access to my mouth.

I'm not surprised when it's Anya who makes the first move to penetrate me. It's her firm tongue that presses against the seam of my lips, trying to gain access.

When she succeeds, her sigh is louder, deeper than it was before.

"I missed this, Zar. I missed your taste and so much more. Your presence, your body, your love, your laughter. I'm so glad you're back."

Her words stop and her tongue flicks against mine. She's tasting me and memorizing me and welcoming me back. I drink in everything about this moment. Feeling her soft breasts against my chest, her fingers tightening in

my mane, her tongue delving, then retreating in invitation for me to invade her.

Her body's responsiveness calls to me, beckons my arousal. I've been hard since I was pulled out of the darkness, but nowhere near this level of lust. It takes all my willpower not to crush her close and grind against her.

I pull back far enough to say, "Did I tell you that time stood still when I was lost? You say I was locked inside my body for *lunars*. It felt like decades. I would have gone completely insane except for thoughts of you, Anya."

I make sure she's looking at me, that she sees the sincerity in my eyes. "I held onto *you*, Anya. I remembered every word and touch and glance we shared. I stayed strong so I could return to you."

She pulls me tighter, holding me so hard her muscles shake.

"I'm so glad my beloved male returned to me."

She kisses me once, twice, three times, then takes the tiniest step back.

Damn it, Anya. In her most loving, tactful way, she's letting me know I need to pass the baton.

I freeze. It's as if I'm paralyzed. Rynn smartly says nothing. Anya's simply standing there, her luminous eyes silently urging me to take the next step.

I'll try. If the future of my relationship with this female is on the line, if everything is riding on this, I'll try my hardest to do the impossible.

Is it possible? Did you really watch that and only have happiness for me? I hiss at Rynn, wondering how weak and broken this male is that he could endure that and not want to squeeze the life from me.

I did, Zar. Love isn't a glass of water. It's not finite. Love is an endless stream. Look at her. Look at the love on her face. The love within her is endless, boundless, infinite. Don't think of lack when you watch this. Think of her love overflowing. There's more than enough for both of us.

I remove my tail from her ankle, then mentally step back and float to the command center. I need to watch as dispassionately as possible. I don't want to behead him during this kiss. Not for his sake, but for Anya's. Even from the command center, I can feel his palms—my palms—as they grip her shoulders. Then one hand slides down to circle her wrist. I can still see through the body's eyes as he approaches for a kiss. Then it's black. He's shuttered his lids so he can better experience this intimacy. Jealousy flies through me so hot and fast I almost cry out, but I don't. I have to allow this to play out. I can't distract him or sabotage this. He—they—need to go forward. How I'll endure this hell, I have no idea. He kisses differently than me. More tentative. I scoff. He spent millennia in those spindly necked bodies learning and cataloging facts. He and I are as different as night and day. He could never fulfill my Anya the way I can. I lean in closer, seeing what it's like to kiss with such little emotion. No. He's not emotionless. He's using every sense to watch, observe, and learn. This is who Rynn is. A thoughtful male. With every observation, he recalibrates his actions. With every single kiss, he discerns how to give her more of what she wants. He's so tuned into her, within moments he's intuiting her every need. I'm swimming in jealousy as I observe her responses. She's melting into his embrace, enjoying his kisses. My jaw is so tight I might crack my imaginary teeth. I have to get control of myself. Then his words come back to me. How do I take pleasure in her pleasure? I listen to every little huff of her breath. I feel every squeeze of her hands as she slides her fingers through his fur—our fur.

Am I really so selfish I don't want her to have this? Do I want her to live with this male for the next decades and hate his touch? Am I so jealous as to be cruel to the female I proclaim I love?

Open your eyes, I urge Rynn.

I think this will be easier if I can watch my Anya.

He complies, and I observe the flush on her cheeks and her fluttering eyelids. I allow myself to feel her tongue inside my mouth. Rynn and I can be separate or together. I can join in this kiss. It's not right. He left me alone for my kiss. But just for a moment, I slip into this embrace, this melding of mouths.

Anya's allowing herself to enjoy this. Rynn was right. I'm happy for her. Now, I'm going to increase the level of difficulty. Can I be happy for the male who stole my life from me even though it was unintentional? Stole my mate from me? Even though I can hardly blame him for wanting such an amazing female.

He did choose to save me. He didn't have to. By the stars, I'm going to try. I dip my toe in the river of Rynn's emotions. They're so powerful I have to step back.

Had I really thought this male was emotionless? Calm, and cool, and too absorbed in facts and figures to be much of a person at all? He's deeper than me. His emotions seem more complex. This male loves my Anya.

It's not an approximation of love. Not a pale imitation of love. Rynn loves my Anya with his whole heart.

Having returned to the command center, I lean back in my chair. I must admit, there are tears in my eyes. Jealousy is perhaps the ugliest of all emotions.

I close my eyes, not wanting to watch anymore, not wanting to taste Anya on Rynn's tongue. I have a quiet, rushed discussion with myself in the privacy of my mind.

I love Anya and there are two choices. For her to be miserable that Rynn is part of her life, or for her to be loved by him. I can tolerate that.

And, I ask myself. For her to love him?

I stop breathing for a moment, then nod my head as I try to get my body, mind, and spirit on board with this idea. Yes. Anya's right, as usual. The only way for this to work is for them to love each other.

I hope Rynn's right. I hope her love is deep as a river with no beginning or end. If there's enough for both of us, perhaps I can learn to tolerate our new situation.

I move closer to Rynn and give him my acceptance. I read a little quote once, "Acceptance doesn't mean approval." Acceptance will have to be enough. Right now, it's all I have to give.





CHAPTER NINETEEN

Anya

I wake in a tight embrace and am proud of myself when my first thought isn't to rush to see who is holding me. I don't care whether it's Rynn's hand holding my wrist or Zar's tail on my ankle. I'm being held by my males. Both of them. It feels divine.

Today is going to be hard. Zar will meet his parents—one of the most emotionally raw things he's ever had to endure. Well, not really. He's been through worse—much worse. But he was on emotional lockdown for most of that. Now, his emotions are wide open. Which is great for being in a relationship. Not so great when you're going through emotional upheaval. There are so many things that could go sideways. Rynn could have gotten his facts wrong and the Ton'arr couple he's going to meet aren't related to him at all. Perhaps they'll refuse to see or talk to him.

My mom would accuse me of borrowing trouble. I don't need to go there. For at least a few more minutes, I can laze here with my guys and think about last night's kiss.

I can't lie to myself. That was weirder than shit. Well, weird and wonderful. To have my mate back, to be in his arms, to feel the full impact of his love? That was the wonderful part.

And Rynn. I've known he's had a crush on me since shortly after he appeared. But that kiss was... more than a crush. That male cares for me. I love Zar's brash passion, so it's funny that I can also love Rynn's almost shy, sincere affection. I never thought there could be anything better than Zar, but I must admit, they make a pretty heady combo.

"I loved kissing you both last night."

Zar's tail tightens on my ankle as Rynn's fingers encircle my wrist, then skate up my arm as if he'd done it a thousand times before.

"Aye." I try to discern who said it, but I can't. Nor do I need to.

Is it possible? I'm falling in love again. With both of them.

Rynn

I'm here for you, Zar. With every ounce of my being, I will help you through this. You've been through a lot these last few lunars, and although this might be a heartfelt reunion, there are many things that could go wrong. Even if everything goes perfectly, it will still be emotional. Feel free to pass me the baton or tap out altogether and take a break in the orchard.

Orchard?

Out the door of the treehouse is an orchard. It's quiet there. Peaceful.

There's a door to the treehouse?

I just created it for you, my friend.

Zar

Why does he make it so hard to hate him? I will never admit it, never, but if circumstances were different, I'd be honored to call him brother.

I grab a cup of *drassah* from the dining room—that stuff is addicting—and head to the bridge with Anya at my side. I sit in the captain’s seat and wait for word from Dax and Shadow.

It’s not even the appointed time, yet I can’t keep my eyes off the comms panel, waiting for their communication.

“Everything is going to work out,” Anya reassures me as she slides onto my lap and strokes my cheek with her palm.

They’ll be ecstatic to hear from you, Rynn says.

“Showtime,” Callista announces.

I’d thought she had her comms on speaker, but she was monitoring everything quietly, in case something went wrong.

When she turns on the speaker, Shadow says, “We were allowed in to see your parents after passing through five increasingly restrictive levels of security. They wouldn’t accept the documentation of your DNA. It’s a good thing we brought a vial of your blood. They’re running the sample now. If it’s a match, we’ll arrange a meeting as soon as possible.”

Of course it will be a match, I almost say out loud, then realize I was counting on Rynn’s intel to be solid. He admitted the memories were fuzzy. I was too young to understand the spoken word. My brain had no ability to organize information in any semblance of order. Rynn’s supposedly impeccable information could just be a combination of misunderstandings and wishes.

We’ll know soon, Rynn reassures me as he sits next to me in the captain’s chair in our internal command center.

“Master Shadow. Master Dax,” we hear a solemn voice speaking the Ton’arr language through our comms. I’m glad Rynn’s been tutoring me in the Ton’arr language. He understands everything the male is saying, doesn’t

even need his translator. It's just another reason to resent the male. He knows my language better than I do.

"The King and Queen would like to offer a formal invitation to your friend Zar to meet with them for dinner tonight at eight."

A dozen emotions bombard me at once. I hadn't given more than a passing thought to my parents for decades. When I did, I never envisioned a father. I'd assumed it was one of my mother's customers. I still haven't come to terms with the fact that I have not one but two loving parents, nor that they want to meet me.

"I'll be bringing my mate," Rynn says out loud, as if it's a foregone conclusion that Anya's invited.

"Of course," the emissary says. "They look forward to meeting you both." When the comm is terminated, I sag in my seat, still wondering if the emotions churning inside me are anxious or excited. It's Rynn who says, "Cally, Anya will need a dress suitable for the occasion. Do we have anything onboard that will do?"

"I think there's a super fancy dress Grace wore for the Emperor on Emirus. She left it onboard when she moved to our sister ship, the *Devil's Playground*. She said she never wanted to see it again. I'll see if Savannah can find it and alter it to fit Anya."

Activity swirls around me and Rynn runs point on a hundred details while I take him up on his offer to spend time in the orchard. I was a consummate gladiator who won countless matches in the arena. I don't want to admit I'm afraid to meet my parents. I can't help but wonder if I'll be a vast disappointment to them.

Anya

We're in a rental hover-van, surrounded by five of our best males. Zar is dressed in a black leather kilt and sash. I've brushed his mane until it's perfect. Despite the care we've taken with his appearance, he looks like a conquering gladiator, not a prince.

My heart aches for him. I can only imagine what it feels like to have your sense of who you are pulled out from under you, then given a new identity. That, on top of having to share his body—and me—with a symbiont, must be a cataclysmic upheaval inside. He's probably scared, but he'd never admit that, even to me.

"I'm worried," he says as he leans over, tugs me close, and sets his chin on my head.

Calm washes through me. I'm so glad he can share his feelings with me.

"We'll get through this, Love. We've gotten through the Marauders and an insurrection and a dozen assaults from the MarZan cartel. Your parents are going to love you."

"I'm not sure. I'm not the son they dreamed of. I wasn't properly educated. I've killed males in the arena. I'll be a disappointment."

I know I should remain belted in, but I slip out of it and straddle him so I can look directly into his normally round eyes, now narrowed with worry.

"If you had a child who was stolen, and you were to be reunited decades later, how would you feel, Zar?" I pierce him with my steadiest gaze.

To his credit, he doesn't pay me lip service. He thinks for long moments, then says, "I would be so happy he was alive, so happy to meet him, I would love him with all my heart."

"No matter what he's done?" I press.

"I would be proud of everything he did to survive, no matter how unsavory, because it would have brought him back to me."

“Exactly,” I say, then kiss him.

“Rynn’s been telling me the same things. I think I just needed to hear it one more time.”

“Fistbump, Rynn,” I say as I knock knuckles with Zar’s left hand, the one that always grips my wrist.

Zar

I glance into the reflective windows of the hover as we step out, wanting to ensure I look presentable.

You look great, Rynn reassures me. They’re going to love you, Zar. Tell me how I can be of help.

Stay with me in the command center, brother, I say before I can stop myself. I just called my enemy “brother.”

That’s not true, though. He’s not my enemy. In the short time I’ve known him, this male has proven his affection and allegiance more times than I can count. He’s a good male. Kind both to me and Anya. Look at her. She’s gorgeous in that emerald dress. It probably gives her confidence. I was too self-absorbed to think of her needs. Rynn is there for both of us.

Brother, I repeat, to make sure he knows the first time wasn’t a mistake.

I’m honored, brother, he responds with a piercing stare and open affection on his face. I’m glad he looks human, like my beloved. Is that what makes it easier for me to care for him?

When I pull my attention to the present, I see we’ve arrived at an old warehouse near the space docks. The males flanking Anya and me are all on highest alert. Dax and Shadow are in front of us, their shoulders tense, their heads swiveling right and left. This would be an unsavory part of town in the daylight. At night, it seems unsafe.

Tucking Anya against my left side, I unsheathe my ceremonial sword with my right. Ten Ton'arr males approach us. Wearing black uniforms with crimson piping, they're armed and wary.

The two contingents stop, facing each other.

"Lord Zar and his mate step forward," one says.

"We're not putting our captain at risk," Shadow says as he bows up and lifts his chin imperiously. "Put your weapons down."

"I'm Persseon," the male in charge says. "We'll be bringing you into the presence of the male and female who are the rightful rulers of planet Ton'arr. We cannot allow them to come to any harm. I give you my word. No harm will come to any of you, but we can't proceed until we collect your arms."

I glance at Rynn in the chair next to me in our internal command center.

What do you think? I ask him.

It seems legitimate. It's a standoff unless we agree to their terms. I suggest having all arms removed except for Persseon's. Our unarmed males can take their unarmed males—they're not gladiators.

When I make my demands, Persseon seems glad to hear my compromise.

"Leave all the weapons but mine right here. We'll collect them shortly," he tells his males.

A moment later, the contingent enters the warehouse. We pass by dingy desks, antique computers, and hundreds of bins of what I assume are spices. The air is redolent with so many smells I can't differentiate them. Anya looks ridiculously out of place here in her fancy ball gown and pretty necklace.

When we pass through the next doorway, it's as if we're in another world.

The dirt and odors of the spice import warehouse are behind us and we're in

a building as close to a palace as I've ever been.

Dark wooden walls and doors gleam as if they've been recently polished. Although the windows must be fake, they're made of stained glass and lit from behind. They all portray Ton'arr males and females in what must be antique garb, all performing heroic feats.

The floors are made of the finest stone and laid into intricate patterns. The furniture and art are of the highest quality.

"Wow," Anya whispers as she holds more tightly to my arm.

"Welcome to the palace of the rightful rulers of Ton'arr, King Valeris and his Queen, Avania," Persseon announces with a sweep of his hand. He looks pointedly at my guards and says, "We will only allow you and your mate past these doors." He points to elaborate double doors that are inlaid with a dozen kinds of wood and inset with stained glass.

