



# Accounting for Taste

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Reem woke on a space station, not feeling like herself. The cybernetic implant in her skull had the effect of changing her perceptions. Bonded without fanfare, she's content to do her job until she gets a call she wasn't expecting from a world she didn't dream of.

Reem can't remember leaving Earth. She woke up on a station that had put accelerated coms in her skull and sold her as a repurposed corpse to a world that needed analytics and other specific labour. Her daily tasks are boring but essential, and her implants notify her when she needs to head to the Pleasure Centre to take the edge off. While she doesn't feel any longer, her body has needs beyond food, water, and rest, so she has been ordered to take care of them.

At the top of the building housing the Pleasure Centre is a Hmrain who always does what is best for his people. He passively consumes the energy from those below and begins to grow to look forward to the arrival of a certain cyborg on a predictable cycle. When a request that he can't ignore comes to him, he has to send his newest acquisition to Aten, but first, he is going to lock her into a contract. He might be face blind, but he is no fool.

**Total Pages (Source):** 50

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## Chapter One

Reem felt the cold air with a chemical tang. It smelled like every hospital she had ever walked through. Well, she thought it did. Her memory was a little fuzzy.

She was on her back, and it felt weird because she never slept on her back. She sat up, and a series of alarms sounded, necessitating an orange being rushing toward her to silence them. Reem remained completely still as she tried to figure out what kind of hallucinogen had been put into her coffee.

“Oh, dear. You are the first of your kind with the procedure to wake. Your kind do not take kindly to the implant.” The words weren’t English, but Reem understood, which confused her.

Reem asked, “Where am I?”

“Experimental station. So many of your people were close to death that it was decided we could try and bring you back with implants. You lost a chunk of your skull and the brain behind it, so we put an implant in to improve recall and cognition. Your mind is functioning well, and if you can eat, you will be on your way to the blind auction.”

“Blind?”

“Your skills are all that is being marketed. We noted that you have scar tissue where your gestation organ would have been. So you aren’t of use as a breeder, but you do have an astonishing intellect, so you will be an information processor on some world. There is always a market for it.”

Reem carefully reached up and found a metal band wrapping around her skull. “Oh my god. What happened?”

The orange woman in scrubs said, “What do you remember?”

“Storms. So many storms. There was always debris flying through the air.”

“Do you know why there were storms?”

Reem tried to think, and her head ached, but she found it. “Asteroid. The Earth died.”

The orange woman smiled. “Excellent. Yes. We are adjacent to the space station that attends natural disasters and retrain the survivors for the worlds that need extra personnel. The survivors are trained, given a minimum bond that they will have to earn out, and put up for auction. If the auction price is more than the minimum bid, the bond servant will still have to earn out the amount, but with one notable exception, the bond is five to ten years, and then you are free to pursue citizenship and live your life.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Yours is set for a three-year value.”

“Okay.”

“You are older. It would be unfair to confine you to a position when you have less time to seek out a world for retirement.”

“Oh. Thank you. It’s nice to know that my being past my prime carries on into space.”

The orange medic smiled, showing needle-sharp teeth. “Your active availability is put

at twenty years, so the bidders will take that into consideration.”

Reem nodded slowly, still coming to grips with the smooth band that wrapped around her skull from behind, from temple to temple. “Do you know what happened?”

“Why don’t you check your med records and tell me?” The woman smiled again.

Reem blinked and thought about the medical records. Her mind began to play a vid of someone being pushed into the space, lying on its stomach with a large chunk of metal protruding from the back of her skull. “Oh, that would do it.”

The medic grinned. “You saw?”

“I saw. I stopped when you were about to pull the slab of metal out of my skull.”

“Excellent. Come with me, and we will test your eating.”

Reem looked down and saw that she was wearing a grey set of pyjamas in a crisp fabric that still felt soft. She was wearing slippers as well.

She turned and dangled her legs off the edge of the medical bed and then eased herself to the floor. “How long have I been out?”

“Six days. The first bond auction of your species was just held.”

“What about the blind auction for me?”

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“It is ongoing.If someone needs your particular skills, they will file a bid.”

They walked past six med beds, each with an attendant and a flat human, all with some kind of implant.All of the people had a grey cast.That wasn’t good.

“Your people do not easily accept cranial implants.You are the first to have survived the process.”

“You are experimenting on corpses.”

She smiled brightly.“Yes.The recently ceased.”

“Right.Well, that makes a clean break for me, I suppose.”

“You retained cognition and speech, so you are a definite success.Oh, you mean your ceasing.Yes, that was fortunate for us.Last-minute headwounds are rare for pickups.You were not even cold before they got you up to us.”

Reem nodded.“Sure, that is what the video records show.”

“I am so happy you can link through the secured systems.It is a triumph of the software.”

“I am unsure as to the details of the software acquisition, but I am happy with it as well.”She was getting videos and downloads as they walked through the med bay and up to the eating space.

The medic assigned to her got a tray of food, which included some ration cubes. “Here. Try these. I will get you something to drink.”

Reem took the tray and found an empty table, sat down, and started sniffing the food before picking up the tiny fork and tasting.

Some of the foods tasted familiar, others were jarring. She memorized what she didn’t like and consumed what she could with one of the watery teas that were offered.

The medic checked a tablet. “Oh, your auction has begun. Three worlds are bidding for your skillset.”

“Are they all compatible environments?”

“Yes. One is offering set living quarters along with a meal plan and a work schedule with days off. The others are listing your bond, and that is all.”

“Do I get to choose?”

“No. The bond house will select the one that is the greatest benefit to you.”

“Do any of the worlds offer medical care?”

“All of them, but some are more expensive than others.”

“What is the work position of the planet where the employee package is listed?”

“Wenavik. The meal plan and living quarters are deducted from your wages.”

“Okay. The others?”

“You choose the accommodation level you like and pay accordingly.”

She nodded and linked to the tablet, going through the work requests. She could do any of them, but she was watching the details of the bid and the focus of the worlds.

The criteria were still that she had to be paid enough to get out of her bond in two and a half years, so as the number went up, her bond by the hour shot up. Eventually, it was Wenavik that won the auction.

Reem immediately downloaded everything about the world. She stroked her fingers along her bare skull and over the metal implant. Well, she was alive against all odds, so now she had to make the best of things.

Her bond was sold, and she had a place to live. That was about as good as she could get.

Six weeks of travel on a commercial delivery service, and Reem was at her new home. The other humans going to bonds had avoided her on the vessel, so Reem kept to her quarters and went through the files she could access easily.

Reem walked down the shuttle hall, went through the airlock, and walked into the customs hall of Wenavik. She walked to the customs offices and checked in.

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The locals were grey with stripes that could change according to their mood.

“Comptroller Reem?”

“Yes.”

“You need to go to medical for a full workup, and then a vehicle will take you to your quarters in the city.”

“Of course.” She inclined her head.

“Comptroller?”

“Yes?”

“You are an actual cyborg?”

“Apparently. That is what they told me when I woke up.”

The male smiled. “I have never met one of your kind.”

“Neither have I. Which way to medical?”

He got up and called an officer, who respectfully led her through the halls and to the medical wing.

The doctor left his other patient when he saw her and escorted her to a private room



where he asked calmly, “Comptroller, may I run scans?”

“As long as you keep them in the safety range identified in my file.”

The doctor nodded and asked, “Your clothing is inert?”

“It is.”

“May I ask you questions about the damage?”

“Yes. I have lost emotional responses and social memories, but I will help you complete my file.”

The doctor nodded and helped her into the scanner, set the scan to her specifications, and while she was fully recorded from a genetic, cellular, and mechanical level, the doctor asked her questions.

“Do you know what caused the injury?”

“The visual record indicated a sheet of metal had been propelled into my skull, bisecting my brain. The experimental arm of the station got me before I was cold and applied the implant, restarting me.”

“Your thought patterns?”

“Similar to what I recall from before, but my acquisition of new information is dramatically faster.”

“Can you locate information about your occupation here?”

Reem sought the information and said, “I will sit in my office and process the data to

create new contracts on this world and others.”

The doctor nodded. “Correct. Now, you have ovaries but no gestation organ. What caused that?”

“I had cancer fifteen years ago. They cut it out. Nothing left behind.”

“You are not as youthful as some of the other bond servants acquired.”

“No. I am not. I would normally have been relegated to a bulk order, but my reproductive status and the wound in my brain... Special circumstances.”

“I see. Well, you are very healthy otherwise. I do need to explain an outlet that we have made available to new species.”

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“An outlet?”

“A sexual relief.”

“Oh, I don’t need that.”

The doctor smiled. “We all do from time to time. It is called the Pleasure Centre, and it is for the release of tension only. Anyone can use it if they have a need, and it will allow for release without social interaction.”

“Bots?”

“In your case, a med bed.”

“Oh. That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Give it a try if you have a need. Your ovaries are still active, so the hormonal response might take maintenance.”

“That is a logical assessment. Is the scan complete?”

“Yes, Comptroller.”

She stepped out of the standing unit and said, “What have you determined?”

“You are an adult female in good physical condition, which is startling considering how frail some of the others are.”

“I don’t know how I maintained body condition, but they told me some of the memories might resurface.Or they might not.Now, how do I get to my living quarters?”

The doctor smiled.“The overlord’s tower has staff here to take you to your home.Your living space has a clothing generator, and you will be very comfortable there.”

“Thank you.I was worried.”

He nodded.“Welcome to Wenavik.I think you will be very good for our world.”

“Well, I have two and a half years of mandatory labour to prove it before I have to figure out if it is what I want to remain doing.”

“Two and a half years?”

“My people don’t live long, and my body will begin to show signs of degrading in a few years.Time is a factor for me.I have to get in, save enough for retirement, and locate somewhere to live quietly while paying for maintenance on my implant.It is complicated.Thank you, doctor.Which way to the tower staff?”

The doctor smiled and walked her through the facility to where two men in military uniforms looked at her, at their tablet, and then nodded.Their stripes flashed nervous yellow.

“Hello, gentlemen.I believe you are waiting for me?”

One of them smiled in relief when she spoke Wenavik.“Yes, Comptroller.Please come with us, and we will take you to your living quarters.”

There was a soft scoff. Reem looked at the blond man standing next to a brunette lady. “Yes?”

“Why do you get special treatment, freak?”

Her guards tensed, but she said, “With hair that projects that he is perpetually nervous next to a woman whose colour radiates nausea, I would wonder who was a freak here.”

The guards snickered. “This way, Comptroller.” He was now striped with teal.

They walked with her, and she heard the rush of slippers on smooth flooring. She felt the air coming at her head and ducked, her guards whirled, and their lianas wrapped around him and held him down while his own minder had to take him over.

She looked at her guards. “Leave him with his minder, and please show me to my home.”

Her escorts flanked her, and off they went in a very nice vehicle.

“Why did they attack you, Comptroller?” The younger male was curious, his colouring bright green.

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“Because they perceived me as having an unearned status. We went back a little. Instead of moving for the benefit of all, it turned into the survival of one. That will take a while to lose, but he should not have aimed at my head. That shows an awareness of a vulnerability and a willingness to exploit it. So I hope he will get what is coming to him.”

The other male smiled. “You are to have judgment over your people for the first six months, so this will be interesting.”

She snorted. “Oh, this will be weird.”

Her quarters were lovely and in the large tower in the centre of the city. The Hmrain who owned the world, the system, and the several systems nearby was rarely seen. He did not care for living beings, aside from needing them for food.

Wenvari lived in the tower at the top, and then it was politicians and high civil servants. She would not see him in the course of her daily activities. He liked to leave the colonies alone to run themselves.

Her clothing generator had suggestions for a business wardrobe, so she got it started.

By the time she had eaten and was ready to sleep for the night, everything was lined up, and she had set timers for her first shift in the offices below. It was time to start earning her keep.

## Chapter Two

Reem followed the directions in her head to her office. There was a group of people waiting, and she headed for the door marked Comptroller.

“Get in line.” There was a growl from her left.

She calmly pressed her palm to the bio-lock, and it snicked open. “I could, but we would all be out here for a very long time.”

She walked inside, found the beverage dispenser, and summoned a cup of tea and a glass of water.

Reem moved around the desk and got settled as the visitors filled the room. She looked at the first one, brought up the docket of what needed to be decided, and looked to the shy-looking person in the centre of the crowd. “Name?”

“Aldiat Reno.”

“What do you wish to discuss, Aldiat?”

Reem brought up all of the files and saw that it was a business expansion request. She looked into the buildings, the files, the environment, and the required plumbing for the expansion.

“I wish to expand my bakery and kio shop. I have a business plan and an estimated planning diagram.”

“What will you do about foot traffic?”

“It will bring more clients into the local businesses.”

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She looked at the group. “Are there any of her neighbouring businesses here with concerns?”

A male stepped forward. “I have a sleep shop, and the increased scent of kio will disrupt the sleep.”

“What is the price of stronger filters for your shop, sir?”

“What?”

“You sell sleep, so you are controlling the environment. What kind of air filters do you have before you add any of your private scents for the ease of your clients?”

He blinked in surprise. “I don’t have that information.”

“Get it and return here this afternoon. Both of you. Miss, if the price of a year’s worth of filters can be added to your expansion costs, you will be allowed to proceed. If you settle this between yourselves, contact this office to close the file.”

Aldiat nodded, and her neighbour left the room.

A helpful woman said, “Comptroller, you can look up the specs of his unit on the system.”

Reem nodded. “I am aware, but if he lies and lists a more expensive unit, he suffers a fine, and the government can take over his business. Isn’t this fun?” She looked at the crowd again, and one man paled and ran.



Reem was almost tempted to smile. “Next.”

The man who had told her to get in line stepped forward. “I am looking for a new field for one of the new crops.”

“Which crop? There were many imported with the new species.”

He dug into his pocket and pulled out some corn and wheat.

“Which do you wish to grow?”

“Both.”

She looked up information on growing corn and wheat. “They favour similar environments, but one is a seed head that needs to be thrashed, and the other is a fruit. Tasty and savoury but still a fruit. Are you growing for experimentation or seed?”

He blinked. “Both.”

She looked through available agriculture lots. “North of the city, plot seven six two one. You have ten days to get the seeds in the ground before the rain needed to grow arrives. Do not mix them. The harvesting is too different.”

He blinked. “You know of these?”

“They are the base for the diets of my people. There are other grains, but these are the ones I grew up on. Do a good job, and I will be the judge.”

He paused. “May I come back and ask about them?”

“Certainly. Your lot is recorded in your file.” She lifted her head to the crowd. “Next!”

Fifteen issues resolved or investigations opened before noon. She returned to her quarters and had a meal before going back to the office and beginning to ratify some of the agreements she had engaged in that morning. As people arrived to talk about their logistical needs, she dealt with them, one by one.

Her first day had been interesting, and she wished she could feel it, but it was a solid start to a new life.

Reem assumed that if she overstepped her position, she would get a note or something.

She completed her first week of work, verified that it indicated the office was closed the next day if someone wanted to know, and then she sought out a hairstylist and a manicurist. Her nails were rough.

Her account had enough funds accumulated to do what she needed to do, thanks to the bidding war. She was going to get some hair.

Reem went to the shop that had booked her in for the services she wanted and nodded to the receptionist. “Comptroller Reem. I am here for booked services.”

The receptionist’s markings flared orange. “Comptroller! You are prompt.”

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“That is my curse.Shall I leave and return?”

“No, miss.Please.She will be out in a moment.”

Reem stood in her business clothing, a long straight tunic and trousers with businesslike shoes.

When the yellow-marked woman came into the room, Reem waited.The receptionist pointed, and the woman went orange.

“C-comptroller?”

“Yes.”

“Please come with me.”

Reem stepped forward and followed the woman down the hall to a very secure door at the end of the facility.

“We keep this unit here as the overlord bestowed it, and it is extremely costly.”

“It also has a specific purpose which I obviously require.”Reem nodded.“Are you fully checked out on the unit?”

“I have used it twice before with varying results.”

“May I program it?Computers and I get along.”

The woman blinked, and her orange got creamsicle with a hint of green. “You can work the unit?”

“Of course. I am part computer myself, after all. It does make people a little ill, so I thought extruding hair would set folks at ease.”

“You aren’t a bot?”

“No. Just a Terran whose brain was split and repaired.”

To Reem’s shock, the woman collapsed to the floor and bowed several times.

“What are you doing?”

“You have seen death and returned. It is a status to be honoured.”

“Oh. Yes, I have. But I came back without feeling, so I live by social direction, and social direction says that you should not be on the floor.”

A bright pink came up, and she stood. “I will watch you and correct you if there are any settings that are not precise.”

Reem nodded and went to the control panel next to the chair with a lot of neck support and an entertainment screen above. She requested colour-changing nanites calibrated to her biology and hair to her waist. She made note of the medical appliance, and the scanners were set to map her twice before they started.

Her stylist blinked. “That was so fast.”

“It’s just programming.” She settled in the chair and said, “Can you press go for me?”

The woman nodded and pressed the activator.

Reem sat while the unit mapped her hairline and the edge of the implant. When it started to extrude hair, follicle by follicle, she remained relaxed and went over the following day's schedule, doing research and calculating actions on previous requests.

By the time the two hours had passed, she had worked through arranging her roster for the next two weeks. The machine simply withdrew silently, and she sat up, pulling a hank of the black stuff over her shoulder. "Marked for death still. Ah, well."

Black was the colour of death for the locals. The stylist came in and gasped. "Comptroller."

"Yes, the hair is programmed, but it seems that the problem with my emotions is locked in. I will have to try focusing to fake it, or I will be distressing people everywhere I go," Reem observed.

"Madam, if you knew it would default, I could have put a colour in it."

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“It is a test. When it changes, I will have worked around some of the damage. Until then, I just have to look in the mirror.” She looked at her hands. “Now, I am off to my manicure.”

“I am on your schedule as well. May I ask you questions, Comptroller?”

“Certainly, as long as I get my breaks and cuticles attended to.”

“I can do that, madam, come this way.”

The rest was very much like a standard manicure back home. She soaked her fingers, got a massage, and then each nail was reinforced and enamelled with a blush peach.

The lady asked a few questions about regulations regarding new businesses and what kind of permits were necessary for a salon.

“There are several permit types that are necessary. Traffic permit for staff and clients, environmental permit for any noxious substances, building permit, lighting permit, electrical permit, inspections at three stages of development and design, and an operations permit. It would be easier to get an existing business and buy it out. Find someone who wants to retire and who has a permitted business.”

The lady blinked. “Oh. Can I write that down?”

“When you have a day off, come to my office, and I will go over the options for you.”

“You would?”

“Of course.It’s my job.”Her hair slid over her shoulder as she inclined her head.“Thank you for the service.My nails were annoying.”

“It was my pleasure, Comptroller.Come back anytime.Perhaps when you need a trim.”

Reem nodded and went to reception to pay her bill.It was smaller than she had anticipated.“Why is the bill smaller?”

“Ceo said you programmed the unit yourself, so she was able to take other clients while it worked, so she discounted you twenty percent.”

“Make a notation as to the reasoning.I do not ask for discounts.”She paused.“And add an additional twenty percent to the bill for her directly.It is the custom of my people to reward good service.She did not injure my cuticles and repaired the cracks in my nails with skill.So, a bonus is offered.”

“It is not our custom.”

“Very well.The funds were offered.”She nodded and caressed the pay plate.“Thank you for your service.”

She turned and walked out of the salon, feeling better about the appearance of her hands.She returned to her apartment and played vids on the link in her mind.Now and then, she admired her nails.She had a fresh outfit ready, and work tomorrow would be interesting.She had gone from a bald alien to the embodiment of death.She was bound to raise eyebrows.

The room was still, and she looked around.“Next.”

One petitioner shoved the other forward, and she was looking at a young female with a child strapped to her for carrying. She wanted permission to move to a district closer to her family now that her husband had separated from her to pursue his love of the ocean.

“Yes?”

“Madam Comptroller, I w-would l-like to—” She jolted as the child began crying.

Reem got to her feet and walked toward them. “May I hold him?”

The woman was shaking but pulled her child out of the carrier, and Reem took him. She looked at his face and watched the red of fury as he cried. “Hello, little man. Having a rough day?”

She propped him on her shoulder and began to pat his back in circles. “Tell me about your request.” The child belched.

“I wish to switch districts to be closer to my family now that my husband has chosen to go deep-sea exploring without leaving us funds to survive.”

“Well, that is not right.” She swayed rhythmically, and the little body went limp. “There aren’t any support systems set in place, as separation is not common. You are granted moving permission, and a stipend to assist in moving will be provided, as well as ten percent of your rent for your new home. That ten percent will be removed from your husband’s new wages.”

“He will be furious.”

“He started the child; it is up to him to make sure that he has a roof over his head until he has reached maturity. If he fathers another child with someone else and



abandons it as well, another ten percent will be moved from his wage.”

The woman smiled. “He won’t like that.”

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“Then, he should honour his promises.Children are not made alone.”She paused.“Unless you are Makradian...then they are.”

The group chuckled softly.

“Madam, your hair went purple.”

“Ah, I like children.It has been years since I held one this small.”She turned the child, and it was tucked back in the carrier.

“He hates strangers.”

“Well, I am the apex of strange, so from here, things may be easier.So, you are given permission to relocate, and your husband will be docked ten percent to be used on your lodgings only.Any overage will be put into a trust for your child.”

“Thank you, Madam Comptroller.”

Reem went around the table and entered the order into the system.She had to do an override on the legal end, but the support order was soon in place.

“The request is complete.Have a good day.”She examined a lock of her hair, and it was dark purple.

She waited until the sleeping baby was out of the room and then rapped, “Next!”

Business resumed as usual, but her hair was back to black in an hour.

A message had been flashing in the corner of her vision for half an hour. She paused and expanded the message, blinking as it stated, Hormonal event, seek the Pleasure Centre.

Reem checked her workload and went online to make an appointment with the Pleasure Centre. They had time during her lunch hour, so she set an appointment and checked on what she needed to bring. Apparently, it was just her body and a willingness to find relief for a sensation she wasn't registering.

She finished her morning appointments and got up, walking out of her office and to the lift. The Pleasure Centre was on the third floor.

Reem walked toward the reception area and was instantly taken to an interview room. The female host said seductively, "What are you seeking?"

"Relief so that the hormone warning will cease. I am not in for a scenario or anything fancy. I just want to come and go."

The woman blinked. "Oh. I see. Come with me."

She was led through the entryway to a small room with a med bed that seemed to have a gel surface.

"Madame, get naked, lie down, and state Activate. The unit will do the rest."

"I hope it's quick; I have to get lunch after this."

The woman was startled. "Oh. Of course. It will release you after it releases you. If you like, you can use a solar shower and then simply leave."

"How much is this? I didn't see on the booking form?"

“You will be paid based on the pleasure surrendered.This is a Hmrain world, after all.”

“I didn’t guess that.Thank you.I will be as brief as I can.”

The attendant blinked.“Of course.Enjoy your stay.”

Reem undressed, climbed onto the bed, settled, and stated, “Activate.”The bed moved under her, soft straps forming out of the gel and pulling her thighs gently apart.A unit with soft lights and another gel panel descended on her, and she began to feel tingles in her limbs as her breathing picked up in pitch.Her clit throbbed and was caressed by the gel, and soft digits worked into her.

She went from cool to fever pitch and then shaking and twitching as her orgasm struck and sent soft waves through her.The unit slowed her breathing and calmed her before moving away from her.She was weak, but the annoying alarm was off her internal view.

She took a solar shower and got dressed.Seven minutes.She would do better next time.

Reem walked out of the Pleasure Centre and went to the nearby food court.Despite her hair being a vibrant blue, her body felt relaxed and calm.Maybe she would try something new today.

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Wenvari clutched at his desk as breath sawed in and out of his lungs. His wings were flexing and twitching from the burst they had just been treated to. He looked at the roster of the Pleasure Centre, and there was only a species list. Terran. This wasn't an ordinary member of their species. Others had been through the centre, and none had had this effect on his senses from ten floors away.

Privacy was paramount at the centre, so he opened the exterior cameras and tried to find the person who had just caused his very being to shiver. He prided himself on not involving himself with his colonies, but he had to remain on site in case of emergencies. The centres were the way he was paid for that bit of attention. Whatever had just orgasmed in the centre had enough power to keep him alert and focused for a year.

He saw beings come and go and found six answering to the Terran descriptor. He focused, but they didn't seem to match the numbers. The black-haired woman went in, but a blue-haired woman exited. Could they be the same? He was so bad at faces.

He followed her progress to the food court and picked her up on a different camera. He was able to get a clear image of her face, and he blinked when the recognition program told him he was looking at the cyborg comptroller that had cost him more than he had been interested in spending. Suddenly, he was very happy to have opened his account a little.

How often did she need to seek pleasure? He wanted to make sure that he was there for every visit. She was exquisite, and he didn't want to miss a drop.

Reem's decisions shaped the world she was living on for two years, and then one day, she got an invitation.

She stared at her inner display and said, "Display message."

A familiar face brought surprise to her mind. "Hey, cousin. We thought you were gone, but Ra did a search for our families, and your DNA popped up. If you use this link, you can call back, and we can talk. You have an open invite to Aten when you finish your bond, wherever you are."

Reem felt her heart pounding. She checked her account and paid her bond. She had accumulated a lot of credits during her regular visits to the centre. She was a preferred flavour.

She checked her schedule and smiled. There was a window that she could widen. She could also remote her decisions for a month.

Reem contacted Jasmine and waited. She wasn't sure that her interior scaffolding could make the call, but when a connection to Aten was confirmed, Reem exhaled in relief.

"I am calling for Jasmine."

A golden face filled the screen. "Who are you?"

"Her cousin, Reem."

"Holy shit. You were recorded as dead."

Reem nodded and split her hair, turning her head to show the mirror that she used for this sort of thing of the silver band on the side of her head. "My brain was sliced in

two, but they got me working again.”

“So, you are a cyborg?”

“I suppose.”

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“Did Nebel make your implant?”

“No. This was made by...I don't know. It was improvised. Is Jasmine there?”

“I will tell her. Will you come to Aten? I am sure she would love to see you.”

“When she confirms that she will, I will ask for leave from my world.”

“Who is your Hmrain?”

“The planet owner is Wenvari.”

“You aren't in a relationship?”

“No. I have not even met him or her.”

“Wait, so you have just been running the colony?”

“Since the day I arrived, with occasional days off.”

“Wow. Okay. I will get Ra to force Wenvari to let you visit.”

“I will send a request to travel there. I have no means of travel, though.”

The gold woman paused and smiled. “We have visitors on the way. They are passing through your system. They will bring you. It is a Zell warship.”