As my heart speeds up with anxiety, I recall Anya telling me about the *drassah* plantation and how Rynn resented not being introduced.

I'll be fine. I'm here for you, Rynn says, as if he read my mind. *Don't worry about me. Now go meet your parents.*

I tip my head to Shadow, indicating he should stand down, then follow Persseon through the double doors, Anya clutching my arm.

When the doors open, I see nothing but six uniformed guards, all armed with laser rifles, forming a wall of flesh between us and anything else in the room.

"We hate to do this, my lord, but we want to ensure everyone's safety," Persseon explains. "I need to pat you down."

Anger roars through me, but the dip of his head and the extreme deference of his body language shouts his hesitancy to put me through this. I've certainly never been called "my lord" before.

I open my arms, but make a low, threatening chuff that fully expresses my reluctance. After he's done with me, when he stands and turns toward Anya, every muscle in my body flies from high alert to attack mode. This male will not touch my mate!

"I'll pat my mate down to your satisfaction," Rynn offers with just enough deference, while refusing to give an inch.

"Yes, my lord, that will be satisfactory."

Good thinking, I tell Rynn as I take over the body to pat her down. He still has done nothing more than kiss her and now is not the time for exploration. When that is complete, the males part to reveal two Ton'arrs—one male, one female. Every muscle in my body slackens, and I have to lock my knees to remain standing. I have no urge or ability to examine the room for safety. My gaze stays riveted on the pair who must be my parents.

They rise from their chairs, or are they thrones, and stride to us as Persseon announces, "King Valeris and Queen Avania, may I introduce Prince Zar and his mate, Princess Anya."

He moves out of the way to allow the King and Queen to approach. The female's urge to reach out to me, to touch me, is so strong I can feel it from across the room. The King's golden eyes, the same color as my own, are shining with affection in the exact same way they were in the picture Rynn showed me from my buried memories.

I had my hand possessively on Anya's elbow, but at this moment, I clutch harder for fear I'll fall to my knees.

My mouth has popped open, my eyes are wide, and my thoughts are flying in my head so fast I can't pay attention to any one thing. Except the affection bombarding me from these two strangers.

“Zaypien,” the Queen says, “my Zaypien.” She hurtles toward me and embraces me in a hug so long and tight I don’t know what to do. Perhaps it’s Rynn, or maybe my own impulses, that propel me to finally throw my arms around her and complete the embrace.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers in my ear. “I’ve been told your name is Zar.” She doesn’t release her tight grip, her hands splayed across my back. “I mean no disrespect. I’ve yearned to say that name to a fur and blood male for over thirty *annums*. We named you that after the day we met. It means destiny, fate, or providence. It’s surely providence that kept you alive all these *annums* and finally brought us together again.”

“What am I to call you?” I ask inanely. Surely the most ridiculous thing to say in this circumstance.

She pulls away enough to make certain I’m looking into her serious face.

“When you’re ready, I would be pleased for you to call me *Ima*, for mother. Perhaps someday, you’ll allow me to call you son.”

I can’t speak. For a seasoned gladiator, I’ve seen it all—endured both emotional and physical torture at the hands of my owners. I haven’t cried in decades. Now, my emotions bombard me as tears spill from my eyes.

A mother. A mother who wants nothing more than to call me son.

I hug her harder than I’ve ever hugged a living person. She hugs me back. Whispering into her ear, I say, “I would be honored for you to call me son, but I ask you not to do so until I tell you about my past. You might want nothing to do with me when you hear about my life. You might certainly never want to claim me as your son.”

Fear flares through me. To have this—a mother’s love—and then have it snatched away. This could decimate my soul.

She presses her fingers against the fur on my back, tugging me down so she can speak into my ear.

“I know you were a gladiator. Forgive me if it was intrusive, but after you reached out to me, I watched a few of your matches. I’ve seen what you can do in the arena and I’ve seen the results of many abuses by the roadmap of pain I saw in the scars on your fur. Son, there is nothing, *nothing* you could do to obliterate my affection for you.

“When you’re ready, tell me as much or as little about your life as you would like. Whatever you share with me will only allow me to love you more. You own a most precious spot in my heart. One that has been an open wound from the time you were brutally taken from me until this moment.”

I groan, hiding my head in the lee of her neck, not wanting anyone to see my weakness. Is it weakness, though, to allow myself to feel the healing balm of her affection? Her love?

“My son,” she says as she strokes my forehead, then furrows her fingers through my mane. Her tears are running unrestrained, forming rivers through the fur on her face. “I wish you hadn’t been snatched away. I’m so sorry we missed so many *annums* together. But we have each other now. I hope you won’t mind how often I’ll tell you how much I love you, or call you my son, or reach out to touch you with affection. Here, come meet your *abba*.”

She doesn’t step away. He joins us. He’s a big male, my size, and it’s easy for him to wrap us both in his embrace.

“Zar. My son. Welcome home.”

I banish my embarrassment and allow their love to wash over me. I can feel their sorrow mixed with joy as my abba allows his tears to flow unashamedly. We’re people who belong together, who were wronged, who

had so many *annums* of our lives stolen. I refuse to pretend I'm not deeply moved by their love and acceptance. We deserve this poignant moment of reunion.

After long *minimas*, my father pulls away, clears his throat, and motions to a small table set for four. Tear tracks darken the fur on his cheeks, just as, I'm sure, they darken mine.

"Excuse my manners," Ima says as she takes a square of cloth from her sleeve and wipes the tears from her face. "Please introduce me to your mate."

"Ima, Abba, this is my beloved Anya. She's my heart, my truemate, my salvation, my love."

She's not from Ton'arr. Will they accept her, a human, as the mate of the heir to the royal throne?

My mother wraps an arm around Anya's back and escorts her to the table.

"Forgive my manners, my dear. I'm pleased to meet you and excited to hear about how you and my son met. I'm certain it's a great love story."

Anya

As soon as I'm seated, I use my napkin to wipe my eyes. Have I ever watched anything as touching as their reunion? I don't think so.

Zar had been worried about them accepting him. He spent so long building a fortress around his heart, he isn't skilled in expressing tender feelings.

He knows how to love and be loved. He's become a friend to all onboard and a caring and concerned leader, but handling emotions like this? He's new at it. I'm glad he has Rynn to support him inside. Even though all these feelings are new to Rynn too, he can maintain some distance from the tsunami of emotion that must be pummeling my beloved mate right now. They make a good team.

The intensity of the moment recedes, and my mate steps into his power as he talks with his newfound parents. He glosses over his history, telling them broad strokes about his childhood. They don't pry. I'm sure they would all be happier with the abridged version.

Zar only shares specifics when he tells them about me and the *Fool's Errand*. His love for me shines through his facial expression and his words. His parents' faces soften as well. At last, we've gotten to the good part of his life.

I'm certain the food is delicious, but although I've been eating, I haven't tasted a bite. I've been through some shitty times in my life, so I allow myself to absolutely wallow in this moment. Yeah, this dinner, watching my beloved be accepted by two wonderful people who have no ulterior motive other than to love him unconditionally, well it's just about the best moment of my life.

It was touch and go for a while. I think if he hadn't been holding onto me for dear life, his knees would have hit the floor. But now he's animated and beaming with happiness. It's a joy to watch.

I'm across the table from him. His parents are on either side of him.

They're huggers—they literally can't keep their hands off him.

When Zar finishes bragging about my role in the overthrow of our owners, the conversation falls silent for only a moment.

Valeris asks, "Is now the time to tell you about the coup? I don't have to share it. Not now or ever. Would you like to know?"

"Yes." Zar's body tenses as if he's girding for a blow. I'm sure it will be.

"I was young. Twenty-five. My parents were far too young when they died in a hover crash, leaving me as King in my early twenties. Your mother and

I had a... difficult start. We were forced to mate shortly after I ascended to the throne.”

He reaches across the table and squeezes her hand, his eyes full of affection. She picks up his hand, turns it, and kisses his palm. Her lips lift in a devoted smile. I can’t wait to hear *that* story.

“Sometimes fate has ideas for us that are even bigger than what we hope for,” she says as she brings her mate’s hand to her mouth and kisses his knuckles.

“She got pregnant with you shortly after our mating. Those were indescribably happy times. The day you were born was the highlight of my life.”

His eyes tighten in pain as if he’s reliving the next part. “You were only one *annum* old the day my younger brother Kato staged the coup. The moment your mother found your crib empty and sounded the alarm, Kato’s males entered the palace in force.

“He knew every nook, cranny, and hiding place. He’d grown up there. He knew how many soldiers guarded the palace. He invaded with overwhelming strength. There was little bloodshed. We were so outnumbered, I ordered my males to stand down.

“To this day, I don’t know why he let us live.”

“Yes, you do, my love,” Avania interrupts. “He knew he could control us because he had Zaypien. He said he would allow him to live if we stayed away, and that he would kill him if we tried to take back the throne. We stayed away to keep you alive, Zar.”

“We set up a home on Algaron IV,” Valeris says. “We used the proceeds from the sale of the family jewels along with our sharp minds to build a small fortune with this spice business, just waiting for the right time to take

the throne back by force. We've never given up. We just had to make sure you were safe."

The Queen reaches out and grabs Zar's hand. "For so many *annums* I allowed myself to believe Kato found you a safe and loving home, perhaps on Ton'arr, perhaps elsewhere. I soothed myself with images of you growing up in a home filled with love and laughter.

"It was only three *annums* ago our emissaries finally tracked you down. When I found out you'd been raised a gladiator-slave, I..." She shakes her head, hand clutching her throat, unable to continue.

"We were both devastated," Valeris continues. "That's when we located you. We were on our way to Hyperion to buy you when you staged your overthrow. You've done a good job of lying low. We were unable to track you down until your males approached us."

"I know I'm a Ton'arr male," Zar says, "but I never felt I belonged there. I'm afraid I haven't investigated much about the planet. How is it faring under Kato's rule?"

Valeris and Avania exchange somber glances, then the King says, "He's... raped the planet, stolen billions of credits in resources, imposed untenable taxes to maintain his lavish lifestyle. The people are staggering under the weight of his taxes and tightened laws. It's not a good time to live on Ton'arr." He shakes his head, his expression tight with pain.

Valeris looks Zar in the eye and says, "We'll talk more politics later if you wish. It's late, and this has been emotional for all of us. We're glad you're here. Can you stay a while? Spend some time getting to know us? Perhaps figure out how we can cobble together our relationship?"

Zar looks at me as if wanting my agreement. Does he really have to ask?

“We’d love to stay,” I answer, my heart bursting with happiness for my mate.

Avania stands, her face beaming with pleasure. “We’ve prepared a room for you and your males. Will you stay here? We’ve taken this abandoned warehouse and made a tiny palace. It’s our only conceit. I’ve never said it out loud, but now that you’re here, I’ll admit it’s more for you than us. I always believed we’d find you, and when we did, I wanted you to get a taste of the life that was stolen from you.”

“It’s impressive,” Zar’s voice is deep with emotion, “but these walls are inconsequential compared to the joy of meeting you both.”



20



CHAPTER TWENTY

Zar

My parents were clever, hiding this luxury in plain sight. We're led through brightly lit hallways. The walls are paneled in the same dark wood that encased the dining room. The golden carpets beneath our feet are plush and comfortable.

When my males are shown to their rooms, they all shake their heads.

"Thanks," Shadow says, "but as hospitable as the King and Queen are, we'll be guarding our captain and his mate. Dax, Stryker, you take the first shift."

Moments later, Anya and I are shown to our rooms. Most of my life was spent in gladiator barracks, sometimes on a cot filled with fetid straw, sometimes a simple wooden plank. The last three *annums* I've considered myself lucky to share my comfortable cabin with Anya. It's nothing special, but it's safe, I'm surrounded by friends, and my Anya and I get to share a bed.

This suite of rooms is certainly the most opulent I've ever seen. The walls are covered with golden fabric. The bed is high off the floor and wide enough for four. This is how I would have grown up? If this had been normal for me, I wonder if I would have taken this for granted. As it stands, part of me still feels I don't belong here.

Anya pulls me to sit next to her on the bed, then cups my cheek in her palm. "How are you doing, Love?" she asks, her eyes inspecting me as if they can glean the truth if she examines me closely enough.

I tug her onto my lap and rock her gently. I hope it tells her how much I love her, but right now, it's more for my benefit than hers. I find it soothing. "It's a lot to take in. Sometimes anger spikes inside me at what was taken from me and the heartbreak it caused my parents. Mostly, though, I'm thankful to have found them. I'm the happiest male in the galaxy."

She snuggles her head against my chest as I listen to what I just said, trying to discern if that was the truth or a lie.

I look over at Rynn sitting quietly in the seat next to me in our internal command center. A handful of days ago, I wanted to kill him. No. I didn't *want* to kill him, I *did* kill him. Many times. Now, I'm used to his presence. I think I'd miss him if he were gone.

You handled that well, he says, not hiding the affection in his blue eyes.

Anya makes a contented sound from the back of her throat, then kisses my pec. Her hands circle my back as her fingers furrow through my fur. I know my mate, so I'm not surprised by what comes next.

"Make love with me," she says as she pulls away enough to look up into my face.

I want nothing more than to take my mate here on this soft, wide bed. I came back from the dead days ago and haven't done anything more than the

one kiss the three of us shared. I spend most of my days with my cock hard as metal.

I take my mating duties seriously. Leaving my Anya wanting should be a crime. But Rynn is here. We've come to an understanding. I honestly think if I asked him to give me time alone with my beloved, *he* might agree. But *she* won't.

I can go to the orchard, he offers. Tonight of all nights, you two should be able to share yourselves with each other.

It's that—his selfless offer—that pushes me over the top into a decision I never thought I'd be capable of making.

We need to go forward as three, Rynn. His face registers shock, then gratitude, followed by eagerness which swiftly morphs into desire. He wants her as badly as I do. He's been very patient with me. Appreciation for this male fills my being.

I lift her easily and have her straddle my lap, her knees at my hips, her core riding my hard cock. It's all the answer she needs.

"It's been a long time for you, Zar. And even longer for Rynn," she says.

I circle her ankle with my tail as he grips her wrist.

"Let me suck you, make you come. Just an appetizer, so the main course will last longer."

She's wearing that sly, close-lipped smile that signals her arousal. She wants me—wants us. I'll try to tolerate this.

You go first, Zar, Rynn says, the earnest look on his face searing in intensity.

The Zar of a week ago wouldn't hesitate, but Anya's right. We're in this together until the end. The male has never had relations with a female.

You go first, "I tell him. *I'll watch and try not to rip the arms off this chair.*

Promise me one thing, I pierce him with my most serious stare. *Don't waste*

this by worrying about me. Promise you'll allow yourself to experience the full measure of pleasure she offers. Don't worry about her. She offers this out of love and wants to please us. We'll please her a hundred times over by the end of the night. Let her give. You receive.

With that, I loosen my grip on her ankle, inviting Rynn to take over.

Rynn

I didn't expect this. Didn't expect Anya to ask for this, especially after the night we've shared. Most of all, though, I didn't expect Zar to hand me the baton. Not for this, and not so generously. I considered refusing, but for once in my long life, I want to be selfish.