“I see.I have sent the request for a month off for travel and visiting family.”

“I will tell Jasmine that you are coming, and Ra will make the arrangements for your travel.”

“Why would the eldest Hmrain make the effort?”

“Because he likes to keep me happy, and bringing families together makes me happy.”

“I will not be staying.I do not belong on a colony world.”

“Fine, but you will come for a visit?”

“I will.”

“You seem very calm for someone who just got connected with a long-lost relative.”

“I am always calm.The sheet metal cut through my emotional centre.This is me now.”

The woman gasped.“No way.”

“Way.What is your name, by the way?”She already had it on her internal screen, but she liked people to tell her what they thought she should hear.

“Harwin, Queen of Aten, Consort of Ra.Best friend of Kris, Consort of Essan.”

“Ah.Well, I am Reem, Comptroller of Wenavik.”

“Pleased to meet you, Reem.What kind of terminal are you using?”

“My head.You can see me talking because I put a mirror on my desk, so you are seeing what I am seeing.”

“Holy, so you are a walking com.”

“When I want to be.I have filed my request for a month off, the beginning to coincide with the arrival of the Zell ship.”

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“You don’t want to stay here on Aten?Ra can arrange it.”

“I have made a home of sorts here.It is now my world.I know the people, the infrastructure, and where to find my favourite meals.That is all I can imagine for now.”

Her internal screen lit up.“I have been granted my leave.I will be ready when the warship arrives.”

“It will be there in two days.”

“I should bring Jasmine a gift.”

“You have time to shop.”

“Yes.Thank you.I...oh...Wenvari is asking for a meeting.”

Harwin smiled.“Then, go and take the meeting.”

“I have to check a map.I don’t know where he is.”

“So, you have never met him.”

“No.I got my assignment and got to work.This is the first I have heard from him.”She looked at herself.“I will see you soon, I suppose.”

Harwin grinned.“I will let Jasmine know you are coming.Do you mind if we run

some tests on you?”

“As long as the result doesn’t diminish my operating ability, that will be fine.”

“Nice.Okay, I will see you in a week or so.”

“That fast?”

“Zell’s people are annoying, but his ships are fast.Really fast.”

“Why annoying?”

“They don’t display affection or show interest in anything but art, science, or Zell.”

“Oh.That is probably unpleasant for anyone new.”

“His consort thinks so.He’s coming around, but it is a process.” Harwin nodded.“Right.I will talk to you when you are on the ship.If I can manage it, Jasmine will be with me.”

“That will be nice.”

“May we access your medical records?”

“Of course.The scan with the metal through my skull is fascinating.”She twitched the corners of her mouth.She sent the data packet to Aten.

“Oh, wow.There it is.Oh, my god.” Harwin stared at her second screen.

“Yeah.Very photogenic.I have to go speak to the overlord.This is strange.It is the first time he has asked to see me.”

“It is because Ra contacted him.Sorry.”

“See you soon.”She disconnected the call and got up after seeking the map to the overlord’s quarters.She broke through a few firewalls, but she found it and walked out of her office and into the hallway.Reem looked left and right, and then she located the lift.She walked to the lift and pressed her hand on the panel.The doors opened.She entered, and the doors closed behind her.She pressed her hand to the interior panel, and the unit began to rise.It knew where she was going.

She remained still as the lift continued to climb, and when it was near the highest level, it slowed, and the doors opened when it stopped.

Reem walked forward and looked around.The air was rich and warm.She smelled trees and flowers, soil and sunlight.She sighed.It smelled like home.

She walked the path that led through an arboretum worth of plants and trees until the light dazzled her and an arched window let the suns sparkle into the space where there was a central desk and the room was filled with work benches and plants.The Hmrain had a green thumb.

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“Lord Wenvari?” She stood in the centre of the space.

There was a rustle to her left, and a dark figure emerged, walking slowly to the desk. She stood where she was until he was seated, and then she bowed deeply.

“Stand up, Comptroller Reem. I need to speak with you.”

She straightened and waited.

“Now, first off, Zell has possession of some plants I want for my collection. I need you to bring those back with you, in whatever vessel Ra uses to send you back.”

She blinked. “Ra will send me back?”

“Yes. Zell is eager to have his consort settle on his world, and he is going to need many plants and trees for that. She’s a farmer, if his noxious messages are to be believed.”

“Noxious?”

“He has thrown dignity to the wind and gone chasing after his consort. It is unbecoming.”

“If she is a consort, he must be getting the sustenance that he needs from her. I am assuming it’s a female.”

“It is. Apparently, her species breeds easily.”

“Interesting.Terran?”

“Yes.Aren’t you a Terran?”

“I am.I am unable to breed, though, so I am safe.”

“You haven’t looked at me.”

“It is against protocol.”

“Look at me.That’s an order.”

She lifted her chin and looked at him.He had the grey of the main population, a mask of black across his eyes, black wings, and none of the colourful identifiers of the population below.

“You are pale.”

“I descended from pale Terrans.”

“You have a grey undercast.”

“I must be tired.”

He cocked his head.“Your expression doesn’t vary.”

“Side effect of my injury and the means used to restart me.”

“Restart?”

“Yes.I was dead, with my brain sliced in two.They put in an implant, and now I am

up and speaking to you. My memories and emotions were the largest casualty.”

“Your reproductive capability?”

“Long gone. A decade and a half gone.”

“What caused the removal?”

“Cancer. It was that or death. My mother felt I made the wrong choice.” She spoke blankly.



“You remember that?”

“It is a feeling of the memories.I remember words and numbers.”She paused.“Overlord, why did you summon me?”

“I have been curious about my new comptroller.You have been here for years and have never asked for my input or needed me to make a decision for you.It has been lovely.The gardens across the globe have flourished.So many new fruits have been perfected.”He smiled tightly.

“I am glad I have been able to assist.”

“Why don’t you seek out your own people?”

“I upset them.My implant is no secret, and my emotional range is minimal.I no longer fit into my own society.I work.I watch vids and take myself to dinner.I am content.”

“You also frequent the Pleasure Centre.”

“I thought the records were sealed.”

“They are but not to me.I also used the external cameras and the timing of a certain rush of energy to pinpoint that you were the source.”

“The machine is efficient.Now that I am no longer nervous, the procedure is faster.”

“I am not complaining, but why are you so frequent?”

“I retain my ovaries, and they cycle every twenty-eight days. That is about to slow down.”

“Why?” He looked upset.

“I am aging and approaching the end of my cycles. I am older than most of the folks you bought at the bond auction. They have decades more to seek partners and start families. My body is ready to rest. I will also need to retire at that point as my thought process will be unpredictable as my hormones splutter.”

He frowned and turned to send a message.

She bowed again and started to turn.

He said, “Wait. I am not done with you yet.”

Reem turned back.

“I need you to go to the Pleasure Centre today and again tomorrow. I wish to enjoy the energy surge.”

She cocked her head. “If they allow it, the machine can just continue until I am tired. That would help.”

“You can succumb more than once?”

Reem nodded. “Yes. Nine times in three hours was my personal best, I believe. My body can certainly do more than take the edge off.”

“Don’t you need to be in need?”

“No.The unit can get me there fairly effectively.”She paused.“Should I go now?”

He looked at her and then sat back in a calculated manner.“Yes.However, return here when you have emptied yourself.”

She didn’t correct him.She knew what he meant.“Yes, Overlord.I will return when I have completed the task.Could you warn the Pleasure Centre that I am on the way?”

“Already done.This is a very interesting experiment.”

Reem nodded, bowed, and left.She felt him staring at her until the trees obscured her form.

Down at the Pleasure Centre, she approached the desk, and a frightened attendant gave her the door key and stated, “It has been programmed to look for signs of pain or distress, but other than that, it will continue.You can also call a halt.”

“Thank you.I will manage.”

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“Why is he doing this, Comptroller?”

“I believe he likes the way I taste.”

“I see. Well, you are familiar with things, so please, surrender the key on your way out.”

“I will. Good afternoon.”

The attendant left, and she put the key with her clothing in the cleaning unit so things would be nice when she was done. She verified the programming of the unit and settled onto the gel bed.

The unit above descended to press the weight on her that she favoured, the digits entered her, and another teased her clit while her breasts were sucked and squeezed. She let the unit play her body, and six minutes after settling, she gasped and moaned as her body clenched. It allowed her rest for a moment, and then it started again. This time, it took eight minutes, and then eleven minutes, and as she was not responding as quickly, a tendril entered her ass and swelled to plug her. She went off again, and five minutes later, she finally called a halt after the last shock to her system had worn off. The unit cooled her skin, soothed her, and then retracted to cleanse itself and set her free.

Reem took the solar shower, got dressed, and returned the door key to the front desk. They looked at her, startled and bowed low. She headed back to the lift and returned to the overlord's garden.

She looked around, and things felt different. She shrugged and walked back to Wenvari's desk. He wasn't there. She remained waiting until he returned.

There was a deep sigh, and she heard the thud of wings. His voice came out of the shadows. "You know, for centuries, I have felt that I was getting enough energy from my population. I was alert, awake, and functioning. Now, what have you done?"

A huge shadow launched toward her, and she blinked as he landed in front of her, the glowing lights of his markings bright and blue.

She would have been terrified, but it was an emotion she couldn't manage. "Did you get what you needed, Overlord?"

He was breathing heavily. "I did. What is your physical situation?"

"Sir?"

The lightning-like marks would have been intimidating if that were how her mind worked. She didn't have room for that brand of fear.

"Are you exhausted? Does your body hurt?"

"There is some light aching, but I will be fine tomorrow."

His eyes glowed. "I see. There is no mention of it, but how long is your channel?"

She cocked her head and then added the context of her conversation. She held up her hand so that the height was across the knuckles. "About this. They had to remove everything above this point."

"So, you don't copulate?"

“No. That would be painful.”

“How do you manage with the unit?”

“It has learned my limitations.”

He let out a noise that was part huff and part growl. “This is frustrating.”

“Why? I can commute as comptroller and deal with colony matters via coms.”

He looked surprised. “You can? Ra wants you to remain with your relation.”

“I do not have a place there. I have a place here. Well, I need to renegotiate my contract with you.”

“Why?”

“Because I paid my bond? I mean, I earned enough for it a while ago, I just didn’t notice.” She met his gaze. “I paid it off today, so if you would like to retain me as comptroller when I return, we need a new contract.”

Wenvari looked down at her, his wings flexing. “That is a good idea. Come to my desk.”

He stepped back and turned, and that was the moment she realized how close he was. He had to back up to give his wings clearance to pivot.

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She followed him to his desk while keeping a respectful distance. He began typing with clawed fingertips on what she recognized as a contract tablet. The tapping was precise and far longer than a simple renewal had to be. He glanced at her up and down and then nodded as he returned to his creation.

He nodded. "You can edit the version on that tablet."

She slowly picked up the tablet and read it. It began with a renewal of her position as comptroller, but then it opened an option for her to take up a position as companion.

She looked at him with a frown. "I am not physically capable of being a companion."

"I am aware that that is the situation. There is an addendum that if your biology changes, you will accept the position of companion for five years, and then we will renegotiate your position as comptroller and as companion."

She looked at the price of the companion contract. "That is excessive."

"You are complaining about being paid?"

"It is excessive."

"It is the calculation of one release per day, commiserating with what you were being paid for your visits to the Pleasure Centre. When you add them up over five years, that is the value, plus a bonus for no days off."

"I see. So, I will remain as comptroller?"

“Yes.It is nice to have someone who can manage the colony.You are doing very well.”

She nodded and increased the comptroller contract by twenty percent.“As I am doing well, I need a bonus.”

He looked at her in astonishment, and then he noted the glow in his arms.“Acceptable.”

She nodded and went over the ridiculous possibility of that kind of repair.No one repaired corpses.

She signed with a thumbprint, ocular scan, and a pinprick on the side of the tablet.She reached forward and set the tablet on his desk.

He sighed and sealed his contract.There was a light from the screen as it filed itself in the digital archive.

She nodded.“I have a forwarding to set up for all requests for my attention while I am gone.”

“I need to speak with you before you leave.”

“Would you like me to visit the centre tomorrow as well?”

He blinked.“Can you?”

“Certainly.It doesn’t hurt.Well, there is some muscle ache the following day, but as I am about to leave for a month, it will not be an issue.I can recover on the vessel.”

“That would be enjoyable.Verify that I am in my office so that I may get the full



benefits and not just my plants.”

She looked around and saw flowers where there had been tree trunks and green before.

“I apologize. That was not my intent.”

“I have been tinkering with them to help Hmrain find compatible partners more easily. A visual clue helps some of us with difficulties identifying faces.”

She looked at him and saw a rueful expression on his face. “Oh. I see. That is why you designed a colour-coded species.”

“Correct. What does the blue mean?”

“Physically relaxed.”

He smiled. “Do you feel relaxed?”

“For a while. During my cycle, I am less relaxed, and my sensors warn me of hormonal buildup. Mostly, I just feel neutral.”

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“Well, if you are able to go to the centre tomorrow, do let me know. I would hate to miss it.”

“Yes, Overlord.” Reem nodded. “Am I dismissed?”

“You are dismissed, Comptroller.”

She turned and walked back to the lift, bemused at what had just occurred. She didn't mind him consuming her output, but she was practical. They weren't a good fit.

### Chapter Four

Reem sat on the shuttle with her small bag stowed next to her as they flew skyward toward the warship. The crew had told her that the overlord had sent some items for her to travel with, but they would be delivered to her rooms on the warship. She blinked at the plural but sat where she needed to sit and went where she was directed to go.

The wonder of space flight was lost on her. She just wanted to get to Aten to visit her cousin.

The warship was huge and sleek. It was a merchant vessel loaded to defend whatever it carried. Reem let her brain go through the specifications as they docked, and she was asked to get her bag and follow a crewmember.

The sober-looking female said, “You are unusual for one of your species.”

“I will concede as much.”

“Zell’s consort is very enthusiastic and extremely graceful.”

“Those are desirable attributes for a consort.”

“You don’t find it unpalatable?”

Reem sighed. “As I am not required to consume it, my palate is not the one to make that judgment. If the Hmrain is not a fan, then it is up to him to choose a new consort.”

“His previous consort was Zellic, and she was quiet and contained.”

Reem nodded. “As are most Zellic. Now, how comfortable was the Overseer with her? Was he stronger or just surviving? Was he feasting or simply fed?”

The crewwoman thought. “I suppose he was fed. He did not advance according to our records.”

“She gave him enough for maintenance. That would cause a regression. I have studied Hmrain as they are fascinating, and they require steady input to advance to their possible limits.”

“Oh. Zell does radiate power now.”

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“So, he has found a matching consort. The current consort is the difference between having a captain who can control a vessel versus the previous consort, who could just maintain propulsion.”

“This is a topic for thought. Thank you, Comptroller Reem.”

“You are welcome.”

The woman smiled, and that made Reem blink. The Zellic rarely smiled. The crew woman looked like a mystery had been solved.

Reem was directed to her quarters, which consisted of two rooms. One was an office. The crewwoman said, “We were notified that you would be continuing to work as comptroller remotely, so this room has an office where you can link to our com system.”

“I am already linked to your com system.”

The woman said, “What?”

Reem flexed her face in what passed for a smile, and she lifted the upper swath of her hair to expose the implant. “I am not a standard Terran.”

The woman’s eyes were wide as she bowed low and made a run for it.

Reem sighed and felt the ship’s engines powering up. The strange sensation of floating started, and then the gravity felt normal as they began the navigation to Aten.

She answered some queries through the space station coms and then had to switch to the warship, and it was difficult to pace things for messaging.

“Reem?Are you Reem?”

A Terran woman dressed in the gauzy clothing of a Hmrain consort was standing in front of her and waving her hand.

“Yes, Consort.I am Reem.”

“Why are you talking like that?”

“Like what?”

“When I see another human, I get all happy.”

“Ah, better to explain right away.”She explained her issues and her classification.

The Hmrain near the door said, “I did wonder about the reanimation reference.”

“It isn’t common.There were a lot of corpses in that lab.”

The male who had to be Zell said, “Do you know what worked for you?”

“No, but I was always stubborn.”

Sage chuckled weakly.“So, you can’t access anything?”

“There are things I know, but my memories begin after waking, and my emotions are mimicked, not felt.”

Zell frowned. “Wenvari wishes to take you as consort.”

“Companion. He just wants access to my output for the next five years.” Reem stood and bowed formally. “I do not have the infrastructure to be a consort.”

Sage frowned. “What?”

“Uterine and cervical cancer.”

“Oh. Damn.”

“It was a while ago. Fifteen years before the kaboom. That is an example of something I know. I don’t know what I did during the time between, but then I woke up.”

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Sage blinked. “Can I hug you?”

“Sure.”

She opened her arms, and Sage hugged her. Reem said, “Hello, young human.”

Sage leaned back wearily. “Is that a joke?”

“Probably. If not, it was creepy.”

Sage looked at her and then belted a laugh. “Okay, so you can’t feel it, but you know what it is.”

“Yes. It is a knowing.”

“Huh. And you don’t know what you did before the end of things?”

“No, but if I saw it, I would know it.”

Sage asked, “Can we go through the files to find out what it was?”

“No. You are your Hmrain’s consort, and his energy levels are low. Attending to him is in your contract.”

Sage blinked and blushed. “You can see that?”

“Yes, so can you. His skin is slightly paler than it was a few minutes ago, his wings

droop, the claws on the tips are curled, and his tail is limp.He's physically fine, but his energy levels could use a top-up."

Sage looked at Zell and blinked."Oh, wow.I can see it now."

Zell extended his hand."Thank you, Comptroller Reem.Your insight is appreciated.I am not good at expressing it myself yet."

Sage took his hand, and a blush touched her cheeks.

As they were leaving her room, Reem said loudly, "Enjoy the tail."

There was a squawk and then laughter as the door closed.

She did get humour.

Reem had concluded her day's business at home and was smug at having figured out how to send communications long distance.

A soft knock at the door and a very relaxed-looking Sage was standing there."Reem, sorry for just opening the door.Did you want to have a meal in the captain's dining room?"

"I have a food dispenser here.I am good."

"Seriously.The food is better there."

"Better or worse doesn't matter.Also, I don't have anything appropriate to wear."

Sage blinked and looked down at her new, pretty outfit.



“Oh, right.I think it will be waived in this case.”

“Rules are rules, and I do not wish to insult anyone by appearing in my work attire.”

Sage blinked.“Seriously?”

“Seriously.I know my place.I know my uniform.I cannot step out of it without a reason, and dinner is not a reason.I do apologize.”

Sage paused.“Perhaps another time.”

“Perhaps.”

Sage left, and Reem got up to eat in case the consort tried again.

\* \* \* \*

Sage looked up at Zell. “She says she doesn’t have the right clothing. She and I are definitely not even close to the same size. Damn.”

Zell rubbed her back and ushered her down the hall. “Her height is surprising. I thought Terrans were all like you.”

“No. All different sizes. Even a few Hmrain height, but I don’t think many of those males survived.”

“Come on. We will have dinner with the captain.”

“I want to have dinner with Reem.”

“Why?”

Sage sighed. “Because something happened to her. Something horrible. I want to offer comfort.”

Zell wrapped his arm around her and flexed his wing to wrap around her. “You cannot soothe everyone.”

“But I want to try.”

“Settle for easing me into social norms. We are travelling to Aten for another seven days. There may be time to have dinner with her. Why are you fixated on dinner?”

“It’s a social gathering for Terrans. We relax and discuss our day, make social plans, and the very act of communal eating makes us feel we are among friends.”

They walked to the captain’s dining area, and the guards became alert. “Master Zell, Consort Sage.”

Sage blinked. That was new. The Zellic were very cold to her. Zell looked at them, and the doors opened. They stepped inside, and the captain got to his feet. He paused. “The comptroller didn’t come?”

Sage stared at the disappointed expression on Captain Duratti’s face. “She feels she is not appropriately attired for the formality of the captain’s table.”

His eyes widened. “I will have something sent to her room for tomorrow. She should not be uncomfortable over an invitation. Lord Wenvari would be unhappy.”

Sage blinked. “Wait. Lord Wenvari?”

“Yes, her overlord. They just renewed her contract for her position as comptroller. She is very popular in the colony.”

Zell chuckled. “I believe she wondered why Lord Wenvari would be unhappy if his comptroller were.”

“She is very useful and an asset to her world.”

Zell held Sage's chair for her before he sat next to her. "You do remember you work for me, right?"

The captain smiled. "Yes, Lord Zell. I am you and your lady's honoured servant."

Sage narrowed her eyes. "Okay, what happened?"

"Consort?"

"I have spoken to seven Zellic in the last three hours, and they have all been polite and enthusiastic."

The captain smirked. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. Two days ago, I got cold nods and single sentences, and all of a sudden, everyone is kissing my butt, so to speak."

Zell smiled. "Terran phrase?"

“Yes.”

The food was brought out to them, and the captain said, “Oh, look, your favourite, Consort.”

Sage snorted. “That’s it. What the hell happened?”

They ate, and Zell finally said, “Captain, please explain what has changed the crew’s mind.”

The captain sighed and said, “Comptroller Reem had a word with her escort into the ship and explained the positive changes we are seeing in you, my lord. You have energy, you are interacting with your people, and you have even been heard to laugh. That is because you are getting sufficient energy from your current consort. The energy level has not been recorded in our history of watching you and watching for you. Your previous consort kept you functioning, but you did not advance.”

Sage felt her cheeks go pink. “So, she explained this?”

“She did. Once it was outlined in a manner that we could understand, we checked the files, and the changes are there for us to see now that we are looking for it.”

Zell grinned. “I can feel the differences myself.”

She didn’t mention that his stamina was increasing. He knew that she knew.

She focused on eating and mumbled, “How did she know?”

Zell murmured, “She is inside the ship’s systems and understood from some comments that my people needed to be educated as to the effect of your presence.”

“She’s what?”

The captain nodded. “She’s linked her computer to the ship’s systems and has been using it to continue her work as comptroller.”

Sage murmured, “She doesn’t have a computer.” Her eyes went wide, and she stared at her food.

“What is it, Sage?”

“She is the computer.”

“What? She is engaged in long-range communications.” Zell frowned.

“That doesn’t make my statement less true. What is that implant?”

“It doesn’t say.” Zell frowned. “The scans weren’t clear.”

Sage blinked. “Well, that would explain it.”

“Her injuries are accurate. She took a metal panel to the back of the skull, and it stopped above her ears, but then her file is blank until she is bonded out to Wenavik.”

Sage finished her meal and sipped at her drink while Zell and the captain talked. She kept thinking about Reem’s calm expression and the warm hug that she had managed to give while not emoting.

Sage kissed Zell on the cheek and said, “I am going to see if Harwin is up. Someone

has to know Reem, and Aten has a lot of human colonists.”

“Sound thinking. Use the com in our quarters.”

“Yes, my lord.” She nodded, and he pulled her in for a kiss. He was definitely improving at kissing a Terran. Practice was making perfect.

She left, and to her surprise, a guard came with her on the way to her quarters. Zellic officers bowed as she passed, and Sage was going to give Reem another hug.

She got to her quarters, got a glass of water, and settled in at the com, dialling Aten.

It took forty minutes for the connection, and then she saw a sweaty Harwin and laughed. “Apologies for the timing.”

Harwin snorted. “He’s congratulating me on the pregnancy, again.”

“Wow. Shaking the baby’s hand?”

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Harwin laughed. “He’s in there a lot. I am pretty sure he doesn’t think the bump is a baby.”

Sage snickered. “I am not going to ask about the options. Look, I am carrying Jasmine’s cousin, Reem, and she has some issues and can’t remember any details about Earth. I am wondering if any of your colonists know her. She’s six feet, with bright green eyes, and looks like she works out. She has a sense of humour, but it comes out deadpan and is a bit dirty.”

“Anything else?”

“Her voice is smooth and controlled, and it makes you lean in to hear more.”

“Okay. I will check things with Jasmine, and we will go looking for someone who has met her. It might help her fill in some blanks.”

Sage smiled. “Thanks. The way she moves and carries herself, she has done something. She’s used to authority.”

“Okay. That narrows it down. So, how are you doing with Zell?”

“Better. We are...better. And, he’s right behind me, isn’t he?”

Harwin laughed. “I know that look. Prepare to get sweaty.”

Sage looked behind her. Zell was standing with his arms crossed and wings out. “Aw, come on.”



He laughed and clicked off the com. "You promised me we could continue what we started this afternoon, and I gave you an hour for your call."

She sighed and got to her feet. "It took forty-five minutes to connect because Ra had the same idea."

Zell chuckled and pulled her into his arms. "Well, your presence is improving me, and your contributions are very well received."

"Well, at least you don't drink blood."

He paused. "Is that an option? I wasn't able to consume the Zellic, but...you are consumable?"

She squeaked. "Um, according to Kethen and Ra."

"Do you mind if I try?"

"As long as you distract me first."

"Oh, you will be distracted." He swung her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He set her down near the edge, flipped her skirt out of the way, and then dove in.

She gasped and whined as he fanned the embers of her previous arousal to a bright burn. She arched up against his mouth and begged him to put her over when he slid his tail into her sex and turned his head to bite her inner thigh.

She felt the push and pull of his tail while his mouth sucked strongly a few inches away. Her orgasm hit and pulsed with every pull of his mouth. It was sudden, it was intense, and she fainted.

She woke with Zell holding her, caressing her cheeks, and feathering kisses over her face. He smiled. "Are you well?"

"You weren't worried?"

"I was until you muttered. Do that again."

She blushed. "Oh. Yeah, I can see why you look so cheerful."

"I can also drink directly from you if I need to, which is helping my cognition tremendously."

She looked down at her thigh. "Your tail is wagging."

"It is. This is an excellent development."

Sage snorted. "Yeah, well, you don't talk in your sleep."

He laughed, kissed her softly, and then with more intensity. The sweet moment got rapidly hot, and he soon moved over her and into her.

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They rocked together while he whispered how he was very lucky that he had a gracious and generous consort. She didn't disagree.

An hour later, he held her as she lay boneless and satisfied. Sage smiled as she curled against him, and he held her tight. He was holding to his half of the contract, and the tail wrapped around her thigh told her he didn't mind at all.

### Chapter Five

Reem was surprised when a dress in Wenavik style was brought to her the next day.

“What?”

The crewman smiled. “It is a gift from the captain. He would like you to join him, Lord Zell, and Lady Sage for dinner this evening.”

“Ah. Right. Let me take a look.” She looked at the dress, and it would probably fit. She said to the crewman, “Wait a moment.”