I grip her wrist harder, letting her know I'm here. She smiles at me, acknowledging my presence.

"I've imagined this a thousand times," she says, her voice breathy. "All I want right now is to make you feel good. Can you allow yourself to receive pure pleasure?"

Her green eyes are shining with arousal in the dim light.

"I can make that sacrifice," I joke.

"Zar?" she whispers. "Are you ready for this?"

Tell her yes.

"He says yes."

"I want it all," she says. "I want to feel Rynn's affection for me. I want to hear it. I want..." She pauses and looks me—us—straight in the eyes. "I want to express my love for him, too. If you can't handle that, Zar, I need to know."

I focus my attention inward and look at the honorable male sitting next to me in the command center. He's been through so much. Meeting his parents tonight, receiving so much affection and acceptance from them had to be a

dream come true for him, but it was still deeply emotional. He doesn't deserve to be hurt by what's about to happen in this bed.

He's still as a statue. Neither of us breathes inside our minds—we're just thought-forms, non-corporeal. But he's not moving at all as he gives this deep thought.

He begins nodding. Slowly at first, then faster.

I care about you both. If you... love each other, you should be able to express it. And I will tolerate it. Perhaps one day, it will even bring me happiness.

Have I told you how much I admire you? I ask.

Don't suck up, he says with a wry smile.

"He's handling it, Anya," I tell her.

She smiles and cups my cheek.

"I hated you at first, Rynn."

"I know." I mirror her, placing my palm on her cheek. "I kept telling you it wasn't my fault, that Zar gave me an invitation. Then when I realized it wasn't with full knowledge and consent, I was riddled with guilt because I hurt you both so deeply. Should I apologize again?"

"You're forgiven. I told you that before."

My cock, so hard a moment ago, deflates as we talk. She leans into my hand as my thumb strokes her pointed chin.

"Then you grew on me." She turns her head to press a kiss to my palm.

"You were so earnest. You tried so hard. It was an honor watching you grow from a stuffy, duty-bound Arclite to a male with emotions. You let me see your fears and challenges. It wasn't easy, but you let me in."

"Aye," I say, surprising myself at how much I sound like Zar.

She leans closer and brushes her lips against mine. “Somewhere between when you woke up in Zar’s body and now, Rynn, I fell in love with you.” An electric current races through my body with her admission. Really? She loves me?

Leaning close, I slide my furred cheek against her silken one and whisper in her ear. “Love, Anya? Tell me again.”

Cupping the back of my neck under my mane, she places her lips against my ear and says, “I don’t know how it works, but I love you. I love you both.”

For the first time in my life, I’m loved in a corporeal form. I remember being loved when I was younger, when I was a being of light. But for three millennia, I’ve been alone. A serious, focused brain in various bodies. Now I have... a home. And a lover. Not just someone to share the pleasures of the flesh, but a person to share my soul with.

No! Two people to share souls with.

“I’m the luckiest person alive,” I breathe as I cover her cheek with little close-lipped kisses. I follow the line of her jaw, then the furrow of her throat. We’re being tender, her fingers threaded through my mane, her lips mimicking mine as she kisses my cheek and a spot below my ear that gives me shivers.

As sweet and heartfelt as this is, we’re on the cusp of something else.

Passion. It’s building for both of us.

With the strength of one finger, she presses me back against the bed, then pulses her core against my kilt-covered cock. The force with which it springs to life surprises me. My eyes flare wide as my body responds to her with raw desire.

“Love can be expressed in many ways,” she says as she lifts an eyebrow.

“Not all of them tender and sweet.”

Gripping her hips, I grind our pelvises together, crushing her against me as I thrust up toward her. A rush of excitement flies through every cell in my body.

After sitting on her knees between my legs, she slides her hands up my thighs from my knees, lifting my kilt to expose my cock. Zar wears no undergarments.

“Someone’s already hard for me,” she says as she drinks in the sight of me. My cock kicks from the heat of her attention.

She leans up, rearranges her voluminous emerald skirts and settles her open core on my cock. My eyes pop open wide in surprise at the slick, warm heat that greets me.

“Whoops,” she says coquettishly. “Should I have warned you I removed my panties the moment we were shown to this room?”

I can’t respond. I’m speechless. To have been male for millennia, but to have never been this close to a female before, to have never felt the hot slide of my cock against a female’s drenched lower lips? There should have been a law against it.

“Does that feel good?” she asks.

“Heaven.”

“It’s heaven for me, too, Rynn.”

When she says my name, my cock kicks against her. It’s the intimacy of her word. No, it’s the acknowledgement that she knows she’s riding *me*, that it’s *my* body under hers that makes this the best moment of my life.

“I love the sound of my name on your lips,” I admit.

“Rynn,” she breathes, saying it just to please me. “You’re here with me. And Zar is watching?” She waits until he brushes his tail across her ankle. “It’s all still good?” she asks and must receive her reply because she leans down and kisses me.

These aren’t the soft, experimental kisses that express tender feelings. They’re determined, questing. She’s like a different female. She’s on a mission.

Her fingers curl around my shoulders as her lips press against mine. She only manages one or two of these hard kisses before her soft, pink tongue slides along the seam of my lips.

“Zar,” she whispers, “it’s mine and Rynn’s first time. Can you pretend it’s yours, too? Enjoy it like I’ve never tasted you before?”

A pang of hurt slices through me. For just one moment, can’t I have this beautiful female all to myself? But I realize she’s the smartest person in this room. She knows he’s the weakest link in our odd threesome and wants to ensure he’s onboard.

She waits for him to tighten his grip on her ankle before she continues. After one more swipe of her tongue against my lips, she leans back to say, “I remember my first kiss with this mouth. I was terrified of those teeth. Bare them for me.”

I pause, forgetting that except for the tail, I’m in charge of the body, then I snarl.

“Oh yeah, big guy. Make a noise with that.”

I always thought sexual encounters would be serious, but she wants this to be fun? Yes, I’ll play.

I expose my teeth with a lusty roar—it surprises all three of us.

A To'narr male makes that particular sound only when he is making love with his truemate, Zar informs me from the command center. I swear I hear a smile in his voice.

“Yeah. White. Hard. Frightening. Sharp. Canines.” She punctuates each word while giving my bottom lip a sexy pluck with her teeth. “This gorgeous face doesn’t scare me anymore,” she says with a lick up the length of first one and then the other of my bottom fangs.

I must be embracing my animalistic side, because my mind flies to a picture of her doing the same thing to my cock—a long, hard lick up the shaft like it’s a child’s candy.

She wiggles her bottom against me, letting me know she felt my cock twitch in response to her little game.

“Rynn likes this?” she asks, as she licks my upper canines. “Or is it this?” she asks with a smile as she grinds against me. She was playing a moment ago, but with this, her eyes flare open with arousal.

“My Anya likes this, too,” I say, my voice a low purr.

“That’s right, my love,” she says, “play with me.”

I freeze as my eyes shutter in pleasure. She’s generous with those words. As they wash over me, I acknowledge I never allowed myself to even hope for anything half this intimate.

“That’s right, Rynn.” She moves her pelvis in a slow, sexy circle against my cock. “I love you.” Her playful tone is gone. She’s piercing me with her most serious stare.

In perhaps the most stupid move of my life, I slip inside to sit on the chair in the command center.

Zar. Are you okay?

Ask me in a couple hoaras, brother. Let's see how this plays out. He's not smiling, but his fingers aren't about to peel the arms off the chair, either. It's all the answer I need, so I return to my Anya.

"Zar's okay?" she asks, one eyebrow raised. She's a smart one. She knew exactly what I just did.

"He's getting used to things."

"We all are. How did it feel to hear those words from me, Rynn?"

Now that I'm not worried about Zar, I allow the reality of her love to wash over me.

"I'm not sure. Maybe I need to hear it again," I tease.

She smiles, "I love you, Rynn."

My heart stutters in my chest as the depth and breadth of the moment washes over me. In one swift movement, I flip her onto her back so I'm riding her.

"Anya," my voice is a deep growl against her mouth. "I love you, too. Can I say it whenever I want? Will you get tired of it if I tell you more than ten times a day?"

I kiss her hard, then barge between her lips so I can taste her even as she shakes her head in answer to my question.

I lap my burred tongue against her soft one, then pull away only long enough to ask, "Twenty?"

She shakes her head again, then lifts her chin, sinking her head into the pillow-soft bed.

"I want you naked, Love. I want to know everything about your body. I wonder if you'll respond like Zar or if there will be differences." She grabs my ear and gently runs her finger along the edge until I shake my head with a laugh.

“It tickles.”

“See? That doesn’t tickle him. It makes him hornier.”

“It did that too,” I admit.

“We have the rest of our lives to discover each other’s desires,” she says. “I can’t wait another moment to suck your cock.”

As if in answer, my male appendage bobs in agreement.

She shimmies off the side of the bed and then pulls on my ankles, indicating she wants my legs dangling off the edge of the bed. She dips her knees, but before she puts her mouth on me, I say, “Let me see you, my love. Let me help you remove your dress.”

Perhaps it’s because I’ve shared a body with Zar this past week, but I’m bold and unafraid to ask for what I want. Or maybe it’s because I know this female likes me. No. She *loves* me. Could my world get any better than this?

“Watch me,” she says, a seductive smile on her beautiful face.

She stands between my feet, reaches to the back of her neck, and hits the autozip. The quiet sound accompanies the movement of the fabric as it gaps across her back.

“You’ve seen me before in Zar’s mind?”

I nod.

“Was it as good as this?” She shimmies, and the emerald fabric slides slowly down first one shoulder, then the other. It hangs for a moment, held up only by her breasts, then resumes its downward glide.

Some part of my mind is aware that the silken fabric hits the floor, but I’m fully focused on those beautiful pink buds, already puckered with arousal—for me.

“I want to learn you, Anya. I want to hold the weight of your breasts in my palms. I want to taste the tips and flick them with my tongue. I want to know every curve and hollow like a blind male and be able to bring you to the heights of pleasure. I want to know the meaning of every noise you make, so I know when to speed up and when to slow down.”

“And you will, my Rynn. But it’s your turn now.”

For the first time, I see the tuft of brown hair at the apex of her legs. A purr rumbles in my chest as a chuff bursts from my mouth. Before the night is over, I’ll have her taste on my lips.

She motions to my kilt. “Off.” Zar removed our sash the moment we passed through the door to our room.

I undo the leather belt and open the kilt so I’m fully exposed to her gaze. The way her eyes glaze over in appreciation makes me feel more alive—more male—than ever before in my life.

“Let me make you feel good,” she says. It’s half request, half command. She’s asking if I’m ready. How can she not know I’ve wanted this for *lunars*? “Lie back.”

I use a pillow to elevate my head so I can keep my gaze on her. I don’t want to miss a *minima* of this.

She starts at my ankles, circling them with both hands as she moves up my calves and thighs, nipping and biting. She doesn’t travel in a straight line. It’s a teasing trail of semi-circles as she moves ever closer to my now-throbbing member.

I had just started experimenting with prolonging my pleasure when Zar arrived back on the scene. For a moment I worry I’ll release before she reaches my cock. Perhaps she understands this, because one of her hands grabs me by the root and squeezes—almost hard enough to hurt. It

definitely gathers my attention. And it reduces my arousal so I can enjoy her provocative attention for longer.

“My mouth is watering for you,” she says as she nips my thigh, her eyes unwavering from mine.

I grunt in response, so aroused I’m unable to form intelligible words.

Her hand still gripping the base of my cock, she leans between my legs and her tongue lands on one of my balls. I hiss in shock. Or maybe it’s pleasure. Perhaps it’s both. People do this? I banish my initial thought, which is that it’s obscene.

Closing my eyes, I lean back and allow myself to experience the pure pleasure of her ministrations. This female who I love is expressing her feelings for me with her mouth. When I let myself dive into the bliss of being tended to like this, I again fear I’ll come too soon.

“Slower,” I urge as I grip her shoulders, wanting to pull her back up to kiss me.

She releases my cock and stops the magic she’s performing with her tongue, but shakes her head.

“I’m not stopping. Just a brief pause.”

She leans up to kiss my belly, which gives me no relief, since the tips of her breasts trailed upward along my fur. One of them slid up the underside of my cock.

“Temptress,” I accuse.

“Mmm.” She nips the skin over my pelvic bone. As she does so, her other nipple glides across my cock.

“Evil sorceress.”

“Mmm.”

Gripping me again, she hovers her mouth over the head of my cock and breathes humidly.

My hips lift and I moan, “Not fair,” even as I hope she never stops.

“What names do you have in store for me when I do this?” Her voice is playful, but her behavior is far from it when she licks me from the root to the tip with the flat of her tongue.

“Anya!” I cry out as the bottom half of my body levitates off the bed.

“I thought for sure you were going to call me a devil,” she says, then licks me again, painting me with her saliva.

“Enchantress?” she asks as she licks me again, this time on another trajectory.

“Beelzebub?” On this sensual journey, she uses the tip of her pretty pink tongue to flick against the notch in the head of my cock that is the most sensitive spot.

“Fuck!” I shout the Earther curse word as my fingers grip her hair to pull her away from me.

As I catch my breath and gain control of myself, I see her beautiful face, complete with smug expression.

“So proud of yourself, Anya?”

“Not yet.” She pouts. “Not until you spill down my throat.”

My eyes flare wide at her wanton words. No, that’s not it. It’s her blatant desire. This female, *my* female, wants me and is unashamed to say it.

She returns to breathe on the head of my cock, then allows her curls to drag along it. Every cell in my body is awake and aware and totally focused, wondering what her next move will be.

“I’m losing control,” I warn.

“Good.” She looks at me, her green eyes sparkling with desire. “Oh look. A present? For me?”

She’s eyeing the drop of liquid beaded on my slit.

“I hear this tastes awful.” She has the audacity to wink at me, reminding us both of my first experience with its taste. “Let’s see.”

I watch as she licks it slowly, never taking her gaze off me. Her tongue flattens, and she takes a long, broad swipe at my cockhead. When the taste bursts on her tongue, her eyes close in pleasure and she makes a low, appreciative hum in the back of her throat.

I get it now. It’s not the taste. It’s the way a female tells her male she fully accepts him. I’m overwhelmed with love and lust and a burning need to reciprocate. Later.

Settling back against the mattress, I shutter my eyes and allow myself to fully enjoy whatever this female does to me. This is love. Just a different way to express it.

She sucks the head of my cock into her mouth, then swipes her tongue around it. The pleasure is sublime. Even though I try, I can’t control my hips from pumping.

She’s sucking now, her head bobbing. My lids fly open to watch as her head full of brown curls bounces up and down on my cock. The transcendent pleasure ratchets up a notch when her palm grips my base. My whole shaft is encased in either her hand or her mouth as she speeds up her tempo.

No amount of self-control can stop my release when she starts humming.

The orgasm barrels at me, building in my balls and gathering intensity until a burst of pleasure as deep and wide as the ocean releases in one moment of bliss.

I try to pull out of her. No one would want to swallow that, but she fights me. I take it as an expression of her love. It's beautiful and makes me feel her affection to the marrow of my bones.