She headed into the lav and changed clothing. To her surprise, the dress fit. The torso wrapped snugly and downplayed her breasts, was snug on her arms, and the skirt flared when the snug wrap on her hips ceased. Her shoes would be fine.

She walked out, and the crewman looked stunned. “It fits. Please thank the captain. I would be honoured to attend his dinner.”

“Yes, ma'am. Miss. Comptroller Reem.”

He bowed his way out of the room, and she shrugged and went back to work. She had a new nursery to authorize. There was a baby boom going on with the Wenavik, and the parents needed a break. She braided her hair while she made the arrangements.

When there was a soft knock at her door, her business was done, and her hair was up in a thick coronet. She got to her feet and went to the door. Two crewmen were standing there, and they looked dazzled, but she knew it wasn't her. She was never dazzling.

"Comptroller, we are here to escort you to the captain's dinner."

"Lead the way." She knew where she was going, but she let them do their jobs.

She walked with them in her borrowed dress, and when they arrived at the dining room, she thanked them politely.

"It was our honour, Comptroller. Have a pleasant evening. We will be here when your evening is over."

"Thank you. You are very kind."

She walked into the dining room, where the captain was on his feet, and he had that same dazzled expression. She walked up to him, and he took her hands, kissing each before sighing. "It is a great pity that you belong to Wenvari. I would like to press my own suit."

"What? I don't understand." She was confused and didn't like being confused.

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The door opened, and Sage and Zell came in. He was looking better, and the constellations in his eyes were moving when she looked at him.

Sage paused. "Whoa."

Zell looked at her and smiled slightly. "I believe I understand the message I received earlier."

Sage cocked her head. "Message?"

"Wenvari has charged me with making sure that no one makes off with his comptroller. When we arrive at Aten, the job will fall to Ra."

"I do not mean to be trouble."

Sage said, "I don't know what you looked like on Earth, but now, you are stunning. Your facial features are nearly symmetrical, your eyes are slightly wider than normal, lips full, and ears are slightly pointed. Has a Hmrain been tinkering with you?"

"No. I only met Wenvari two days before we left, and we didn't have any contact."

Sage frowned. "How long have you been on his world?"

"Just over two years."

Zell scowled. "And you never spoke to him?"

“Didn’t need to.I did my job, and he did whatever he was doing.There was no reason for us to interact.”

Zell asked softly, “But he met you before you left?”

“Yes.When we renegotiated my contract.”

Zell looked at her, closed his eyes, and rubbed his forehead.“And he wouldn’t care about your appearance.”

“Because he doesn’t see faces.”

Sage was shocked.“What?”

Zell sighed.“Wenvari was given a number of gifts, but seeing emotions in faces is not one of them, so he created a people who wear their emotions on their skin.”

Sage frowned.“What?”

Reem said, “The Wenavik have lines in their faces and bodies that change colour with their mood.It is very easy to see what they are thinking.”

“How does he eat if he can’t experience pleasure?”

Reem said calmly, “His quarters are above the Pleasure Centre.People come in day and night, and he gets the benefit without the socialization.”

Zell blinked and laughed.“That is how he found out what you were.You cycled.”

“He knew I was Terran.”

“Not all Terrans have consumable energy.”

“Ah.Right.I also did cycle.They have a pleasure unit that’s a bot, and it’s very efficient.Takes care of things in under ten minutes.”

Sage blinked.“Like a sex bot?”

“Oh.No.And yes.It’s two thick, flat sheets of a super-soft, slick silicone.Nodules rise out of it and do what is needed for stimulation.My vaginal canal is limited, so penetration is not recommended.”

Zell frowned.“Limited?”

“Surgically reduced to remove abnormally growing cells.”

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Zell nodded. "So much of this trip now makes sense. Ra has the best repair units available. Tinkering with species was his specialty."

Reem nodded. "Of course. That is why the children of Geb suddenly got their bonds refunded to start us in freedom. They didn't tell us, but that was the effect."

Sage blinked. "Wait, so...hang on. Zell, you knew about this?"

"Of course. It occurred when Symo and I were following you and Bailey."

"I see. Well, hell. I might have made a different decision."

Reem said, "That is why he didn't tell you. He was insecure given his previous behaviour."

The captain was fascinated.

Reem looked at the shock on their faces. "The coms on this vessel are not as secure as you think. I have entertained myself reading the history logs and listening to conversations in ancient Hmrain."

Zell's eyes were wide. "You can listen to coded transmissions."

Reem looked at him blandly. "Can't everyone?"

Sage stared and started giggling. "Hah."



“Hah indeed.”

“My ability to manipulate computers has increased over the last few years. I could have made a fortune with this skillset on Earth.”

Sage blinked. “No kidding.”

The captain smiled. “So, if we all agree that she is magnificent, may we have dinner?”

Reem blinked. “What?”

Sage smiled. “You are hard to ignore and very attractive.”

“I am not trying to stand out.”

Sage patted her arm. “I know, but you are something else, and that is impossible to ignore.”

Zell nodded. “You don’t read with the same energy that I feel with Sage, but it is impressive and unexpected. What has Wenvari said about it?”

“Just that he got more from me in a day than the Pleasure Centre in a year.”

Zell snorted. “I can believe that. When Sage arrived, it was like lightning was poured on my nerves.”

“They hired me to wake him up, so I did.”

He lifted her hand to his lips. “You are still waking me.”

Reem said softly, “Adorable.”

The captain held a chair out. “Comptroller Reem, please have a seat.”

She walked over and settled against protocol with a Hmrain still standing.

Sage was seated by Zell, and he sat next to her with his wing protectively over her back.

The crew brought in the meal, and Reem looked down as she tried to analyze the food. She took a few bites and nodded. “Bland but nice.”

Sage blinked. “Bland?”

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“Wenavik has stronger flavours and a ton more spice,” the captain murmured. He nodded to one of the attendants, and the young female rushed out and back with a tray of sauces and salts.

Reem knew those condiments. They were at every meal she ate in public venues. She happily began to create heat levels that would have melted her colon back on Earth.

She kept going until she surpassed Carolina Reaper level, and at that point, she could taste the flavours of the food behind it.

Sage reached out and went for one of the sauces. Reem said, “Nope. Don’t do that. Use the blue salt as a starter. It isn’t actually spicy. It is more warm with flavour.”

Sage got a tiny bit of the salt, and she tasted a crystal. “Oh. Wow. That is like a flavour bomb.”

“Yeah. You get used to it.”

The captain smiled. “I have tried some of the sauces. I regretted it for days.”

Zell looked at them. “May I?”

Reem nodded. “Of course. Do you have a level in mind, or do you want to start slow?”

Zell nodded. “Slow. I am intrigued. This is my first time off-world in centuries.”

She walked him through the different options, and the dinner turned into a taste test

for the Hmrain, with Sage offering him water when he punched above his weight.

There was laughter, and Reem felt settled to be in a group of people again. It was good practice for meeting with Jasmine.

Sage had a glass of wine in her hand and asked, “Reem, what is the most unusual request you have gotten?”

Reem paused. “Sex club for farm animals.”

The room went silent. Sage said, “What?”

“A farmer wants to make sure that there is genetic diversity in his animals, so he thought it would be a good idea to make a breeding club so other farmers could bring their animals to the city and let the beasts go at each other.”

Sage exhaled. “That is much more benign than I thought.”

“I know, right?”

Zell asked, “So, how did they take the rejection?”

“I didn’t reject him. I told him that downtown without a plan to deal with the manure and water, and other infrastructure, was unacceptable. Downtown is not a place that will allow zoning for animals to walk through it. So, we searched for a location near the city where farm vehicles were allowed to park and the sounds of animals copulating would not annoy the neighbours. It was a contained space that could not expand. Any expansion would have to be via setting up a second facility, and he is inspected monthly to make sure that things are hygienic and the animals are cared for. The inspectors also rotate so that no bribery can be enacted. I also use random spotters to make sure the animals are all right.”

The captain blinked. “All that for animals?”

Sage said, “Animals kept us alive far longer than vegetables and grain. They managed to keep going longer than any standard farm. Keeping them healthy and having a successful and controllable growth for them is vital to a thriving colony.”

The captain looked at the dishes. “You eat a lot of meat.”

Reem nodded. “It is one-third of my diet, along with cheese.”

Sage chuckled. “This is going to be a few interesting days.”

The captain nodded. “We are also being met at Aten by another Hmrain vessel from Kifeessen.”

Sage smiled. “Let me guess. Another Terran consort?”

The captain nodded. “Yes.”

Reem sat back. “We are a welcome infestation.”

Sage laughed. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

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“The majority of us will find our ways in the stars.” Reem nodded. “One way or another.”

Sage looked at her and smiled. “One way or another.”

Reem nodded. “I need to rest. I wish everyone a good evening.” She got to her feet, bowed, and left the room.

Her guards escorted her back to her room, and the Zellic were still smiling foolishly at her. She got into her quarters and out of the borrowed dress as fast as she could. It didn’t feel right to wear things that were not hers.

Three more dinners in the borrowed dress, and they reached Aten. Aten had arranged his world strategically to be the hub of many Hmrain.

Reem stood in her normal office wear and carried her small bag with her. Her guards walked her to the shuttle bay. A shout made them stop. “Miss! Comptroller! You forgot your dress!”

A crewman was running toward her with the dress in his hand.

She sighed and took it. “It isn’t mine. It was loaned to me and should be returned to a recycling unit.”

Sage’s voice said softly, “It looks lovely on you, so keep it.”

Reem huffed and stuffed it into her bag. “Thank you for retrieving it.”

The crewman smiled as if she had complimented everything he had ever done.

Sage snorted and pulled her toward the shuttle. "Come on. Almost there."

Reem walked with her, took a seat, and was with the Hmrain and consort, heading for the endless light of Aten.

When Reem left the shuttle, she saw two gold statues, one with wings, one without. When they both moved, she blinked. Oh, right. Ra and Harwin.

She walked behind Zell and Sage; etiquette kicked in. She moved slowly and let the Hmrain greet each other. Sage and Harwin hugged.

Harwin frowned. "Weren't you bringing Jasmine's cousin?"

"Sure. Reem is... where is she?" Sage looked around and saw the woman thirty feet back. "That's her."

Harwin beckoned for Reem to come closer, so she did. "Greetings, consort of Ra."

Harwin blinked. "Right. I guess that is a formal greeting."

Reem nodded. "You seem to be adapting well."

Small flying drones came toward them, and they began to circle Reem. She told them to behave, and they formed up neatly at her side.

Harwin stared. "That's new."

"Apologies. They were just curious."

“Right. Well, we have a specialized restoration unit for you.”

Reem cocked her head. “Why?”

“Because Ra was told you have a brain injury.”

“I did. I have an implant.”

A new voice called out, “She always was stubborn. It was part of her charm.”

Reem looked at a woman in a bodysuit who walked out of the pyramid. “Jasmine.”

Jasmine ran to her and hugged her. Reem opened her arms and returned the hug with precisely the amount of force necessary to show enthusiasm.



“Reem?”

“Yes.”

“Why aren’t you lifting me and swinging me around like you used to?”

“I lost most of my memories of individual events. My memories start after I woke in the lab, and I don’t know how long I had been there or been awake before my memories began.”

Jasmine leaned back and said, “That is what I heard, but I didn’t think it could be right. Then, we asked around, and we found people who remembered you, and they are willing to do a memory display tonight.”

“What is that?”

“They will put a halo on and listen to music that reminds them of a moment, and the halo will project that moment.”

“I see. That will be interesting.”

Jasmine looked at her face as if searching for something. “You are still in there.”

“I am. Do you want to see the implant? It seems to explain the point succinctly.”

Jasmine looked ill. “Sure.”

“You were always squeamish, Jayjay. You don’t have to look.”

Jasmine inhaled sharply and stiffened her shoulders. “I can look.”

“I paid to have my hair extruded just to hide it because it upsets people, no matter the species.”

“I can look, Reem.”

Reem nodded, bent, and parted her hair to show the silver band. “There, that is the item holding my brain together.”

She felt fingers on it. “Oh, wow. I thought it would be weird. It looks like a headband.”

Gold masculine legs filled her vision. “Comptroller Reem, Wenvari would like to know what is possible with your recovery, so we will do an assessment now. No treatment will be administered.”

“Yes, Lord Ra.” She slowly straightened.

“Follow me.”

She nodded, and as he walked to the pyramid, she followed. Harwin fell into step with her. “I am coming along so that it isn’t scary.”

Reem said, “I don’t get scared.”

Jasmine piped up from behind them. “She never did. Her blood was ice when she needed it to be. Always calm.”

Harwin nodded. “Right. That probably helped.”

Reem sighed, “Couldn’t hurt.”

Jasmine took her hand and held it tightly as they walked.

Reem looked at her and felt another piece of knowing kick in. Jayjay was always clinging to her and hiding behind her. “So, you have gotten spliced with something. You look very creamsicle.”

Her cousin smiled. “Mixed with Maltoothans. Ra is trying to contact them to see if they have a Hmrain descendant for me to play with.”

There was a snort from up front. Reem recognized that Ra was laughing. Harwin snorted. “Jasmine has refused a match until she saw you. Wenvari was refusing to let you go until just now.”

“He does not like dealing with his people, so he has been content for me to do it.”

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Jayjay clung to her as they passed a team of archaeologists, who looked at her curiously.

Walking into a pyramid that folks actually lived in felt strange.

Harwin asked, “Reem, did you ever see the pyramids?”

Reem said, “I don’t know.I think so.”