Panting from pleasure, my pulses slow, then stop. I return from the heights of my bliss as I watch her take one more lick, then use the tip of her tongue to catch a droplet at the side of her mouth.

Lifting under her arms, I pull her to lie with me.

"That was amazing," I tell her, unable to put into words that the intimacy she afforded me was life-changing.

"Kiss me." She makes it an order, not a request.

I kiss her hard on the mouth.

"Tongue." Another order.

Ahh. When I dip inside her mouth, I understand. She wanted me to taste myself on her, to accept even this primitive aspect of myself.

"Get it?" She asks with a smile.

"It's all different when it's done with love," I breathe against her lips, no longer wanting to reject any part of this body I share with Zar.

"How are you doing?" I ask Zar out loud so Anya can stay in the loop.

It's my body, too. Anya's spent three annums learning how to please it, he says with a genuine smile. Sharing wasn't as hard as I thought.

"Are we ready for round two?" Anya asks as she burrows next to me and licks my nipple.

I'm both sated and energized and could go all night. But there's no room for selfishness in this triad.

"I'll catch my breath as I watch you and your mate," I say with a smile as I retreat to our internal command center.

How are you doing, my friend? I ask.

I felt your pleasure—and hers. It's not easy, brother. You'll see in a moment.

I've never considered myself a jealous person, but the moment she sighs his name in pleasure, I have no doubt it will eviscerate me.



21



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Anya

I'm not sure what's weirder: being abducted to outer space, or being in love with two people—one of whom doesn't have a body.

Poking around inside myself, I test out how I'm feeling. Is this okay? Am I crazy? Immoral? I wonder what my parents would say if they knew.

Actually, I think they'd approve. They always supported my every endeavor. I think my folks would be happy I figured out a way to make lemonade out of lemons. I've been dealt some sour lemons. But after what just happened here in this bed, I'd say my lemonade is pretty sweet.

"Beloved," Zar says.

I'm getting to know some of my males' subtle differences. No one else might be able to pick up on them, but I'd know that low, rumbling timbre of his voice anywhere.

"How's my mate? Seriously. I want to know. We have to make certain this works every step of the way. Holding back will be the sure path to misery," I say.

“My wise female.” He slides his thumb across my chin. “I won’t lie. I never wanted to share you. But Rynn’s a good male and we’re making the best of this. Besides...” He gives me a teasing grin, “You suck cock so well, how could I ever let you slip away?”

He gives me the sweetest smile with just a glimpse of fang. It speaks volumes and is full of love and admiration and says just how much I mean to him.

Rynn was so tired and blissed out, I don’t think he could leave the bed if he wanted, but Zar seems ready to run a marathon. He bounds out of bed and then leans down to pull me with him. After lifting me up so I straddle his waist, he twirls with me around the room. It’s half dancing, half a victory celebration.

“I’ve been in hell most of my life,” he breathes into my ear. “You, Anya. You’re my heaven. My reward for all the bad days.”

All of a sudden, he gets solemn and stops circling. After piercing me with a steady gaze, he says, “I’d die for you, Beloved. I hope you know how special you are to me.”

There’s something about this moment that touches deep into my soul. It’s so solemn, so serious, it’s hard to hold onto. I tell him, “I know exactly how you feel. I’d do the same for you.”

This calms him. It speaks to him somehow. I see his shoulders relax and a small smile play on his lips.

“Now let’s make love, mate,” I urge.

His hands splay across my back, my legs still circle his waist. He hitches me closer, then kisses a path from the indent in my throat to my chin.

“You going to make me roar tonight?” he rasps as he nips my cheeks with his fangs. I love when he does it. Knowing he’d never harm me with his

razor-sharp teeth never fails to turn me on.

Feeling his cock bob against my bottom as he strides across the room, declares how ready he is for me.

“You going to take me soft or hard tonight?” I prod.

“Nothing, nothing about me is soft tonight,” he chuckles. “But I’m thinking maybe a little of both.”

We’re both startled when we hear shouting in the hallway. There’s one thing about being mated to a gladiator, I’m seldom fearful for my safety. But when I hear Dax and Shadow yelling, I cringe, every muscle in my body tensing.

“Hide!” Zar hisses as he sets me down. “Bathroom. No matter what happens, don’t come out unless I tell you.”

He looks like a different person. The calm, happy look on his face has been replaced by sheer lethality—jaw clenched, eyes narrowed, ready to spring.

Zar

There are good warriors in the hallway guarding us. I couldn’t catch what they were saying, but there’s a skirmish out there. My parents’ guards took all our weapons, but after our calm and welcoming dinner, I thought any cause for worry was long over.

It’s suddenly preternaturally quiet out there, which does the opposite of calming my nerves.

Fireplace poker to your right, Rynn says. Metal clothes rods in both closets. I think we’re strong enough to rip the wooden canopy bedpost from the bed. It could be lethal. Tell me what to do, brother.

Just what you’re doing. Help me stay one step ahead of whatever’s happening, I say as I rip one clothes bar out of its holder, then grab the poker.

I have one makeshift weapon in each hand when the bedroom door bangs open and slams against the wall. Six warriors in hard-shelled body armor force themselves into the room. Their laser rifles are all aimed at me.

“On the floor! Now! On the floor!” one of them shouts.

A couple of pieces of metal, even wielded by a seasoned gladiator, are no match against six armored males armed with lasers.

“Now! I won’t tell you again.”

As soon as I hit the floor, I’m told, “Hands on your head, asshole.”

I follow their orders. My sole focus is on keeping Anya safe.

Luckily, the bed isn’t obstructing my view of the door. I can see the intruders. These aren’t my parents’ people, which strikes fear even deeper into my heart. Is God really so cruel as to tear my family away from me only *hoaras* after I first met them?

A male dressed in royal regalia strides in as if he owns this place. He wears a wide ribbon, upon which dangles what appears to be a diamond the size of a baby’s fist. I saw pictures of him when I investigated Ton’arr on the Intergalactic Database shortly after we overthrew our captors. This is the King who I now realize is my uncle, the male who arranged for my kidnapping as an infant. This is the bastard who overthrew my father. They look alike. The same coloring, similar eyes, but they’re nothing alike in disposition. Where my father wore an open, pleasant expression, this male looks nothing like him in temperament. Slitted eyes, a snarl on his face. He looks ready to kill.

“You just couldn’t stay dead, could you, Zaypien?” He steps close, but not close enough for me to reach out and grab his ankle. “I should have killed you as a babe. I thought I needed you to use as leverage.” He shrugs. “I was young then, too naïve to know it would have been just as easy to kill you

and simply say you were alive on some mythical planet. Oh well. What's done is done." He sneers at me derisively.

I'm scouring all the databases in my head, Zar. I can find nothing that can help us. Can we fight? Rynn asks.

No. We're outnumbered. Keep watching. Look for any weaknesses from Kato or his males.

"Stand up. Let's see what thirty *annums* as a gladiator sculpted you into, *nephew*." Reaching back his hand, wordlessly asking for a weapon from one of his guards, he then takes a few steps back and points it at me.

He's arrogant and egotistical, but he's no fool. He's not close enough for me to wrest his weapon from him.

"Slowly," he instructs, as he makes a show of pointing his weapon at me.

Biding my time, I tell Rynn. *This isn't over yet.*

"So this is the product of a thousand *annums* of royal DNA plus thirty *annums* of physical training. Pathetic," he sneers. "Oh, your intercepted comms tell me you're mated. Where is the little *human*?" He snorts derisively, then says, "Species mixing? You're more of a disgrace to the royal family than I would have thought possible."

I'm so angry, I'm thinking of a biting retort when Rynn says, "She didn't come with us."

Kato moves quickly and uses the butt of his gun to jab me in the face, breaking my cheekbone. Blinding pain spikes like a hot poker up my face and into my eye.

I could have wrested the gun from him, but the six guards in the room had all stepped forward, focusing their sights' red lights on my chest.

I glance at Rynn in our internal control room. He's never received a punch before and is shaking his head, trying to regain his senses. The pain doesn't

faze me. I've already pushed it out of my awareness.

It only takes a moment for two of Kato's males to scour the suite, find Anya, and yank her into the bedroom. She's behind me, but I know the exact moment Kato sees her by the look of sheer disgust on his evil face.

"You were that desperate? Mating that... human *thing*? Pathetic." He pauses for effect, then, "You've caused me a great deal of trouble. If you hadn't shown up, it would have been business as usual, but my sources tell me you have the potential power to bring not one but two ships of trained gladiators into the mix. That was enough to garner my attention.

"I let your parents live all these *annums*, knowing they were weak, that they'd never challenge my position. But you? You could be a different story. I need to make sure all of you suffer an untimely death. I have a rule: never leave the important work to others. Thus, I'm here to take care of this personally."

"Haven't you caused enough suffering?" Anya says from behind me.

His face loses all trace of control. It's a mask of anger and disdain. He seethes, "Bring. Her. To. Me."

The two males who found her drag her to him. He grips her cheeks between his fingers and squeezes until she yelps in pain.

"You've angered me. You, Zaypien, your parents, and this little animal from the dirty end of the galaxy."

He twists her head this way and that, amused at how his tight grip distorts her features.

"Your parents are being held by my guards, as is everyone else in this pathetic excuse for a palace. That includes your gladiator friends. Funny how lasers trump unarmed gladiator flesh every time," he sneers. "We have all the time in the world to teach you a lesson before I kill you all."

He spares no time tearing off the towel Anya had wrapped herself in while hiding. Her shocked gasp rips through the room. We all realize at the same time what my uncle has planned.

Zar, we can't allow this to happen, Rynn says through gritted teeth.

I'm dying inside, too. We're outgunned, I say as my mind races to find a way out of this.

Two choices, he's talking rapid-fire as we watch Kato squeeze one of her perfect breasts. *We could lunge at them, hoping a stray laser will kill her before she's brutalized, since that's what he has planned anyway.*

His words hit me like a fist. He wants me to hasten her death so she can escape his touch?

I have a better idea, though, Rynn says. *Get me close enough and I'll slip into his body.*

That's against your rules. You said you don't invade, I say as I consider his suggestion.

*You think some arbitrary set of rules is more important than Anya? It will mean certain death for **you**, though.*

You think I'm not ready to sacrifice my life for her? She's the most precious thing in the universe.

Get us close, Zar. As close as possible. Usually our lips need to touch, but I think I can fly out of here in my Arclite form. I've never had to do such a thing before. If I succeed, I'll make his males stand down. It will save Anya and your parents.

That animal is pawing at Anya. It's disgusting. There's nothing sexual about it. It's anger, aggression, and possession. She's biting her lower lips, refusing to allow a single sound of pain or fear to escape her to give this sick male any satisfaction. I can't watch for another second.

Yes, is all I say as I prepare to lunge.

Zar. Rynn claims my attention. *I love you like a brother. I—*

Now is the time. The opening is perfect. I don't have time to hear the end of his thought, nor to admit I love him, too.

Rynn

Zar leaps the distance between us and his uncle, clutches the male's shoulders while still in midair, and presses their lips together. Kato was surprised and slow to act. Before he loses consciousness from my invasion, he only gets off a quick burst from his laser. I'm not sure where it struck, but by the smell of burning hair, he must have scored a direct hit to Zar. I've readied myself to vacate, so I disconnect and become incorporeal faster than I have ever done before, and enter Kato.

Not taking the time to get my bearings or examine my new body, I head straight to the brainstem and begin the process of wrapping my filaments around his cells. I'm vaguely aware of the sound of two bodies hitting the floor—Zar's and Kato's—and then Anya's tortured scream.

She might not know what happened, but she's already registered that Zar's body is lifelessly lying on the floor. If Zar isn't dead already, he will be within an *hoara* or two. I've never made a meld in this fashion before, but no body that has been a host can last when a symbiote leaves. I hope some day she figures out what happened and knows Zar died to save her. I wish I could tell her, but I doubt I'll ever get the chance.

I'm working quickly, taking over my host and relegating him to the place where the other 56 lie in their final resting places..

There are many things I need to do at once and time is of the essence. I must establish myself, ensure Kato is fully subdued, and get the body

working as soon as possible so I can protect Anya, Zar's parents, the gladiators, and the palace guards.

I'm already fatigued. This work is demanding and I'm doing it at breakneck speed. When Anya cries out, I take a moment to force open my eyes to see several of the henchmen wrenching her to her feet. Two are standing over me, calling Kato's name.

Kato's conscious mind gives up. I'm now in full control. I take a moment to breathe a sigh of relief, then hurry to act in character and make certain Anya and Zar's parents are safe.

I moan, then spit, "Give me room, you fools. I knew there was something wrong with my last meal." Rubbing my abdomen, I wince in pain. That should buy me some time as I continue to fully meld with my new host.

Although normally the procedure is slow and solemn, accompanied by soft music and the prayers of the priestesses, I realize I can perform it in record time when my beloved is in harm's way.

My filaments are invading Kato's brain on their own, just like the parasite Dr. Drayke accused me of being *lunars* ago. After opening my eyes, I heave myself to a sitting position.

"I've lost my taste for that little piece of filth from across the galaxy," I say as I lurch to my feet. "In fact, I think our work here is done. I don't want my epitaph to read that I killed every member of the royal family. Why do that? They're weak and pitiful."

"Now that their spawn has been neutralized," I press my toe to his motionless body, overcome with sadness when I confirm he's dead, "they can resume their little business while I return to ruling the planet."

Even as the words are spilling from my mouth, I'm surprised at how quickly I took over Kato's condescending, abusive personality.

“Leave the prince’s body where it lies. Let his parents deal with his remains,” I say, my lip curled in arrogance. Without this order, I imagine my males would enjoy abusing Zar’s body. The least I owe the honorable male is a decent burial.

I’m mourning him. I hadn’t realized how much affection I have for him until he sacrificed himself for the female he loves... loved. My chest is tight and my eyes are watering as I mentally say my farewells.

I should console myself that I just saved many lives, but after a lifetime of self-sacrifice, I long to be selfish. Leaving this room, knowing I’ll never see Anya again, feels like someone has ripped my guts out of my body and let them spool onto the floor. I know without a doubt I will grieve their loss for the rest of my life.

I have to touch her, to connect with her one more time.

Striding to her, I grip her left wrist in the same way I have hundreds of times since we came up with this physical clue. Staring into her terrified tear-filled eyes, my mind casts about for something I can say to give her comfort while causing no suspicion from my guards.

“I’m sorry I killed your beloved,” I sneer derisively, squeezing her wrist so hard I wonder if I’m hurting her. I used his special endearment. Perhaps in the days to come, she’ll replay it and discover the hidden meaning.

She spits in my face as she says, “Rot in hell, you bastard.”

I wish she hadn’t done that, but in order to keep my secret, I have to respond. Cupping her face in my hand, I move between her and my males. With my broad back obstructing their view, I pretend to squeeze her face just as Kato did earlier, but I hold her gently and try to make the new face that I wear display my love for her. As I do that, I say, “Sorry I made you a

widow,” with enough disdain in my voice to convince my guards I’m still the bastard they think I am.





CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Three Months Later...
Rynn

For the millionth time, I contemplate murder.

Let me out, you fucker. Let me out!

A million and one.

It's odd how the last three *lunars* have both flown by and dragged at the same time. Every moment I have to deal with Kato makes me contemplate my very sanity. Why am I allowing him to live? His constant, angry bellowing deep in the dungeon of my mind makes it hard for me to listen to my own thoughts.

I've locked him away next to the other 56. He should be dead, but I guess all Ton'arrs' systems allow them to maintain their sentence even after being invaded by an Arclite.

For the first couple of *lunars*, he was quiet, just as Zar was. Now that he's awakened, he's becoming increasingly vociferous.

I wanted to believe it was Anya's unwavering love that kept the bond connected to Zar that allowed him to spark back to life. Now I know it is something in Ton'arr DNA.

He's a strong personality. I'm beginning to wonder if I'm going to have to figure out a way to dispose of him before he escapes his internal cell and disposes of me. I'm not quite sure how to do that. I may have to find another host and let Kato die altogether. I don't want to do that, though, because I have so much power in my position as king.

I knew I couldn't simply return to Ton'arr and correct all the corruption that Kato presided over for the past thirty-eight *annums*. No, I've had to be much more devious than that. It's like the game of chess Anya taught me. One move, then another, all with one goal in mind.

I began with the slightest reforms. Just a tweak here and there. At first, it was vetoing my advisors' recommendations that we raise taxes again. Then it was a look at my shocking personal budget and trimming all the fat. Then it was investigating some of Kato's cronies.

He'd placed them into positions of power, thrown tax money their way, and expected kickbacks. I cut them by huge percentages with the excuse that my intel informed me the citizenry was threatening revolt.

Bit by bit, I've reduced budgets, pardoned a few of what Kato called "Enemies of the State," and tried to ease the burden of the general populace. I shake my head as I wonder why anyone needs so much money, especially at the expense of their subjects. Really, how many opulent palaces, fancy vehicles, or armies does one male need?

I'm getting stronger in here. One day I'll break free and kill you, you motherfucker.

Delightful. Not only annoying, but he might be right. Not that he can kill me without killing himself, but him constantly trying to take control is grating, and some day he might become strong enough to escape and eventually throw me into an internal cell I won't be able to fight my way out of. I'm going to have to deal with him sooner than I'd hoped.

When he became somewhat aware of his circumstances, he became more vocal. I encased the room in soundproofing, which lasted seven gloriously peaceful days until he discovered how to dismantle it. Now I have to reinforce the door and walls every day. The stress is wearing me down. Barely an *hoara* goes by that I don't think of Zar and Anya. Kato had mentioned he'd intercepted private comms between the King and the *Fool's Errand*. Because of that, I haven't trusted the system enough to sneak contact with the ship, although I yearn to do so.

Anya. She wasn't just Zar's beloved, she's mine, too. I lived 3,000 *annums* before I found her. Perhaps in another 3,000 *annums* I'll find someone half as lovely, half as worthy to love.

The only way to keep her safe is to never speak to her again. I may be the king, but Kato installed so many greedy sycophants into power I can't really do as I wish. If I change the status quo too drastically, I might find myself at the business end of a laser. My life may not be worth much, but I want to stay in power to help the citizens of the planet. Some days, I feel as if I'm the only thing standing between them and perpetual poverty.

My thoughts drift back to Anya. Although I know I'll never see her again, I wish I could at least communicate with her, let her know I love her, that I'm sorry for her loss. I want her to hear the sincerity in my voice when I tell her Zar was the best male I've ever known. But I'd risk not only her life, but that of Zar's parents if anyone ever discovered our secret.

Knowing I'll never see her again has done nothing to dull my love for her, or my memories. At night, in bed, when I allow myself to think of her, I'll admit, my hand strays to my cock more often than not.

I stroke myself as I think of her. Her curly brown hair. Her sparkling green eyes. Her open warmth to not only me, but every male and female on the ship. I still don't know how she did it, how she ignored her sorrow at losing Zar and found a way to feel affection for me. But I'm so grateful she did. Her heart is so big she found a way to love us both.

I feel gut-punched when I think of how she'll spend the rest of her life.

Alone. I don't believe she'll ever get over the grief of losing Zar not once, but twice. Perhaps she even feels some sorrow at losing me, although I shouldn't wish for that.

Did she get my hints the night Zar gave his life to save her? Was the sheer act of gripping her wrist, of using the word "beloved" enough to tell her the truth of my takeover of the odious male who even this moment is bellowing his threats and spewing his hatred at me?

"Your Highness." There's a knock at the door to my quarters.

"You dare interrupt the sanctity of my private time?" I holler, wishing I didn't have to imitate the king's bad behavior every *minima* of the day.

"I—I'm sorry, my Lord. There's a... comm from the King—uh, the *former* King."

Kato would have probably killed the male for that mistake, but I barely have time to contemplate that.

"Valeris sent a comm?"

This is interesting. To my knowledge, he hasn't spoken to his brother in all his *annums* of exile.

"Come."

The young Ton'arr male enters, his body language obsequious, his head hung low. Certainly he knows how precarious his position would be if I were, indeed, Kato. He has to believe he's a walking dead male.

"Don't ever call anyone king but me," I pierce him with a murderous stare, but it's lost on him since he's studiously avoiding eye contact. "Have the comm's officer connect him through to my personal computer in fifteen *minimas*," I instruct.

After dismissing the servant, I rise from bed and put on one of Kato's most opulent robes. It's a deep cobalt blue with gold piping. For good measure, I place one of my crowns on my head. It carries so many jewels it's far too heavy. It feels like I'm a child playing dress-up, but I'm certain this is exactly what Kato would do in this circumstance.

Exactly fifteen *minimas* later, I'm sitting at my ornately carved wooden desk when a comm comes through.

"What do you want?" I snap, hoping he continues the call long enough to give me the information I seek. How is Anya, I wonder. Is she faring alright?

"Hello, Kato." He's cordial, but shows no deference. I guess that fits. I'm the male who stole his kingdom.

"Valeris." I tip my head. "Get to the point."

"My physician says I'm dying."

He pauses. Perhaps for me to absorb his words, maybe for me to express my condolences. I stay in character and say nothing.

"I would like to return to my homeworld. It won't be a long stay, but it does need to happen quickly. Before my condition prohibits travel. I will come with a small contingent of guards, cause you no trouble, and leave within three days. Is this acceptable?"

Is this acceptable? This is the answer to my prayers.

“On one condition. You meet with me in person,” I reply. This is too good to be true. I can ask about Anya, in a roundabout fashion, of course. I would love to allow this fine male to step foot on home soil before his demise. I wish I could express my sorrow for his illness as well as the loss of his son, but I form my face into a mask of disdain and wait for his reply.

“Yes.”

“I’d like to meet the moment you touch down, then you can be on your way,” I insist. I can barely wait to have this conversation.

“Certainly. I’ll be there in five days.”

“If more than six of you beam down, I’ll be forced to incinerate your ship.” I imagine Kato would demand this. I don’t want any of my staff to think I’ve gone soft. Even though I’m the King, I’m sure this comm is being monitored.

“I understand. Five days, then.”

He terminates the comm.

Even though I know I’m alone in the room, I glance around to ensure no one is here before I allow my face to express my relief. I’m sorry the male is dying. At least now I can get closure about my beloved.



Five Days Later...

I’m wearing a different, more opulent, robe than I wore for our comm, as well as a heavier, more ostentatious crown. This one has three enormous sapphires under the spikes, as well as numerous smaller jewels and diamonds. After familiarizing myself with Kato’s habits, I’m certain I’m closely following his patterns.

The real imposter king is inside, tantruming loudly, demanding his immediate release. I've never spoken to him, but by some of the things he's said, I think he understands the rudiments of his situation. He can't see, but he can hear what I hear. He's definitely growing stronger inside. I've ignored the problem since Valeris's comm, but I'm going to have to use a final solution on him—and soon.

Valeris and his five guards enter the conference room. They're all Ton'arrs, all wearing the same uniforms I observed the males wearing in his small palace.

The room is filled with fifteen of what I'm told are my best guards.

"I assume all their weapons have been removed?" I ask imperiously.

"Yes, Your Highness," my captain of the guard says.

"What do you want?" I ask Valeris.

"I'm ailing. I wanted to speak brother to brother. Command your males to pat me down again, then do me the service of clearing the room. If it would make you feel better, have one of your males loan you their rifle."

He pierces me with a flinty gaze. Since I "became" Kato, no one has dared look at me so directly. Something's afoot, but I see no harm in observing how this plays out.

A moment later, we're both sitting at a conference table built for twenty.

I'm clutching a laser rifle I barely know how to hold, much less shoot.

Glancing at him, I wait for him to reveal why he's really here.

"I assume there are listening devices?" he asks as he casually glances around the room.

I have no idea, but I think he's correct, so I nod my head.

"I've been paying attention to events on Ton'arr. It appears you've changed since you attempted to have me killed in my own home."

He lances me with a look so strong, so piercing, I'd have to be an idiot not to know he's going to be speaking to me in code.

"Perhaps something... fundamentally changed for you after that mission," he probes.

My shoulders lift almost imperceptibly. Does he suspect my secret?

"Perhaps something happened when you were assaulting my daughter-in-law," he says.

That he even referred to my Anya makes my heart beat faster. I stare at him. He has to know he has my undivided attention.

"Perhaps."

"I, for one, know that everything isn't always as it appears. That things sometimes don't go as planned—for better or for worse."

I raise an eyebrow, a silent request for more information.

"For example, sometimes people have changes of heart, even at our age. Would you agree?"

I shrug. "Something might have happened on Algaron IV that caused me to... re-examine things. Perhaps we're never too old to *change*."

I hate that, even as king, I can't have a private conversation with this male. The best I can do is give him my most sincere stare.

"Remember the game we used to play as children?" he asks. "I say the beginning and ending letters of a word and you guess at it?"

Ah, finally. He's giving me a test. I hope I pass.

"Of course I remember it. I'll play."

"What word starts with R and ends in N?" he asks.

My heart soars! He knows who I am! He's spoken with Anya. She must have understood the messages I was trying to give her on that horrible day

and she's filled him in on everything. Now they need proof of their suspicions.

"I can think of nothing but a nonsense syllable. Rynn," I say dismissively, watching his response as if my life depends on it.

"Yes. A nonsense syllable. It feels good to talk again after all these *annums*. I brought a peace offering."

"What would that be?"

"The female you wanted on Algaron IV. She's on the ship and I can place her at your service for the remainder of my stay if you'd like. A present to clear the air after all these years." He shrugs as if offering me the use of a female means nothing to him.

I met him, dined with him. He has a good heart. This male absolutely knows who he's talking to. He wants Anya and I to be able to speak.

I've learned many things since I left my last Boklorn body, but I have no idea how to contain my expression of joy at his offer. I clamp my lips together until I calm myself, then say, "I believe her name was... Anya?"

"Yes." He nods. "Would you like her company?"

"That would be acceptable." Inside, I'm standing on the chair in the control room I created, jumping for joy.

"I'll have her beamed down upon your promise she'll come to no harm and will return to my ship unharmed when my visit is over."

"Absolutely."

Anya

I'm excited. I'll be able to see Rynn inside Kato's body. I can't wait to see him, although it will be weird being cordial to the male who looks like the evil king who tried to rape me.

I'm wearing the emerald dress I wore that awful night. It's the only thing onboard the *Fool* that's nice enough to greet a king.

I quiet my thoughts as I'm beamed to a transporter room inside the royal palace. The moment I rematerialize, I'm surrounded by six palace guards. After I'm rudely patted down—a process that takes longer and is much more intrusive than it has any right to be—I'm hurried through hallways and brought to an ornately paneled set of double doors.

"Your Highness," one of them says after he knocks. "The female is here." One word, "Come," is barked from the other side of the door.

Crap. I'm used to Rynn's softly mellifluous voice. His voice was always a little quieter, his o's a little rounder, than Zar's. This male? He's sharp and angry. Is he going to rape and torture me for my entire time on this planet? Maybe it's not Rynn. Did we read all the signs wrong?

The guard opens the door and I swish in. The sound of the fancy silken gown is the only thing I can hear above the wild beating of my heart.

"Leave us," Kato orders as he looks me up and down.

I can't read him.

"Twirl," is the first word out of his mouth. It's accompanied by one of his ringed fingers making an exaggerated circle.

Shit! Rynn wouldn't do this. I'm in the room with Kato!

"I've wanted to see you again since our time was cut short on Algaron IV. Come. Sit at the table with me." He strides to the door, opens it, and instructs the two guards standing at attention on either side to leave.

Without hesitation, they depart. He closes the door and turns to me with a full-on four-fanged smile. It's terrifying. Feral. I can barely make my way to the chair and force my legs to bend.

After I sit, he pulls his chair close so we're hip to hip. Is it Rynn? We're facing each other like that first evening when I fed him dessert. He leans close and places his palm upon my cheek so softly I can barely feel its touch. His eyes shutter closed, he swallows, and then his whole body trembles.

It's Rynn! Rynn who is full of love for me. My love for him comes bubbling past my fear, overflowing, spilling out of every pore of my body.

Leaning in, he whispers in my ear, "I've missed you every moment of every day, my Anya."

"Oh, Rynn. You were so stiff and angry I was afraid you were Kato. I'm so glad to see you." This position keeps my gaze from him. Without seeing Kato's sneering face, I can connect with the Rynn *inside* this vile body. The real Rynn.

"I believe I'm being surveilled even in my own suite, but you can sit on my lap. We can whisper anything we want to each other."

After sliding onto his lap, I place my head on his chest and listen to the steady thrum of his heart.

I lean up to whisper in his ear, "It's so weird to have affection for someone living in this odious body."

"I understand. Can I pet your hair while you tell me everything that's transpired in the last three *lunars*?"

I snuggle closer and take a deep breath for the first time since we cooked up this plan with Valeris.

"We've been watching things on Ton'arr, noticing the changes Kato made ____"

"I want to hear this," he interrupts, then pauses and takes a deep breath that ruffles my hair. "But first, how are *you* doing, Anya? You lost your beloved

mate.” He hugs me tighter, offering support. “I’ve prayed you were coping well.”

“Zar’s alive,” I say, pulling away to watch how he reacts to the news. “He lived through the uncoupling.”

His mouth pops open in surprise.

“I thought... I assumed... he would die. When the symbiont leaves the host...” he shrugs. “That’s always what happens.”

“Ton’arrs are different. Stronger, I guess.”

He hugs me tight, his fingers threading through my hair. “I didn’t lie, Anya. I didn’t dream he could live through that. I never meant to trick you. I truly believed I couldn’t leave without killing him. Do you hate me? Does Zar?”

“Of course not. We know you, Rynn. You’re a worthy male. You never would have lied about that.”

I explain everything that’s happened over the last three months. How Zar only suffered a flesh wound the night Kato burst through our door. That it took the better part of a week for Zar to fully re-inhabit his body, for his mind to come back online after Rynn’s departure. That’s when we heard of the sacrifice they both made on that fateful day.