Jayjay said, “She did.A bunch.She was stationed in the Middle East for a while.”

“I was?”

“You were.You were a helicopter pilot, and you worked with a number of charities out there to get supplies and equipment out to places where bikes and trucks couldn’t go.”

“Interesting.”

“You really don’t remember?”

“My brain was sliced horizontally.It does a number on recall.”

Jasmine clutched at her.

They walked to a restoration unit, and Ra typed at it.“It is set for analysis only.”

Reem checked and said, “So, I should just get in?”

Ra nodded. “Yes.”

She moved to the unit and settled. She closed her eyes, and the humming started. The light was focused on her head for the most part, but her abdomen felt warmth. Reem linked to the machine and found out what it was looking for. How peculiar. It was looking for traces of Hmrain DNA. What was funnier was that it found two strains, one in her genes and one in her implant.

Ra opened the unit, and she met his gaze. He smiled. “You know.”

“There are things I know and things I feel. This is something that I know.”

He helped her out of the unit and nodded. The machine was whirring to try and figure out a way to remove the implant. It was literally brain surgery.

Chapter Six

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:06 am*

Reem was escorted to a huge hall where there were a dozen humans who froze when she entered the room.

Harwin smiled. "Reem, these people recognized you the moment we described you. When Jasmine added that you were a helicopter pilot, they burst into tears."

"I am sorry to have caused so much trauma." She inclined her head toward them, and there were more tears.

One woman had a mixed-species toddler, and the little one patted his mother's thigh before running over to Reem. He tugged at her hand, and she picked him up, walking over to his mother while another woman with an eight-year-old sobbed. She ran toward Reem and clutched at her waist. "I remember you."

"I wish I remembered you, little bit."

Harwin blinked. "You are good with kids."

Jasmine chuckled. "They always climbed onto her lap, even before the cancer treatment."

The mother walked up to her. "He's heavy. I can take him."

"He doesn't weigh anything, but he's asleep." Reem twisted to show the boneless little body.

"He's been up teething and hasn't slept in days."

“I have a vibe about me.I knock the little darlings out.”Reem carefully removed the little boy and draped him on his mother.

The eight-year-old looked at her and said, “Up?”

Reem lifted the kid and settled her on her forearm while the kid leaned against her and breathed deep.

The mother in front of her gasped.“It’s your scent.”

“Yes.That is one thing I know.It keeps folks calm around me, which lets me stay calm.”

Ra said softly, “They have memories of you.They know your memories are gone and wish to share what they remember with you.”

“Excellent.Which way do I need to look?”

They led her to a pile of cushions and urged her to sit.Harwin and Ra sat nearby, and Jasmine was speaking with the folks who volunteered to show what they remembered of Reem.She was putting them in a certain order.Reem snorted.Jasmine did like to tell stories.

Harwin said, “I hope you don’t mind, but the other fused humans are curious.”

Reem looked at the colourful women and shrugged.“Pull up a cushion.I am here for the big show.”

The women grinned and settled on cushions, and Jasmine spoke to the first person while pressing a remote.Terran music that settled in Reem’s bones played.The room dimmed, and the projection started, looking out through the eyes of the older man

who was sharing his memory.

They were huddled against a rock face, an open space ahead of them. He made sure everyone was held back, and then they heard the whup-whup-whup of the helicopter. It was huge for the space it was landing in, but it settled, and the rotors continued to move as the door opened and the pilot came out. A wide grin was on Reem's face as she yelled, "All abooooard!"

She sorted the survivors and packed the helicopter tight. The viewer was wedged under the co-pilot's seat, where the seat had been removed to make room for three more.

Reem looked at him, winked, then the rotors moved faster, and they pulled up and moved forward, grazing the dead trees and flying out to an education station shuttle. She set them down and slowed the rotors again, helping them out and to the friendly aliens who were ready to give them their med checks. The man looked at Reem as she looked at a tablet with more coordinates on it. More people who needed a lift.

"Thank you. We didn't think anyone could come to get us."

Reem grinned. "Door-to-door service. Now, go and get a shower. You know why."

He entered the med unit.

Reem stroked the hair of two of the children who were curled up with her. "I am a little lippy."

Jasmine lined the next person up. "On a good day. Foul-mouthed on a normal day."

The next memories were similar. The sound of the helicopter, the arrival, the loading,



and then up and over to a shuttle site.

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Four people shared their memories of hugs, smiles, and cheerful hope distributed openly.

The last woman said, “Um, my memory is probably the last. I was on the shuttle that took you to the station. It isn’t something I am going to forget. But you kicked ass. All the way.”

Reem asked, “How long ago was it?”

“Three years. I was seventeen. We were stuck in an area that had suddenly gone volcanic, and then we heard your confirmation in the background while someone was yelling at you. This is what happened next.” The young woman turned and put the circlet on her head, and her memories played.

Ash was in the air; they crouched under the trees, waiting.

“Do you think she’s coming?” she asked softly.

“I hope she’s coming, but it’s dangerous to fly over the lava field.”

“How did we even get the radio?” she muttered.

“Angela said an angel dropped it and told her help would come if she called for it. Here we a—ohmygod. She’s here.”

The helicopter was showing a lot more damage, but it settled, and Reem said, “Get in. They are prepping to leave, and you really want to be on that shuttle. Come on.”

Forty of them packed in a space meant for fewer. Three children were crammed under the console, and a net up top held the toddlers. While she calmly packed them in, she hummed and sang, and when they were all locked in, she said, “Well, it’s been real, but I want to live.”

She took off, and the helicopter fought her, but she got them up as the lava filled the clearing where it had just been. “No going back now, kids.”

The heavy aircraft moved slowly, and she started speaking calmly into her headset. There was an argument, and she said, “You are going to get them to safety, or I am going to fly up to you and kick every one of your asses. I am not doing this for kicks.”

The helicopter went faster, and when they could see the huge ship, they could also see it was powering up to leave without them.

“Fucking, weasely bastards.” Reem set the helicopter into a dive, and she headed for the front of the shuttle. “Power down, or I put this on the fucking shuttle, and no one leaves. I have forty-one souls on board, and I know the shuttle can go overweight. I read the manual.”

There was a pause, and the helicopter lowered until it touched the shuttle. There was a sound of an engine being shut off.

“Excellent choice. Open the doors, and get some personnel here to help the injured.”

They lifted, turned, and set down. Reem helped them get out and ushered them toward the ship.

There was an explosion and a scream. Folks were running into the shuttle with Reem between them, laying her down near the cockpit. The shard of one of the rotors was in

her skull.

There was crying, sobbing, but they closed the shuttle, and the crew powered the vessel up. There was a lot of shouting from the cockpit as the vessel wobbled upward. Motion in the aisle caused screaming as Reem got to her feet, and she walked to the cockpit, causing the crew to leave. Humming softly, she did something to the controls, and then they were lifting smoothly and leaving their world behind. The memory showed Reem standing there with that shard of metal in her head, humming softly as she took their shuttle to the education station. She collapsed the moment they were docked, and a crew pushed in to carry her out. No human tried to leave before she did.

The woman took the circlet off. “You are up and talking and moving around. That’s a miracle.”

Reem shrugged. “It is science, actually. I am part Hmrain. Thousands of years ago, Ra was on our world, and he had visitors. Assessors were sent to make sure Ra wasn’t a complete nut job—”

There was a deep laugh.

“And to see what kind of species he was surrounding himself with. I am guessing one of my ancestors took a dip in the Terran gene pool.”

“How does that matter?”

“My brain is in lobes that work differently from yours. When the survival programming kicked in, I got up and flew the shuttle. I could access all of my skills and the control manuals I had memorized. Luckily for you and myself and everyone on that shuttle, I did.”

She looked at Sage, who was staring at her with wide eyes. “So, your emotional centre was damaged?”

“Fight or flight came on, and it hasn’t stopped since.”

Sage swallowed. “Lifting a car off a child.”

“That’s the same reflex. What couldn’t I do? No clue. As long as there are things to learn to protect those around me, I will keep going. Or until one of the units knits things back into proper position in my brain. Either one.”

Jasmine grinned. “So, I might have fun genes in me?”

“Sweetie, I think you have enough.”

Harwin laughed. “You aren’t wrong.”

“All seriousness, I got this from my mom’s side.”

“Dang.” Jasmine sighed. “So, you flew a helicopter in an eruption and then hijacked a shuttle while dead?”

“Well, you know, after the impact, I had to find new hobbies. You already had knitting, so I had to diversify.”

The humans in the room burst into laughter.

The Hmrain smiled cautiously.

Ra said, “The calculations have been done, and I would offer you a meal first, but...”

“No one wants to clean vomit from a restoration unit.” She looked around and blinked. She had collected all of the children around her. “Uh, I am stuck.”

Chortling parents came and reclaimed their offspring. The kids were all sleeping, and the parents moved to the side of the chamber.

Reem caught on. “There’s a buffet.”

Harwin smiled. "Sorry. A gal's gotta eat."

Harwin pulled her to her feet, and Ra led her away to a different unit than the one that had done the assessment.

"This is not a fast process. You need life support while it works, and it is going to take some time. Weeks."

"Well, hell." She sighed. "Can you let Wenvari know that I will be late?"

"I will. You will have to enter unclothed."

She shrugged. "Fine." Her shoes were set near the unit, and she disrobed, folding things neatly. She felt a light touch on her back.

"They didn't heal those scars?"

"Not scars. Birthmarks. They have been freaking out my physicians since I was born."

"That continues to explain things. You are a mystery, Reem."

"Gee. Thanks. This isn't creepy at all." She glanced at him.

He shrugged and opened the restoration unit. It wasn't just for repairs. The cushions were deliberately arranged to support her arms and legs, and it looked comfortable.

"In you go." He helped her get settled. "Hydration and repair systems will be connected via injection. You will be sedated before that begins."

"Okay. So, a few weeks?"

“Three to be precise.”

“Okay. Here we go.” She leaned her head back, and the unit closed around her. The light was soft, she heard the hiss of gas, and she was under.

\* \* \* \*

Sage asked, “Is she really part Hmrain?”

Ra put some food on a plate and carried it for Harwin. “The designers have touched her genes. Who is in her genome is lost to the ages. She doesn’t have a mark...yet.”



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Harwin blinked. “She’s getting a mark?”

“Her other nature is being pulled forward to strengthen her. A mark is likely.” He smiled and helped her to a low table, setting her second plate in front of her.

“Why do you keep trying to feed me?”

He shrugged. “She’s not the only one with a new mark.”

She stared at him and then slowly looked down at her bare abdomen. She was wearing her belt high, so she pried it back and looked down at her belly, seeing the small mark that was definitely new.

Harwin looked at him, and then she burst into tears. Ra came around and soothed her. “I thought you would be happy.”

“I am. I just want Kris to share this with me. She hasn’t been answering her coms this week.”

He rubbed her back. “I am sure they are just on a trade mission.”

Kris’s voice sounded, “Or maybe Essan was grabby, and we had to wait until he took the edge off.”

Harwin shrieked and ran over to her friend. Kris was taller than she had been and sporting serpentine scales across her cheekbones.

Harwin grabbed her and spun her around.They were both laughing, and Harwin said, “Well, at least you are being conservative with fabric.”

“And you are being weighed down with gold.What’s your point?”Kris was beaming.

“That is a lot of trouble in those two bodies.”Yorness grinned.“Looking good, Harwin.Archaeology suits you.”

Harwin grinned.“I feel I should say something about polishing old relics, but I can feel him right behind me.”

Kris covered her mouth and hissed softly.

A scaly Hmrain walked in behind her and slid his hand around her waist under the fabric panel.Kris sighed.“Harwin, this is Essan.”

“The living statue with his hand on my ass is Ra.Ra, Kris.”

Kris grinned.“Essan, this is Harwin.I am guessing you know Ra.”

Essan chuckled.“I do indeed.Greetings, Ancient Ra.”

They clasped forearms, and Harwin laughed at the very masculine display.

Yorness chuckled.“Your station is very congested right now, Lord Ra.”

“Is it?”

“Well, in addition to Zell’s warship and Essan’s ship, there is a third armoured cruiser at the station.”

Ra chuckled, and Harwin felt it. “Oh, good. He’s here.”

Harwin asked, “Who?”

“Wenvari. He has finally left his greenhouse, and it is because of his companion, Reem.”

Essan smiled. “Is he coming down?”

“No. He has to run his world now that his comptroller is being repaired. He will be busy for a few weeks.”

“What happened to his comptroller?”

“She’s in a repair unit. She has genes touched by the designers and wing scars on her back.”

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Essan's eyes widened. "You are joking."

"I am not. They also dumped additional nanites on her at one of the experimental stations."

"How badly was she injured?" Essan asked politely.

"If she were just human, she would have been very dead. I will show you a recording of the memory projection but not when we have a meal waiting."

Zell and Sage were talking with the primal humans. Den and Addy were standing close, and they spoke of the large quantity of humans on Aten, with plans for more to come.

Harwin looked at the three Hmrain in the space and snorted. She returned to the table and sat, continuing her meal.

Kris came over with a plate. "You are eating like the plate owes you money."

"I am eating this so that Ra won't find something that he thinks I will like more. I am about to have an increase in girth."

"From eating?"

"Well, not from swallowing."

"Ohmygod, you're pregnant!"

“Don’t pray in this temple.He’s always listening.”

Kris covered her mouth, looking at Ra.He was looking back and grinning.