I wax eloquently about how privileged I was to watch as the King and Queen helped nurse him back to health with love and affection. How Zar, always so strong and self-assured, has grown into himself even more with the support of his two wonderful parents.

“It’s so sad that Valeris is dying so soon after Zar and he reunited.”

“Valeris is healthy,” I tell him. “It was just a clever ruse to get him down on this planet to be able to speak with you.”

Kato’s body relaxes under me.

Then I explain how we watched his behaviors and appreciated how clever he was to make slow changes. If he'd come in and made sweeping reforms, his evil supporters would have staged their own coup.

"We've been gathering strength. Calling in favors from people still loyal to Valeris. Now that we know it's really you inside Kato's body, we're going to stage an overthrow."

"That would be wonderful," he says so sincerely I don't think he's even had time to wonder what will become of him. Doesn't he realize he's wearing the body of the planet's most hated male? That the overthrow we're planning means either his death or a life sentence in prison?

"We've got a plan for you," I assure him. "We'll get you out of here safely. Everything's not yet in place, though. We've got some tweaking to do. We need to build up our forces."

"I don't matter," he says as he holds me tight and kisses the top of my head. "As long as you and Zar and the real King and Queen are alive and safe, I'm happy."

He hugs me and rocks me in his embrace. I've had three months with Zar to reestablish our relationship, to be able to touch, make love. Rynn's been here in this palace with no one to talk to, no one to trust. No love and affection. He lost me *and* Zar.

"You must have been so sad, so lonely."

"Yes. I've been lost in some ways. What I had with you and Zar was the best thing that ever happened to me, even if it was short-lived. I'm so glad Zar's alive. I hated to think my leaving his body killed him. And it pained me every time I thought of how heartbroken you must be."

He's such a good male.

“I still love you,” I blurt. It’s true. Even with him wearing the face of my enemy, I still love Rynn.

“And I will never stop loving you,” he says sincerely as he lifts me off his lap and sets me on the chair. “And I love Zar. That is why you should command the ship and have them take you back.”

“Why?”

“I love Zar like a brother. No, that’s not right. It’s more than that. The Arcrites have a concept called soulbinding. It’s rare and coveted. It’s a connection as strong as two people can experience. That’s how I feel about him. It’s warm and deep and full of respect and affection.

“And you, Anya, I love you in a different way. After what we shared that night on Algaron IV, I’ll never be able to think of you as my friend. You’re my lover.

“I don’t know what your plan is, but I’ll never be able to look at you without wanting you. You’re too tempting. My feelings are too strong. It’s not fair to any of the three of us.”

He pets my head, then says, “Tell me what I need to know. I will do whatever I can to ensure Valeris overthrows Kato’s rule. Fill me in on everything, including how you found the courage to walk in here when you wondered if this body might still be controlled by a male who would rape and possibly kill you. After you’ve shared all of that, you need to leave.” I pause and breathe and try not to cry. My body feels old and heavy. Even blinking my eyes seems like too daunting a task. This situation is impossible.

Over the past three months, I’ve been consumed with planning this overthrow. At nights, I’ve held my beloved in my arms, endlessly thankful

to have him back. But always in the dark recesses of my mind, I've thought of Rynn. How sweet and loving he was. How he's such a gentle soul.

Zar and I have talked about him endlessly. How selfless he was to move into Kato's body, and how brilliant he is as he's made improvements for every living being on Ton'arr. We've both missed him. I never allowed myself to admit how much I loved him. How much I still love him. And looking at him, it's clear the feeling is mutual.

It's like a Greek tragedy. Through no fault of our own, we can't be together. I restrain my urge to slide onto his lap and hug him. I tear my mind from the thought of throwing him on the bed and having my way with him.

He's right. I need to leave before we do something all three of us will regret.

After I tell him everything we've planned, Rynn scoots his chair away from me.

"I may never see you again," he says, his expression speaking volumes of things he can't say out loud.

After walking me to his door, he reaches for my hand and brings it to his lips. His eyes shutter closed and he kisses the back of my hand with ineffable sweetness. We both know this could be the last time we see each other. He could be killed in the upcoming overthrow attempt. If not, he can never allow me back on Ton'arr without raising suspicion.

When he releases his grip, my other hand covers the spot he just kissed as if I could make the tingle last forever.

Within an hour, I'm back on the *Fool's Errand*, crying in my beloved's arms and then giving a report to the ship's warriors about the intel I collected on Ton'arr.





CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

One month later...
Rynn

I'm getting stronger every day, motherfucker. I'm going to break out of here and kill you. Soon! My son, Dasteron, will figure this out. He'll come for me and make you pay.

Valeris's faction has conquered most of the planet. My generals tell me the rebels will overtake the palace soon. Frankly, I can't wait. Kato's constant threats and epithets are driving me crazy.

It's been nerve-wracking sitting here, unable to communicate with Zar, Anya, or anyone from Valeris's side. I've not only listened to my advisors, I've crawled through my own data and run thousands of scenarios. With each successive rundown, I've found ways the rebels might lose, then made corrections on my side to help Valeris succeed.

I've countermanded my generals and moved my armies to places they'll be of less strategic value. Although initially I was loathe to do it, I've denied

all leave time to weaken the army's morale. I've done as much as I can to ensure Valeris wins back his crown.

I probably should have spent more time considering my own fate. When they storm the palace, I'll be vulnerable. That is, if they overtake it at all and don't simply bomb it into dust with me in it.

I guess it doesn't matter. When I contemplate life after the overthrow, there's really nothing I care to live for. I'll be in this maniac's body. He'll continue his incessant shouting. That is, unless he escapes altogether and winds up in the command center with me.

I shake my head, unable to imagine that. Where Zar and I came to a truce, and then became soulbonded, Kato and I will never be able to get along. The other option is just as repugnant. I could kill him. When I remember how fragile Zar's lifeforce was when I approached him in his room, I realize just how easy it would have been to snuff Kato out. Although Kato's grown stronger than Zar was when I found him, I could obliterate him, but it would kill my soul. I don't have the heart to do that, although my wise mind tells me it would be the best choice.

So, I'll either be killed in the initial overthrow, or sentenced to death after a lengthy trial. I guess either of those will be preferable to living with Kato's perpetual, thundering threats.

Just wait, fucker. I'm going to—

BOOM!

Loud explosions pierce the silence of the palace, along with concussions that shake the foundations of the building.

"Your Highness," one of my guards yells through my door. "The palace is being breached."

“Stand down,” I order. “We’ve lost. Don’t risk your life. Get our enemy on comms. Announce our surrender.”

Finally. I can do what I’ve been telling my generals to do for weeks. We can stop losing more good soldiers to a lost cause. Let this moment be the first chance at peace this planet has had in thirty-eight *annums*.

Not long after, I hear boots marching down the hallway outside my door. I stand, arms raised in surrender, and wonder if they’ll be so bloodthirsty as to kill me on sight. They might. They certainly have a right to hate the male who lives in this body. He’s raped their planet of resources during his entire reign.

There’s something about the synchronized sound of boots marching that causes a spike of cold terror to slither up my spine. My stomach tightens and swift panting breaths rasp out of my throat.

I unlock the door and open it wide. Valeris will be sleeping here soon. No use having them break it down.

At the head of the inverted v of the invading soldiers is Zar, his brown mane held high, his golden eyes shining.

I’m glad it’s him who has come to take me into custody. When we’re face to face, he gives me a grin. Not just a small show of upturned lips, but a full-on smile flashing all four fangs.

“Kato!” his voice is full of hatred. “Our intel says there are a few cells in the basement. I’m taking you into custody.”

Anyone behind him would think he held me in contempt and couldn’t manage to hide his hatred. He’s still smiling, though, as he gently grabs my upper arm. His smile disappears as he turns and escorts me down the hallway.

“Though this male is our enemy,” he says loud enough for all to hear, “we owe him a fair trial. It’s the right thing to do, and the people of this planet deserve it. He is to be treated with the utmost respect.”

Instead of leaving me to his cadre of soldiers, he personally accompanies me through hallways, down staircases, and into the bowels of the palace. I’d never explored here, but his information was correct. There is a small cellblock with three ancient cells made of thick metal bars.

He tells me, “I’ll be back soon to speak with you personally,” then raises his voice to say, “Treat this male according to his highborn station.”

Zar

Finally, this fight is over. We’ve arranged for my father to be crowned tomorrow. It will be broadcast planet-wide over every type of media.

The coup, re-taking the planet, has consumed my time and energy as well as that of my crew. There is just one loose end, and it will be tied up before I lay my head on my pillow this evening.

After locking Kato in his cell, I spent the rest of the day conferring with my father and his generals, making sure the palace was safe for his return. Then I consulted my very soul. The decision I must make in the next few *hoaras* will affect me more deeply than any other of my life. This doesn’t just affect me. It touches the lives of two other people I hold most dear.

“Want to talk about it?” Anya asks as she dons a fine gown she chose for this occasion.

We’re in a guest room on the second floor of the palace. It’s even more opulent than the rooms at the palace on Algaron IV. My mother insisted Anya and I get clothing made to reflect our station. I’m standing in my closet choosing between many garments she’s had made for me. It still feels odd. I don’t know if I’ll ever feel as if I belong in them.

My father and mother are staying safely on the *Fool's Errand* for one more night. We'll quash any small uprisings before we risk their lives. We've done heat scans and conducted interviews. Every living being in this palace is a loyalist.

"Babe? We don't have to do this. Ever. And we certainly don't need to do it tonight. I sense you're not sure. We shouldn't make this commitment unless you're all-in. It's a huge decision. Bigger even than your decision to mate me."

I tug her to me, mindful of not wrinkling her fine crimson dress, then I pull her even more tightly into my embrace. To hell with the wrinkles.

"It will change things forever," I tell her.

"Yes."

"It's the right thing to do."

"No," she protests. "No, it's not. I will not allow you to do this because it's right. The only reason to do this is if it's what your heart truly wants."

"Anya," I breathe into her fragrant hair, "why is it you're always wiser than me?"

"That's why you picked me. Right?"

We stand like this for a long time as I parse through my thoughts, considering pros and cons until they're a whirling jumble in my mind. There are very few irrevocable decisions that must be made in a lifetime. This? This is one of them.

"It not only is the right thing to do," I say as I pull away far enough to look into her beautiful green eyes, "it's what I want. And it's what you want, right?"

"Yes, Love."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

I grab her hand and pull her through our door. On our way through the palace, I keep my arm snugged around her waist. As we approach the dingy door leading into the dank cellblock, I slow.

“Cellblocks don’t carry good memories for either of us, Anya. Are you alright?”

“The best present of my life came from a cellblock, my love. That’s where I met you. Tonight, I get another gift.”

It’s her happy, confident smile that gives me the final push to go through with this, the biggest decision of my life.

We stride down the small hallway that butts up against the cells, and stand in front of Kato’s cell. He’s only been in there a day, but it’s obvious he’s been struggling.

“We need to talk,” I say, knowing we’re on camera.

He rises from the small bed he was lying on and nods.

“We’re transporting you to a private room nearby.”

“My Lord,” the captain of the guard says, “we won’t be able to protect you. Let me advise you again not to take such a risk. Especially with your mate nearby.”

“Thanks, but I’ve made up my mind. I have my sword,” I say as I hold up an ornamental sword I’m wearing in a scabbard at my waist.

Just around the corner is a small, enclosed room, no nicer than the cells, but more private. Ar’Tok, who does comms on our sister ship and was part of the invasion force, came in earlier and swept it for recording devices.

This isn’t a nice room. Nothing has prettied it up. There are no pictures on the walls, no rug on the floor. There are simply ancient stone walls in the square room with a scarred wooden table and chairs in the middle.

“Sit,” I say as I indicate one of the chairs.

Kato lifts an eyebrow in question when Anya and I remain standing.

“It’s safe in here,” I say. “Private. No listening devices.”

“I’m honored you came to see me before whatever big event you’re dressed for. Zar, let me tell you how happy I was when Anya told me you lived. I never meant to cause you such pain. I’m so glad you escaped not only with your life and your beloved, but now you’ve found your family and you’re a royal prince. It’s a true fairy tale.”

If I had been wavering about my decision before now, his speech just clinched it. I’m about to make the best decision of my life.

“We’re not on our way to a big event,” I tell him as I allow myself to feel the joy building in my heart. “The big event is here.” I glance at Anya and ask, “Ready, Beloved?”

Her face brightens with a wide grin as she nods.

We both kneel on one knee in front of a very surprised sixty-*annum*-old Ton’arr male.

“Since you possess all the knowledge in the universe, I assume you’re familiar with Earther mating customs?” I ask, one brow winged up in question.

“U-um?” he stammers.

“It is customary for one party to bend on one knee to ask another’s hand as a mate. As always, things between us have been... unusual. Why should now be any different? Anya and I will be doing the proposing. You, my dear friend, will be listening. And giving us an answer.”

I wish there *were* cameras in here. I’d love to play the pictures back later, on our anniversary. We could have a good laugh at the shocked expression on his face.

“Do you want to go first, Beloved?” I ask Anya.

“Rynn, I’ve loved you for a long time. I’ve watched you grow from a self-consumed ass to a wonderful, giving person. The amount of times and the various ways you put others first has astonished and impressed me. You have a huge heart and a brilliant mind. I would be honored if you would take our hands in marriage.”

Rynn’s mouth is working, but no words are coming out. It’s just as well. He needs to hear what I have to say.

“I hated you, brother.” It’s only after the words come out that I realize how truly odd they are as opening remarks to a mating proposal. Probably equal in romance to Anya’s description of Rynn as a “self-consumed ass.” I refocus. “But I love you now. Anya told me your people call our connection soulbound. I couldn’t have come up with a better name.

“You’re more than a friend. You make me a better male. We’re a great team. I can count on you to always have my back. And I know you will always, always care for my beloved with all your heart and soul.

“I’m inviting you back in, my brother. To live together, love together, and work together.”

I’ve never seen a person’s face crumple as I see it now. It seems like every emotion a person can express is flying across this good male’s face. He’s shocked and touched and, if I’m reading him right, honored.

“Zar? You want to give up your independence? Your autonomy? What do you gain?”

It’s a good question. I’m not sure I have an answer until it flies at me hard and fast and with 100% certainty.

“I gain *you*, Rynn. I gain you.”

He rises and goes to hug me, but his hands are manacled.

“I guess you’ll have to wait until you’re back inside to hug me.”

“You guys can hug in there?” Anya asks.

“He never told you?” Rynn asks. “We can kill each other in there, too.”

He and I burst into laughter. Anya does not.

“Do you have an answer?” I ask him again.

“I would be honored.”

He’s touched, Anya’s crying, and I feel like I just came in first after running a marathon. It’s a good day.

“And Kato?” he asks. “His spark is alive and strong and vocal. So, like you, he will survive when I leave.”

“This is even better. We weren’t sure he was still in there. He gets to remain in that miserable body, be tried for crimes against the royal family and his people, and pay for his misdeeds.”

The three of us form a tight circle. Little Anya, who barely reaches our shoulders, and the two of us Ton’arr males.

Rynn can’t hug me, but Anya and I embrace him. “I love you, Rynn,” I tell him, then press my lips to his.