Harwin chuckled.“He’s being polite because we have Hmrain guests, but I am confident that he’s wanting to investigate the new mark as soon as he can.”

“Uh-huh.So, tell me about this other Terran.”

“Oh, Reem.Yeah, she has quite the story.”Harwin told her what they had learned while she finished both plates.

Ra was watching, and when he looked at the plates, he started for the buffet.

Harwin watched, and when he picked up a plate, she clapped her hands, and the plate fell into two pieces.Ra whirled and raised his brows.“What was that, Harwin?”

“I am full, and I know you aren’t hungry.”She smirked.

“You were confident you wouldn’t miss?”

“Of course not.I didn’t.”She put her hand on her belly.“You didn’t.”

He paused and grinned, moving toward her with speed, catching her up and heading for their quarters.

\* \* \* \*

Kris looked at Essan.“Don’t you even think about it.You already did your version of the same thing when we got to the station.”

Essan chuckled and kept a hand on her back. “You are right. I did.”

Yorness smiled. “So, there will be a Hmrain baby boom soon?”

“Eleven to thirteen months, depending on the father,” Kris muttered.

Essan kissed her temple. “I will be with you every step of the way.”

“Yeesh, talk about exhausting.”

Yorness said, “Now, Nana Kris, you are just a little grumpy because you were caught by surprise.”

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“Surprise, expecting it, doesn’t matter.He likes me reckless or shy.”

Essan laughed and stroked his hand down her back.“You aren’t wrong.”

“Found some new scales?”

He hissed softly, “Yes, and I will greet them properly as soon as our hosts return and show us where our guestroom is.”

She chuckled.“If you get desperate, we can always go and defile the shuttle.”

His soft hissing against her neck made her consider the shuttle option.The flicking of his forked tongue had caught her focus.

He paused.“It seems my brother wishes to speak to me.”

He abandoned her and went to talk to Zell.Kris looked to Yorness.“Was he always that much of a twit?”

“No, Nana, I am pretty sure that it’s a recent development.I don’t know how he was with my ancestor, but there are no records of him playing tag with her.”

Sage wandered over and sat with them.“Well, it looks like we have lost our playmates.”

Kris chuckled.“Do you mean Harwin or Zell?”

Sage wrinkled her nose. “No comment.”

Yorness laughed.

They got some more snacks, the primal Terrans gathered around, they made a pillow fort, and had a pre-sleepover chat.

Kris sat up after Sage mentioned a similar sleepover on Bailey’s ship surrounded by Earth trees. The other ladies sat up, and Kris asked, “What kind of trees?”

“Uh, cacao and coffee. I think she had some tea bushes. Bailey believes that some of our traditions need to be restarted on other worlds.”

Kris asked, “Where is she now?”

“Um, probably under Symo? His ship was heading home.” She smiled. “We are going to test the plants we got in Zell’s system.”

Kris paused, “Is Zell’s ship a transport or—”

“Warship.”

“Dang.”

Sage said, “You are really getting into the whole bossy consort thing, huh?”

“It has its moments. What about you?”

“I got companion training, so I can pour a steady cup of tea in a hurricane.”

Kris frowned. “But you are a consort.”



“Yup. Paperwork is filed and everything.”

Jasmine asked, “What is the difference?”

Sage snorted. “Foreplay and aftercare. A companion contract is mostly about being an outlet, not a partner.”

Kris nodded. “That sounds like it sucks.”

“Minimal sucking.”

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They giggled, and Jasmine stopped, looking up at the stone ceiling. “Do you think she’s okay?”

Kris looked up. “Reem? If she’s in one of Ra’s rebuild units, she’s fine. He can bring the dead back with one of those things.”

Jasmine ran her hand over her hair. “I think that has already happened once. How many times can she come back and still be herself?”

The ladies went quiet, and their gazes moved up to the level where Reem was in a pod somewhere.

Kris took her hand and held it. “She’ll be fine. She flew a shuttle with no training, and we would have considered her clinically dead, but I was reminded of the images of people who had gotten shot or had bolts or nails in their brains, but they were up and talking.”

Jasmine nodded. “If anyone has to do things weird, it’s Reem.”

Yorness took her hand. “Tell us about her.”

Kris saw Jasmine look at the women around her, and she started to tell them all about her cousin. Zell and Essan came close, and they listened to the story of a woman who had faced death time and again, and when she rose from the ashes, she pulled others with her.

Reem listened to everything. She heard the sounds of space and ships and transports all around her. A low voice was near her, and he was asking her what to do with colonists and disputes. She sent the information to the tablet next to the chamber. Reem liked that exercise. It helped her keep her focus.

She counted the days and occasionally moved her fingers. When day twenty-one was there, she waited for the unit to tell her she was complete, but it stated that she was in development. That was a strange description.

She started sending messages to Wenvari about her being trapped and what the hell was development?

His low voice said, "You have additional genes, and it will hurt if you are active while your body is settling into its new format."

She sent him an image of her with four arms.

There was a soft laugh. "No, Comptroller. It will be more subtle than that. You have been given additional material to help your transformation."

She sent an image of scaffolding.

"Sort of. Building blocks."

She sent an image of blocks stacking.

"Much like that. Yes. Comptroller, you are almost ready to return home."

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She flashed an image of her apartment, the view of the city, and her office.

He chuckled. “Slightly different view, but yes. You remember that you agreed to be my companion?”

She flashed an image of the bed she used at the Pleasure Centre.

“Yes, Reem, but so much more. I know your face, you see.”

She flashed a bunch of faces across his screen.

He tapped her features out of the crowd. “I do not see faces, but yours, I know.”

She sent a series of dots across his screen.

“Not much longer. Hours. The implant has been minimized. The biological parts of it are grafted to your brain, but you will be able to feel again, laugh again, and enjoy the children running to you again.”

She put an image of her running away from little kids, laughing.

He snorted. “Your cousin says that children always come to you. They always have.”

Reem put an image of herself with radiating lines coming off, and children were touched by them and came to her.

“Your non-human genetics cause that particular effect. I have spoken to my people,

and they feel the draw to you as well.”

A picture of herself scowling.

“You seek positions of solitude, but you can’t avoid it. They will come to you, over and over. You help, you guide, you do the job I didn’t want to do. I was very excited when I saw your qualifications. I paid more than I have for any colonist, and now I am glad that I did. People around you are content. It is so relaxing that I am thinking about starting work on another empty world.”

Reem paused. She sent a cartoon Wenvari flying to another world and putting plants down.

“I will not be moving. The initial stages take centuries and are best done from a distance.”

She walked the cartoon Wenvari back to his home.

“Correct. It is my home now, and it is your home. I can hardly wait to see you in something more feminine.”

She showed herself clinging to her office clothing.

“I am afraid not. In addition to your comptroller duties, you will be with me as we open new businesses and eventually deal with international traders.”

She put a thick sweater on her character.

“That won’t do. You will get too hot in the greenhouse.”

He pulled an image over from a different screen. There was a fitted bodice that floated

off in delicate panels, and the skirt wrapped from the top of her hip bone to just below her groin and then into more delicate panels. The feet in the drawing were wearing sandals that went up her calf, wrapped with vines. There were wristbands that did the same.

She put her normal clothing on top of the image.

He laughed and put the new, soft image over it. “You will get used to it. Everything is covered according to your social protocols. Harwin says it is decent, and Kris argued with Essan on how to get an outfit with sides. Sage is content with her clothing, so she was of no help. She has a Daughter of Rath with her. It is another one of your kind. That is unexpected.”

She showed Kris with a shadowed figure next to her.

“Ah, the Daughters of Rath are singular beings from different species who are trained in the violent arts and bringing peace by any means. They are a fascinating group of beings.”

Reem looked up the Daughters of Rath and found the criteria for joining. She shuddered at the mention of absolute loss mixed with world-ending rage. She found the information on the Terran member and found Theodora, betrayed by her husband, who murdered her child in the womb so he could get a fresh start. Theodora had survived; her child had not, and her rage drove her to madness. Now she was a Daughter of Rath and helped others find justice, for a price.

“Did you just hack Rath’s systems?”

She flashed the screen green.

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“I will tell Ra to expect contact.”

She heard him speaking into a com. She idly ran through the requests for help until she found one that had a familiar name. It wasn't begging for help; it was demanding it. There was a very angry Terran at the end of that letter. Reem did what she could. She expedited it to every bit of tech that Rath owned.

She heard a response in a few minutes. Enough, Comptroller. You are right. It deserves our attention. How did you get through my security?

It is just something I know how to do. You will send someone to help them? They were lied to. Those are worthless contracts.

Yes, now that you have made me look...everywhere...I understand that. Who is your Hmrain?

I have a companion contract with Wenvari. It will start when I am out of here.

Where is here?

A restructuring unit on Aten.

Why?

I had a brain implant and multiple Hmrain DNA in here along with my own. It has been a long session.

Hours?

Twenty-one days.

“Who are you talking to, Reem?”

She flashed the Hmrain spelling of Rath on his screen.

“Reem, disconnect at once.”

She spoke to Rath. Wenvari is upset that I am speaking with you. Thank you for listening to my concerns. Please let me know if I can help in any way.

There was soft laughter through the link. I know why he is upset. If I were there instead of here, he would be up for a fight, and he would lose.

Why?

Because you are from a unique species with a unique set of skills. I do believe you are also a singular female. Wenvari would be a fool not to guard you. If he ever lets your contract lapse, contact me. If I am available, I am at your service.

Um, thank you, Lord Rath.

There was a deep chuckle through the com, and the call was disconnected.

She wrote in text, I am no longer communicating with Rath.

“Good. He’s aggressive and might try to steal you. There aren’t any others like you, and I want to keep you with me.”



She spelled out, Five-year contract, right? No worries.

“Once we confirm compatibility, I would like to sign an addendum. To the original.”

Why? Five years is a while.

“Because, unlike my experiences on my world, I know now what kind of a determined creature you are. Your skills and fearlessness are astonishing.”

I was afraid, but there was no option. It was succeed or die trying.

He sighed. “I thought as much. The Terrans who knew you are bringing gifts of fruit and clothing for you. They are going without their rations in order to ensure your comfort.”

The unit’s message changed to Complete. Injectors pulled out of her arms, and all holes were sealed.

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“Ah, the unit has finished its work.I will assist you out.”

She heard rustling, and he clicked the releases.The unit opened slowly, and she winced in the bright light.Hands reached in and lifted her from the unit, cradling her carefully against a body whose dark grey was streaked in soft lavender lightning.

She whispered softly, “Thank you.”

“It is my pleasure.You have not moved in three weeks; it is likely that you would be weak.Can you really fly anything?”

“Not a Hmrain.”She chuckled.“Not yet.”

“If you wish to experiment, please notify me.I will be there and ready.”

She sighed.“Good to know.”

He set her down at the edge of the bed where the outfit he had shown her was lying.It was a lovely royal blue with grey trim.“Why blue?”

“It is your colour when you are calm.I want you surrounded by calm.I have noticed you found a way to keep working from within the pod.”

“It took a few days, but I managed it.”

“Thank you.Everything is so much better when you are in charge, Reem.”

She smiled.

“Your cousin said your name had meaning.”

“Gazelle.It means gazelle.”

“What is that?”

“A delicate, bounding deer.My mother was petite; my father was not.I took after him, but the name stuck.”

Wenvari smiled and caressed her hair.“You seem delicate to me.The name suits you.”

She got up slowly and wrapped the skirt around her.She fumbled at the catches and fasteners, but Wenvari said, “May I?”

She paused and nodded.His long fingers made short work of it.He picked up the top, slid her arms into place, and did the same job on the front ties that held it snug to her torso before the panels floated loose around her midriff and arms.Technically, she was still fully dressed, if clear clothing was fashion.

Wenvari met her gaze and smiled.“I can see you.The wide look in your eyes, the small nub of your nose, and the tempting curve of your lips that just pulled downward in a scowl.You are the first being not created Hmrain that I have truly seen.”

He knelt and got the vines that held her shoes up on her calves.There were vines that wrapped around her arms, and as he applied them, they flattened to her skin.“There.All protected.”

He looked at her and bent to kiss her.Reem blinked and understood that he meant to pursue the intimate portion of the contract sooner rather than later.

His hands wrapped around her ribs, and he straightened, holding her up for the kiss with her legs dangling off the ground.

She pressed her arms to his shoulders as heat spilled through her, and she missed her pleasure unit.

He leaned back. “What is purple?”

She slowly opened her eyes. “Hmm?”

“What is purple?”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. “I don’t understand.”

He set her on her feet, and he took a lock of her hair and held it where she could see it. “Purple.”

“Oh. Lust, I guess. It’s been a while.”

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He smiled. "Good. For me, lust is white."

She looked at the silvery pale streaks in his skin. "Oh. Got it."

He cradled her head and kissed her again. "Your cousin is eager to see you."

"Yeah. Wait. What do I look like?"

He chuckled. "Mostly the same. The majority of differences are internal."

"My brain is back together?"

"It is. You will slowly return to the self I have never met. I am very interested in meeting the result."

He released her, took her hand, and walked her down a few sets of stairs when they crossed to a gathering area. Jasmine was there, and she sprinted over, yelling, "Reem!"

Reem stepped forward and looked down at her cousin. "So, that is one change."

"Whoa. You grew a foot."

"You are just jealous because you are stubby." She hugged her cousin. "You made it, Jaz."

"You made it, too, with a chunk of helicopter in your skull. I know that is the way you

wanted to go out.”