The melding is different this time. Where before it felt like an invasion, this time, because he came by invitation, it feels like a homecoming. Perhaps because we’ve traveled this path before, I don’t lose consciousness, nor does it hurt.

I feel him tinkering at the base of my brain, but more than anything, I feel him inside me. As I think the thought, he says it.

It’s like coming home.

Yes, brother, coming home. His embrace is whole-hearted and overflows my heart with joy.





CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Anya

Rynn's right. It *is* like a fairytale. Zar and Rynn get to be princes. I get to be a princess. Take that Disney, you ain't got nothin' on me. And best of all, for the rest of my life I'll have not one but two attentive males who love me more than life itself. Just as I love them.

We left Kato on the stone floor in that crappy conference room. The guards will carry him back to his cell and what becomes of him after that, I really don't care. As long as he's punished.

Before we enter our suite, the captain of the guard approaches Zar with a logistical question. After he answers it, Zar instructs, "We're not to be interrupted until I contact you again," then pulls me through the doorway. "Sorry, Rynn," he says, "I know this room isn't as fancy as the King's suite you're used to."

"It's fine," is Rynn's reply. It's wonderful that they converse out loud so I can be privy to what's going on in that handsome head. "Whatever this lacks in opulence, I've gained in better company."

We all laugh. It's good to feel light again. It's been tense for so long. I must admit, amidst my excitement about what's coming next, I'm also feeling a little shy. I've made love with Zar's body a thousand times. With two males inside it? Not so much.

"Nervous, Love?" I don't need his fingers around my wrist to know this is Rynn. He has the most uncanny knack of tuning in to my feelings.

I nod.

"We'll do this at your pace, or not at all. We don't need to consummate this commitment right away."

The male has been dying for this for months. Now he's offering to wait longer? I shouldn't be surprised. He's such a worthy male.

"Now that I've been genuinely invited in and know I have a rightful place here, if you want, I can wait in the orchard. I don't have to even be—"

"Don't even say it. We're going to figure this out. Tonight," Zar insists. Smiling, they allow their eyes to show the warmth of their affection. Then they stalk to me, turn me in a half circle, and embrace me from behind. Their touch is full of love and totally unthreatening as they rock me back and forth.

"Would it shock you," Rynn whispers in my ear, "if I admitted how many times I imagined this? How many times I pictured in my mind what's about to happen?"

"No. I wouldn't be shocked. Tell me, Rynn. What do you really look like? I want to be able to picture you when we're touching." I probably shouldn't have asked. What if he describes an antenna'd slug or Jabba the Hut? I cringe, wishing I could pull back my words.

"You never asked Zar?"

"No, but maybe you shouldn't—" I'm really regretting my question now.

“I was formless until I met you. I was born as a sparkle of light, and I maintained that in my Boklorn bodies. It wasn’t until I constructed the internal living space for Zar that I gave myself a visage.”

“You made the treehouse and the command center for me?” Zar asks.
Treehouse? Command center?

“Yes. I thought it would provide you a sense of comfort.”

“That’s the first place I killed you,” Zar says. I don’t detect a hint of shame in his voice.

“Someday you’re really going to have to tell me about that,” I interject.

“We had a rough start,” Rynn placates. Are they always going to cover for each other? It’s adorable. “I was already in love with you, Anya. When I had to pick a face and body, I chose a—”

“Human,” I interrupt. “Let me describe him.”

They lift an eyebrow in question.

“Shoulder-length hair the color of mine?”

He nods.

“A face almost pretty enough to be a woman, but a masculine jaw and a sexy gaze?”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Rynn’s voice is self-deprecating.

“Yes,” Zar admits. “He’s almost too pretty to live in a gladiator’s body.”

“How do you know what I look like?” Rynn asks me.

“I hate to admit this in front of Zar,” I say, “but that male invaded my dreams since before we met Valeris and Avania. I thought I’d lost my mind.”

Since my abduction, I’ve encountered a lot of things I can’t explain, but this odd phenomenon definitely goes to the top of the list. Visions of slugs and

Jabba the Hut are banished and I can keep the picture of my handsome Rynn in my mind when we make love.

I turn in their arms, lift onto my toes, and throw my arms around their neck, then lay my lips on theirs. The night is going to turn sensual in moments, but this kiss is far from it. I realize my two males kissed during the transfer, but in our ceremony, the groom never got to kiss the bride.

If this were a book, this mere brushing of lips would take up an entire volume. It signals all the commitment and love that people can share. The warmth and softness of our lips are full of sweetness and promise.

“I love you. I love you both,” I say when I finally pull away.

“My beloved,” says Zar.

“My love,” says Rynn.

Rynn

I’ve had the pleasure of our mate’s body for annums, brother. I’m right here, but you’re at the helm, Zar says as he sits in one of the command chairs.

The female of my dreams is in my arms. Any reason for guilt has been banished. She’s rightfully mine to love and hold and enjoy.

Slipping my hand under her curtain of hair, I cup the nape of her neck and tug her toward me. Her kiss to me was a pledge of love. I’ve told her of my love in a thousand different ways. My kiss to her now promises nothing other than to signal my intention to pleasure her all night long.

My lips tease her with little smacking noises. They culminate with a wet swipe along the seam. When I press closer, I feel her smile, the corners of her lips tipping up in happiness.

I vow to spend the rest of my life making her happy, but that is not my mission tonight. Tonight I want to make her scream in passion.

I trail little pecks to her ear, then whisper, “You’ve made love to this body a thousand times, Anya, but I’ve never known yours. Be bold tonight. Teach me.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want you to love me like Zar does. I’ll teach you nothing. Learn me, Rynn. Discover me on your own. Create your own playbook.”

Something inside me cracks open. Until my end of days, this moment, this moment right here, will always be the moment time will be measured by. My memories will be sorted as either before or after Anya said those words. Because the Rynn of before is no more. She just created a new one. This Rynn is going to take what he wants. At least in the bedroom.

After turning her in my arms so her back is toward me, I hit the autozip on her beautiful crimson dress. Not wanting to wait for it to slide to the floor, I pull it down only to notice she’s wearing no undergarments. Not on top or bottom.

“Don’t. Move.” I can barely get the words out through my dry throat. I drink her in from her softly rounded shoulders to the indent at her waist to her rounded hips. The cleft of her bottom beckons. Although I want to explore, I need to finish my visual feast.

Stepping around her, I smile as I drink her in. Her breasts are as sumptuous as I remember from the night she gave me my first orgasm from her talented mouth. A memory I frequently called to mind when I stroked myself in the king’s bedchamber. Those beautiful pink tips are already puckered in arousal.

I hear Zar behind me, breathing in deeply. Maybe he’s enjoying her scent, or maybe it’s just a hint for me to do the same. Yes. Her arousal scent. It’s already perfuming the air and I haven’t laid a finger on her.

“You’re the most beautiful being I have ever seen,” I whisper, then bridge the distance between us and nip my way from the spot behind her ear, down the cords of her neck, to her collarbone. I never thought of it as an erogenous zone, but when I scrape it with my fangs, she sucks in a harsh breath and arches her back in invitation for me to do it again.

I oblige, only to receive a gift of more of her scent.

Nipping downward, my mouth arrives at her nipple at the same moment my hands cup both her breasts. I lick and nip and suck one while my thumb strums the other.

“Rynn,” she breathes dreamily as her nails squeeze my upper arms.

My cock hammers at my clothes. I not only love her touch, but her response to me. I feel like a maestro playing the galaxy’s finest instrument.

Switching sides, I work her other nipple with my mouth while I pluck its mate. Unsheathing one of my claws, I drag the tip across it until she moans deep in her throat. The sound of her pleasure makes me feel more like a king than I ever did when I was in Kato’s body.

I keep switching breasts, finding creative ways to play with my new toys. I notice everything about this moment—the silken feel of her skin under my fingertips, the way she responds when I brush my mane across her breasts, the sweet taste of her. It’s a heady package.

“Naked,” she says as she tries to ease my jacket from my shoulders.

“Not yet.” I give the tip of her nipple a harder nip as a scold.

“Rynn,” she breathes in pleasure.

I’d been careful not to be too rough, but it appears she likes a firm touch.

I nip the other hard bud with the flat of my front teeth and she gets so weak-kneed I have to hold her up. Her scent in the room is now so heavy, I can taste it on my tongue. Which prods me to change locations.

Lifting her is easy in this magnificent body I've been gifted. I stride to the bed and lay her down.

"Naked," she pleads, but I simply shake my head.

Keeping my clothes on allows me to remain leashed. I've discovered my animal side lately, and I don't want to expose her to it. Yet.

Circling both her ankles with my hands, I split her wide and enjoy the view.

"You're beautiful, Love."

"You are, too. Especially when you're *naked*," she pouts.

"Not yet. Right now, *you're* on the menu."

I nip and bite and purr my way up her leg and inner thigh, then breathe in a great gust of her scent. Earlier today, I thought I was a dead male. Now I'm taking a trip to heaven.

I nuzzle my nose against her, gathering her scent on my face as I toss my head side to side and up and down. When I first smelled this, I gave it a name. The Anya Scent. It feels primitive, covering myself in it. I want to pleasure her and own her and make her come and slide inside her—all at the same time.

First things first. I must have her on my tongue. From this moment forward in my life, I vow to do nothing by half measures. I spear my tongue into her as deep as it will go. This pulls a low moan from her as she bends her knees to open herself more widely to me.

My eyes roll back into my head for a moment when her intimate flavor bursts upon my tongue. I've never tasted anything like it before, yet it's as if I've always known this is what my Anya would taste like. I lick her, like the feline I now am. Allowing the burrs on my tongue to stimulate her.

I'm still getting the lay of the land when my flat nose bumps her pleasure button. I have all the information in the galaxy at my disposal. Since our

first kiss in the kitchen, I've studied human female anatomy. I know the importance of this territory, but hearing her moan, feeling her writhe, I didn't expect my simple touch to elicit this response.

She's gripping my mane, her fingers threaded through the hair, her thumbs on the edges of my rounded ears. She knows this spot arouses me. Does she want me to lose myself in her?

"Make me come," she says as she hunkers closer, pressing against me. Gripping her hips, I extend my claws just a fraction and let them flex against her skin.

"Rynn!"

Somehow I know this wasn't shouted in distress. My Anya likes a bit of pain with her pleasure.

I repeat the action, then move the playing field to the glistening slit lying open in front of me. Lapping at her little bud garners a wiggle, but pressing elicits a moan and a thrust. Anya's body isn't hard to learn if I just pay attention.

I work the little nub, learning when to flick it hard and fast and when to press in deep, slow circular strokes.

She's not shy about letting me know what she likes. Sometimes she moans or hisses. At others, she rolls her hips and thrusts them wantonly into my face. When she's quiet and still, it's time to change tactics.

Her cream is the most delicious thing I've ever tasted, especially since I know it's a display of her pleasure. My cock and balls ache. They've been ready to burst since I rammed my tongue into her channel for the first time. All the more reason to keep my clothes on.

"Finger," she says as her head thrashes on her pillow.

My claws are fully retracted when I slide a finger into her warm, wet canal. My cock will never forgive me. He wants to be buried there.

Pressing harder with my tongue and then the flat of my nose, I feel her muscles tighten as her nails press into my shoulders. Her release overtakes her, and she rides her pleasure with gusto. The keening noise she makes, taking no care to rein it in, is almost enough to make me spend.

Her pleasure seems endless as her inner walls spasm around my finger. I slip another inside and feel like a king when her keening moans ratchet up a notch, telling me I added to her bliss even more.

The intensity of her release seems to slow, but when I quit stimulating her bundle of nerves, she breathes, “Don’t stop.”

When I resume licking, everything seems to go wrong. I can feel her pulling away, yet she just asked for more.

Soft for a moment, Zar coaches. The moment her hips beckon again, get back at it.

Rather than resent his instructions, I follow them. I lick softly and clutch her hips harder, letting her know I’m still with her. Her body settles down, then ramps up again.

The moment she pants and thrusts her mound up toward me, I get into the rhythm she liked best and within moments she hurtles into another boundless orgasm. At the peak, as I’m pounding my fingers into her, she calls my name.

It takes all the control I’ve got to keep from spilling in my pants. My female called my name at the peak of her pleasure! Is there anything in the history of the universe better than that? I don’t need to search the depths of my database for the answer, because the answer is a resounding no.

I feel like a king.

“No more,” she pleads when her bliss has ended and I gear up for another round. “Come up. Put your head on the pillows and kiss me.”

“How did I exist three thousand *annums* without you?” I rumble into her ear when we’re cuddled together.

“You’ve got me now, big guy.” She starts to snuggle closer, but then protests. “Take. Your. Clothes. Off!”

You can’t stall any longer, Rynn. We get to make love to our mate, Zar says. How? I ask.

Don’t be dense.

I join him for a moment in our command center and punch his arm. He gives me an indulgent smile. It wasn’t that long ago he would have taken my head off, literally. Now his smile is warm and caring.

I meant, are we going to do this together?

Yes. It will work well. We’re a team now.

Although we just mated each other as well as Anya, it makes me feel good to hear him call the two of us a team.

We bound out of bed and begin tearing off our clothes. Before we get the hang of coordinating our movements, I almost strangle us as I try to pull an intricately tied cloth off our neck. With only one or two more missteps, we manage to toss all our clothes on the floor.

As we crawl into bed, Anya bawls, “Stop!”

“What, Love?”

“A girl needs a moment to look. I feel like the wolf in an old fairytale. I want to eat you up.”

“That could be arranged,” slips out of my mouth far too quickly. Zar punches my arm inside and hisses, *You want her mouth on our cock, my*

male? You don't want to be sheathed inside her hot channel? Don't be a fool.

I bow to your greater knowledge, I tell him. Just thinking of the picture his words painted makes me feel the urgent need to slide into her.

We preen for her at the foot of the bed as her eyes become brighter. When Zar shakes his ass at her, I'm scandalized for only a moment, then I enjoy performing for her. When her little mouth pops open and she lets out a moan, we stop our show and climb next to her.

"Need more foreplay?" Zar asks as we pluck both her nipples in unison. He twists a bit on the release, silently giving me advanced pointers as we progress.

"For a minute," she says as she sinks into the mattress and nudges us out of the way so she can open herself to us.

We bend to flick one nipple with our raspy tongue while we twist the other, and within moments I can tell by the pitch of her moans that she's ready for more. The scent in the room leaves no question about her level of arousal.

Settling our hips between her thighs, our hand over her wrist and our tail around her ankle, I hold her gaze and whisper, "I love you, my Anya."

"I love you, Rynn. And Zar."

"My beloved," he murmurs.

When we place our cock along her folds and slide along their silken heat, I understand why poems are written and songs are sung and statues are forged all in homage to this. This. The intimacy, the pleasure.

My cock is dripping with excitement. It mingles with her cream as we glide up and down, teasing both us and our beloved.

We're purring now, the vibration penetrating through our torso all the way to our cock and balls. Zar's got control of the body, and he pauses for a

moment, ensuring I'm ready, before he plunges into her.

Bliss. It's tight and wet and warm and welcoming and the best thing in the universe. When we grip her shoulders and pump into her, it's the most spectacular thing I've ever felt. I watch her face. It's the picture of ecstasy. I couldn't love her more.

The pleasure carries me away. It doubles and then doubles again, and for a moment, I can't think of anything but reaching the pinnacle of satisfaction. We're slamming into her, pounding against her flesh until the slap of fur on flesh resounds around the room.

"Don't stop," she cries as she grabs our forearms and strains her pelvis against our onslaught, meeting our every thrust with one of her own.

She cries out our true name, "Zar-Rynn," as she finds her release.

To feel her channel clenching me, clenching our cock, is the body's truest expression of love and affection.

Zar helps her change position, using his hands to urge her onto all fours.

You've seen the four white puncture wounds on her shoulder? he asks.

Yes. I always meant to ask—

I bite her. It binds us.

Doesn't it hurt? I don't want to hurt her. I love her too much.

It will make her come again—hard. It's another connection. Quit talking and get to work!

Me?

You and you alone, my brother. It's my gift to you. A mating gift. When the act is done, it will be your mating gift to her.

Something shifts inside me. It's partly in my mind, but somehow in my physical being. As I allow myself to contemplate this act, the desire for it grows and builds. Maybe it's bleeding through from Zar, but I feel more

animalistic than I could have imagined. Although I've never experienced this before, I *want* to bite my mate.

"Yes, yes, yes," she urges. Is it something about this position that signals what I'm about to do? She's certainly indicating her desire.

My eyesight changes. Everything is blurry except the spot on her shoulder where my teeth have pierced her before. I want to bite her, to taste her, to tether us even closer.

As soon as I place my fangs on her shoulder, I feel her inner walls spasming around my cock as she releases a low, animalistic growl of her own. When I bite her, it's her scream of passion that causes me to jet into her. It's an explosion of bliss more potent than anything I've ever felt before.

Zar's nearby, but he doesn't join me. I don't know why until I roar. The sound thunders out of my mouth. It's hot and loud enough to be heard in the next galaxy.

My vocal cords strain and the sound is so deep it feels like it's ripping my throat. The first roar came barreling out of me without warning or effort. It felt so good, was such a wonderful expression of my feelings, that I force out a roar on my own.

It's as if nature built the Ton'arr to announce their possession of their mate. I like it. In case anyone wondered, let me proclaim to all the planet that this amazing, beautiful female is, "Mine," I rumble then begin to purr.

I give one more spray of my release into her, loving not only the physical bliss, but the power of possession, of marking her with my scent and my sperm and my bite. That she revels in it? Nothing on this world or any other could feel as good.

I don't know how, but as we tumble next to her and tuck her so close not a sliver of light could penetrate between our bodies, we begin to laugh. From

exquisite pleasure to having fun. We get this? All of this? Forever?

I've been truly blessed.

Her eyes were closed. When she pulls her head back far enough to look at me, fear slices up my spine as I see the look of pure shock on her face.

"What's wrong?" Reflexively, I curl my hands around her shoulders as if I could bind her here in case she runs.

She smiles, "Nothing's wrong, Rynn. Something happened with that bite. It's how Zar and I became truemates. You must be part of the bond now. When I look at you, your body is surrounded by sparkles of light. It's beautiful. Now I'll be able to see the reminders of your Arclite form."

I left that form behind 3,000 *annums* ago, but I like this. Zar and I are soulbound, but I can retain the slightest bit of individuality. I like that my truemate can see me.

Zar

I'll never tell either of them, but I'd been worried about this coupling. I told them both I'm not good at sharing. Although I love them both, I'd questioned if I would be able to tolerate sheathing myself inside my beloved and not being able to enjoy it alone. I'd wondered not only about the physical pleasure, but what it would be like to share her affection.

But look at her, her face is still rosy from all the ecstasy we shared, her eyes slightly unfocused. Yet she's so full of love. For us both. And it doesn't feel as if I'm getting half the love. No. The love is doubled.


And watching Rynn's enjoyment, *feeling* it. There was no jealousy. I was able to share his joy. And the sparkles, it's fitting. Yet another way to signify how inextricably bound and connected the three of us are.

"I love you, my mates," I tell them, my voice hoarse with passion.

"I love my mates, too," she says, the look in her eyes shouting her sincerity.

“I’m the luckiest male in the universe,” Rynn announces.





Epilogue

One month later...
Anya

I won't cry, I won't cry, I won't cry, I chant to myself.

"I give up," I sigh.

"What, my beloved?"

"I've been telling myself not to cry, but that's a fool's errand, right?"

Shit. When I realize what I just said, I break out in tears. Why did I have to say the words fool's errand? That's what I'm crying about.

"It's going to be fine," Rynn says. They've gotten really good at squeezing me when they talk, so I know who says what. It works pretty well. Now I know who to reward with kisses and who to tease mercilessly. "We're just embarking on a new adventure. It's not an ending so much as a new beginning."

"New beginning, huh?" I ask. "Is that going to be part of your speech?"

"Aye," says Zar.

Our journey to the gangway is deliberately slow. It's as if I'm saying a mental goodbye to every metal wall and doorway. Yeah, I know I'll visit, but it will never truly be the same.

Everyone is already waiting for us on the tarmac. I don't know how we managed it, but the three of us are the last to arrive. We're standing between the two ships—the *Fool's Errand* and its sister ship, the *Devil's Playground*. "Everything's changing," I say, unable to keep my voice from sounding like a sad three-year-old.

"Aye, love. If it doesn't work out, we can change our minds."

But we won't. Because this decision is for the best.

"Maddie and I looked," calls speckled, red-skinned Stryker as he approaches us. He holds up a liquor bottle. "We couldn't find the stuff you call champagne. You're really going to use a bottle of Sillerian whiskey? Sorry to say it, but that sounds like a terrible waste."

"He's right," Rynn says. "Not that I drink the stuff, but it will all just end up on the ground."

No one's in a very talkative mood. They're all looking expectantly at us. Maybe the festivities Maddie has planned for afterward will perk us all up. "Got your speech, babe?" I ask Zar.

"Of course." He pats the leather pouch he wears around his waist. It's the galaxy's sexiest fanny pack.

Everyone hushes and gathers around us. After he consults his notes, Zar begins solemnly.

"Welcome everyone. You're all my friends, comrades, brothers, and sisters." He pauses to look each person in the eyes.

I'm doing the same as I mentally remind myself of my history with each of these people. Although we've shared soul-crushing slavery and hair-raising

close calls together, what pops into my mind are all the good times we've had. The weddings, feasts, celebrations, and funny moments. In one way or another, I love each one of these people.

There are even some new faces in the crowd. Three high-ranking Ton'arr soldiers Valeris assigned to our ship.

"As you know, I've agonized over this decision, and I think it's the best for all of us. I've known many of you mated couples have yearned for children, but I kept firm in my belief that no babies should be born on a warship. And make no mistake, we're at war."

He pinches the bridge of his feline nose. He thinks it's a smooth move, but we all know it's to hold back his own tears. I quit trying. Wet rivulets are sliding down my face already.

"It's a sound decision to move almost all the mated couples to the *Fool's Errand* and change her mission from warship to freighter. You'll be taking easier missions, nothing illegal. There are plenty of ways to make legal credits in this galaxy. Some of you may want to keep fighting non-lethal *cestus* matches. Perhaps on our friends' Sanctuary compound where they've rebuilt an ancient arena. No death matches there."

When I take a moment, through my tear-stained vision I see there's hardly a dry eye in the crowd.

"We're here to christen the *Devil's Playground* with a new name. This decision didn't come easily, but Kato's factions have vowed to pursue us. His son, Dasteron, my own cousin, will follow in his father's footsteps and keep making attempts on my father's life. Since we were the factor that propelled Valeris to victory, we're now going to be in Dasteron's sights. He's championing what they're calling the Prosperity Party. Prosperity indeed. Prosperity to line the rich's pockets.

“If being their enemy isn’t bad enough, we all know the MarZan cartel will never let up. We’ll be their target for *annums* to come. To fight them, we’re going to be lean and mean. Warriors. And that’s why we’re here to christen the *Playground* with her new name: the *Galaxy Warrior*.”

The crowd politely claps. I think we’re all in too much shock to be enthusiastic. Savannah, a warrior in her own right, and Maximus’s mate Raine who is a doctor, will be the only females on the ship besides me. Not only will the *Warrior* be full of testosterone, gladiators will be streaking naked through the halls. I imagine there will be endless rounds of dirty drinking songs being sung in the dining room.

I don’t worry about the danger. We’ve always been in danger. Nor do I worry about the naked gladiator asses or bawdy songs. I get a kick out of their playful exuberance. I’ll just miss my friends.

“I may no longer be the captain of the *Fool’s Errand*, that honor goes to Captain Beast, but I’m decreeing that from this day forward, we meet for Blessed Peace Day each *annum* at Sanctuary. No excuses,” he scolds.

Shadow hands him the bottle of Sillerian whiskey and the two can’t manage to do it without a long, heartfelt hug. They could barely tolerate each other at first, but they’ve been best friends for years.

Shadow argued, wanting to follow his captain to the *Warrior*, but Zar refused. Shadow and his mate Petra should be on the safer ship. They’ve yearned to have a child.

A child. Yeah. I can’t lie. I want one, too. A little lion-baby would no doubt be adorable. Zar-Rynn and I have discussed it at length. There will come a time when we’ll settle down. Zar will eventually take over the throne on Ton’arr. Dear God, that means our children will be princes and princesses. It will take a while to wrap my mind around that.

In the meantime, we'll fly through the galaxy, keep the heat off the *Fool's Errand*, and continue being galactic Robin Hoods. Which may make things sound nobler than they are, but I prefer to think of it that way. We'll fight MarZan and what remains of the Prosperity Party and hopefully free a lot of slaves on our travels.

Zar has to hit the whiskey bottle against the hull of the ship three times in order for it to break. I hear more than a few whispered, "Why would anyone waste a good bottle of whiskey for this?" before Zar consults his notes and intones, "Spilling this whiskey is to symbolize good luck and safe travel for all aboard. Here's to long and happy and loving lives for all of us. Here's to new beginnings."

He looks at the crowd and despite the bittersweet moment, we all clap and cheer and the males stomp their feet.

Zar

She's crying, Zar.

We knew she would. It's a big change for all of us. I'm sad, too. The last annums were the best of my life.

Aye.

You called it a new adventure, Rynn. It will be.

Everyone in the crowd is hugging and sharing what they'll miss about each other. In between well-wishes, I turn my attention inside and look at my soulbound brother, my friend—Rynn.

I'd say our grand venture is going well. I tell him. When he lifts his handsome human eyebrow, I amend, *Our triad.*

Aye. He laughs, then looks at me. *I'm sounding more like you every day. I'm happier than I've ever been,* I tell him. *I have the love of the best woman in the galaxy, and the finest friend who will never leave my side.*

He nods, his eyes shining more brightly than normal.

I like knowing we'll always be together, I tell him. We make a good team. Your knowledge has been invaluable in helping with this new endeavor. I count on you in the tight squeezes and for the long-haul. You'll be my most trusted counselor when I'm... king.

It's still hard to believe that will be my future, but my parents and I have had some long talks. My reign on Ton'arr is definitely coming. That's when I'll give my beloved a youngling.

She walks over and slides her arm around my waist. Rynn grips her wrist, and I encircle her ankle with my tail.

"It's all going to be alright, isn't it?" she asks, looking up at me with a smile.

"Not alright, Beloved." I lean to give her a kiss filled with love and promise. "It's going to be amazing."

The End





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DEAR READER

I hope you liked reading this story as much as I loved writing it. It's been a long time in the making—three years, to be exact. I knew from day one that Zar was really a prince. I've been dropping the tiniest Easter eggs for you, but don't feel hurt if you didn't pick up on them.

I have so much to say about this series and this book in particular.

In case you missed reading my bio, I was a psychotherapist in the “before-times,” prior to becoming a writer. I specialized in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder).

The way Zar and Rynn communicated inside their head, including the internal “geography” and their struggles to accept each other, is very similar to some people's DID internal systems (although all people's systems are different). I hope the way their relationship evolved and the way they communicated inside seemed believable to you. (Except for the beheadings, I completely made that up).

I assume you got my not-so-subtle hint that there will be a new spin-off series. The first three books of the Galaxy Warrior series are already written and available on Amazon: [Torrvek](#), *Roklyn*, and *Reever*.

Zar-Rynn and Anya will be at the helm and there are all those luscious, single gladiators from the *Devil's Playground* (now *Galaxy Warrior*) as well as some Ton'arr soldiers who've been assigned to help. Rawr!

Check out the origin story for Zar's parents: King Valeris and Queen Avania. The beginning of their love story has been in my mind for YEARS! It was NOT love at first sight. The next book in the [Galaxy Gladiators series, Valeris](#), is written and waiting for you. I'm calling it a Cinderella retelling in space. It's a bit sweeter than most of my other books. If you can believe it, no one dies. Don't worry, there's plenty of spice.

If you're not aware, I retooled Zar's first book, added some additional scenes, including an epilogue, as well as some extra HEAT, and relaunched it recently. [Check it out if you haven't already.](#)

Can't wait for more in the Alanaverse before Galaxy Warriors launches? Don't forget the Galaxy Pirates, Galaxy Sanctuary, Galaxy Games, and Treasured by the Zinn series

The pirates series all have fun, exciting "capers" thrown into the romance. Galaxy Sanctuary is set on planet Fairea where the gladiators have a home base (and everyone can have babies).

[Galaxy Games](#) is a smidge grittier than my other books (a few more fight scenes and a whole lotta love).

Here's the link to the [Galaxy Gladiators Box Set with the first 10 books plus a bonus novella.](#)

This is the moment, as in all my previous books, that I beg for a review.

This time, though, I have a second request. When you write your review,

please try to do so in a way that **doesn't reveal the spoilers**. I hope you were surprised at many places in this book, especially the status of Zar's consciousness as well as his origin story. I hope you can allow readers who come after you to experience the surprise at their own pace. Thanks so much.

Hugs,

Alana

P.S. If you haven't [signed up for my newsletter](#), what are you waiting for? Cover reveals, extra scenes, contests, and giveaways.



MANY THANKS

Thanks to my early readers. Dr. Lee who helps with plotting, gives me gentle and not-so-gentle nudges about my scenes and characters, and always offers support. Thanks also to Stephanie A. who is way more than an assistant. I can always count on her. Thanks also to my daughter, author Amarra Skye, who gives me her best plotting help usually as we're hanging out in the pool. Yes, that's what we call "working."

I have teams of early readers who give feedback. Thanks to: Shannon B., Jhane M., Karen H., Michelle M., Naomi B., Christine R., Sarah B., Marianne K., Vedece B., Corda A., Anne-Marie S., Gill V., Patricia H., Anuschka-Marie, Patricia M.

Want to [sign up for my newsletter](#) to receive cover reveals, first chapters, sexy extra scenes, and enter giveaways?



ABOUT ALANA KHAN

Do you really want to know I have the cutest ragdoll cat in the world?
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