Reem felt her mouth curving, and then she started laughing—a rusty, unused laugh that made Jaz burst into tears. She giggled. “Nailed it. That was the way I wanted to go out, and I went, bought the t-shirt, and now I am back.”

Jaz laughed and sobbed at once. “You’re back.”

Reem ruffled her hair. “Yay. I am back.”

Jaz held onto her like she was trying to squeeze out a prize. Wenvari tried to intervene, but Reem shook her head and stroked Jaz’s hair. When she lifted her head to smile, Reem smiled back at her. It set off another wave of crying, but she was able to stop herself, and Reem wiped her tears. “You have me living as a relative somewhere in the universe. With a little notice, you can come and visit if you like.”

“Why notice?”

“I have a one-bedroom apartment.”

Wenvari said, “You can keep it for guests, but you won’t be needing it.”

Reem looked at him, and he was giving her a bland expression. His expression was matter-of-fact.

Reem tried something, and she found his ship above them getting ready for the push home. “We are leaving?”

Wenvari grinned. “You can still use computers.”

“Yeah. Answer my question, flappy.”

He blinked. “Flappy?”

Jaz muttered, “Don’t piss them off. Hm rain are usually calm, but they can be unpredictable.”

“What is the reference for flappy?”

Jaz said, “I think she meant the sound and motions your wings make while flying.”

“She has never seen me fly.”

“She was trying not to call you something objectionable, so she used a verb.”

Reem nodded. “What she said.”

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He nodded, removed her from her cousin's embrace, picked her up, and headed out of the pyramid, taking flight with a few sweeps of his wings.

"I do not hear flapping," he murmured in her ear.

"Me neither. Oh, look, cities!"

"Not afraid of heights?"

"Never. We had to pull the seats from the helicopter so that we could use the lightest thing possible. I did most of my flying on a webbed seat. It was almost like this but more forward-facing."

He did barrel rolls, launched skyward, and plunged toward the ground while she giggled.

He snorted. "Well, you have regained your emotions. That is good."

As he flew back to the pyramid, she sighed. "It is like opening a door inside me that I need or that someone else needs. Jasmine needed to hear me laugh. I used to laugh a lot. That is how she feels my presence, knows I am alive."

"And that was important."

"I came here for her, and I know she will do great things with the skills she has from being a primal."



“You heard all that?”

“Heard? Maybe. Downloaded, definitely. Do we know what the computer was?”

“Designer artifact used in biological computers. Your brain was perfect for it.”

Reem nodded. “I thought that might be it. I have also seen the extent of my alterations. Was that you or the nanites?”

“Both. I would like our time together to be enjoyable, without stress or pain. I do not enjoy those emotions.”

She smiled. “I know.” Wenvari had been at her side the last two weeks of her transformation. He had fussed over the setting and smoothed every bit of discomfort from the pain of being realigned by nanites. He had remained at her side and spoke to her as soon as she was awake.

He moved on silent wings and landed at the base of the pyramid. Ra, Harwin, and Jasmine were waiting.

Wenvari nodded to Ra. “Thank you for the use of your restructuring unit.”

Ra smiled. “Thank you for the tech to continue my research. The components you have offered in exchange for helping Reem are sufficient.”

Harwin frowned. “How much did you charge him?”

Ra smiled. “Enough. Wenvari has a number of worlds that create the most astonishing technology, and then he goes on to the next to plant trees, grow food, and then the technology creeps in again. He can’t help himself.”

Reem was tired and smiled. “That sounds like him.”

Harwin said, “You are beautiful, Reem. You take my breath away.”

Ra nodded. “Your features are lovely, Reem.”

“And you are both very shiny.”

Harwin chuckled. “She doesn’t like compliments.”

“It isn’t that I don’t like them; I just never knew what to do with them.” Reem leaned her head against Wenvari. “I just want to go home and get back to my routine.”

He kissed her temple. “Then, that is where we shall go.”

Harwin sighed. “I thought we would get to hang out more.”

Jasmine said, “Yeah, but knowing that you are in one piece and can communicate with emotions again, I guess that’s enough for me. Can I get another hug?”

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Reem tapped Wenvari's shoulder, and he set her on her feet. She swayed, and he steadied her. Jasmine came in and hugged her, muttering, "Aside from the unfortunate line up with your boobs, you are still a great hugger."

Reem looked down at the top of her cousin's head. "Are you comfortable or using me as a crash device?"

"You are too solid to be an inflatable, maybe gel pads?" Jaz looked up at her.

Reem kissed the top of her forehead. "Moron. I look forward to setting up a com schedule with you and sharing gossip when Ra manages to find your match. He's having a lot of fun with that." She let Jaz go.

Ra's eyes widened.

She shrugged. "I was in all the systems. Everywhere. My body was supported, so I had plenty of energy to follow signals across space."

Reem sighed. "It was strange, I thought I would lose myself, but I was fine. I followed my path home over and over."

"You could sense your body over distance?" Wenvari asked softly.

"No, I could sense you. You glow with a distinct signature that is all you. I could find it back all the way from the designers' station. They caught me in their systems, and we had a nice chat, and then they sent me home."

Wenvari lifted her into his arms. “Home is where we are going.”

Harwin squeezed her hand, Ra inclined his head, and Jasmine smiled with teary eyes. “Bye, Reem. See you at the next family gathering.”

“I will be hosting on Wenavik in ten years. Food’s on me.” She said the last as her Hmrain launched skyward.

There was only one shuttle left, so Zell and Essan had left with their consorts. “Did you get the plants?”

Wenvari landed, and he walked in through the hold ramp. The space was filled with plants, carefully arranged and tethered in place. “We have the plants.”

She grinned and leaned against him as the hold ramp came up, the shuttle was pressurized, and he sat down while holding her as the pilot took off.

They were on their way home.

## Chapter Eight

Waking in Wenvari’s arms was a novelty. She jolted every time, and he soothed her. He turned her in his arms and kissed her every morning.

On their third day on the way home, he asked, “How do you get aroused?”

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She suddenly realized what he was waiting for. “Oh, it either happens cyclically, or you can just touch me or kiss me like you mean it.”

“Mean it?”

“I have some affection for you, Wenvari. We are bound together for the next five years. I have also been alone for about the same amount of time. So, if you don’t want me, I won’t take up your time, but if you do, you are going to have to start things.”

He smiled and caressed her cheek. “I can do that. I did not want to rush you.”

“Rush away. I can keep up. Well, as long as you can hold back.”

“Ah, they fixed that. May I demonstrate?”

“Are your hands clean?”

He grinned, got up, and went to wash his hands. He returned, yanked the sheet off the bed, and looked her over. He looked her over, head to toe.

“Doing an assessment of what you bargained for?”

“Trying to decide where to start.”

“Well, you can make a list and start at a different place every time.” Reem smiled.

He knelt next to her and bent to kiss her lips. “That is a very sound idea. You have

sealed your fate.I am starting at the centre.”

Reem thought he was going for her navel, but he grabbed her leg, flipped it, and planted his kiss over her sex, exploring and licking, and she started to feel bolts of excitement shooting through her.Wenvari chuckled and spread her thighs apart from their clamped position around his pointed ears.

Reem blushed when her hair turned purple.Wenvari grinned.His marks were white hot to look at, and when he returned to her thighs, she heard a crackle of energy.His hair was lit with lightning.

She craned to see what he was doing as her body writhed against his mouth and then his fingers, but he pressed her back with his wing and continued driving her mad with his mouth.

Reem felt the tension building and gasped softly as the first release washed through her.The bite she felt on her inner thigh was matched with the crackling of energy against her clit.She yelped as the soft pinpoints of pain kept her orgasm going and going.He moved his wing, and she met his gaze.

He lifted his head and licked his lips.He moved the fingers that he had thrust inside her, and they gleamed brightly.She covered her mouth and mumbled, “That hasn’t happened for a while.”

“The climax or...”

“The slick on your hand.It’s why the machine was so soothing.It had lube.”

He slurped it off his fingers and smiled.“Well, you are deeper than my fingertips, which is good enough for a start.”

She felt the blush across her skin. “A start? What’s a finish?”

“We will find out.” He moved over her, and his erection pressed against her. The head moved and then slid into her, moving, stretching, and filling her.

Reem looked up at him; he filled her vision as he filled her body. She squeaked and grunted as he continued into her, and then, suddenly, he stopped.

“Look at me, Reem. I want to memorize your expression.”

She stared at him as he started moving, and he smiled softly as he led her body to pleasure and then did it again.

Reem woke up on a table in Wenvari’s bath chamber. His oiled hands were moving over every muscle group and rubbing until she was limp. She groaned and could see that her hair was grey-blue.

He was glowing grey-white and smiling. “There you are, Comptroller. Perhaps seeking your power a fourth time was too much, but I can’t regret it and will help you to retune your instrument.”

She spoke in a whisper. “Retune?”

“Yes, speeding your recovery means that we will be able to move together again. I have started at four different points and enjoyed them all. You have hundreds of other points to begin, and I wish to experience them all.”

She leaned up on her elbows as he rubbed at her lower back. “We don’t have to do them all right now.”

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“How will I know which is my favourite without trying them all?”He sounded amused but reasonable.

“Well, I know one thing specifically that will trim your list.”She grunted as he pressed her flat.

“What is that?”

“Lord Wenvari, you like to watch my face, and I only bend so many ways.”

He smiled.“Excellent point.What about turned to one side?”

“Maybe, but you will have to line up.I will have a limited range of movement.”

“Your stamina does need work, Reem.I am delighted with your current capabilities, but I am waiting patiently for your body to settle into its new lines.”

“Lines?”

“You now wear the same veins under your skin that I do.They are rising with every peak you visit.”

“Yeah, about designs.Yours are lightning.”

He kept massaging her thighs.“They are.”

“And each time you wanted to speed things up, I detected the crackle of energy along



my body.”

He chuckled.“I was eager.I believe the urge to see your eyes go blank will fade in a century or two.”

“Our contract is only five years.”

“What were you planning after that?”

“I was going to work as long as possible to make money for retirement.Buy a small house, grow some herbs, and live out my very short life on Wenavik.”

“How short was it?”

“Was it?”

“Your lifespan.”

“In my family, ninety-five years or so.I was already close to fifty.”

He continued his slow massage of her back with a strong slide from shoulder to ankle.“Well, it is now considerably longer, and your fertility has been...refreshed.”

“Yeah, I guessed as much.The records from the different Hmrain that had human consorts all indicated that eggs with Hmrain DNA had been assembled.”

He chuckled and kept working on her until she was limp.“While you were studying my people, I was learning how to take care of you.”

“Like a pet?”

“Like a new species that I want to see thrive.”He leaned down and kissed her shoulder, then the other, and finally the back of her neck.

“I can’t move.”

He laughed and scooped her up.“You have such a strange effect on me.I feel lighthearted.I never feel that way.”

“Oh, I learned about that, too.My genetic donor was a class called ambassadors.They were designed to look generic to several species with a little effort.One of them was sent to make sure that the Ra project worked, and she left her child with its other mother.”

“Ah.Interesting.I felt that the designers would not have left us alone without some supervision.”He chuckled.“I would not have noticed that someone came to check.I have always kept to myself if I could.Also, I don’t know faces, so that is a factor.”

She smiled.“It would affect your interaction with people around you.Everyone would look the same.”

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“This is the issue. I don’t know why they made me that way, but they did. I am rather happy with how things have worked out.”

She nodded and then dozed against him, warm and limp. She used her computer back home to greet petitioners and continue her work as comptroller.

He murmured against her temple, “You are working again.”

“Mmphf.” She grunted.

“You have my markings on your forehead under your skin, and they are glowing white-gold as you work remote.” He chuckled. “I will be able to see if you are splitting your focus with a computer.”

She smiled and patted his chest. She tried to find instructions on caring for a Hmrain, but it always ended in sex position manuals. Reem would check again later; for now, she was a limp, warm cinnamon bun.

She was in the shower but didn’t remember getting there. The large male she was leaning against might have had something to do with it.

“How are you feeling, Reem?”

“Less sore than I have a right to be. The massage did the trick. When are we home?”

“Forty-six hours. Eager to be back?”

“Yes.Do I still have to wear the consort uniform?”

“Of course.You are my consort, after all.”

“According to the contract, I am a companion.”

“I have the addendum and change in terms on the tablet in the bedroom.”

She chuckled and arched into him as he massaged her tailbone.“You are getting very good at that.”

“I gave you visual clues.Your markings help me know what you are feeling.”

She looked up at him and slid her hands up his chest.His white-grey was in evidence, but a soft lavender was visible beneath her skin.“That isn’t fair.”

“Fair or not, I am glad for it.”

She chuckled and reached around his ribs and stroked the skin where his wings and back became one.He froze, and his designs were white and blazing under his skin.“I am taking the hint as well.”

He lifted her for a kiss, holding her as the heat built between them.

He cut off the water and walked to the air column that dried them from top to toe.At first, she thought it was strange to use a shower like that on the ship, but then he blandly explained that he was a Hmrain, and he would have a sunken tub if he wanted one.The water was recycled and was fine for reuse over and over.

He sat at the edge of the bed and pulled her onto his lap, rocking her against him while kissing her senseless.She rocked against him until she gasped and held onto

him as a low groan ripped through her.

“I believe you would have broken the machine if I brought you in in this state.” He chuckled. “Or rather, I would if I were there to witness it.”

She swallowed and rasped, “Why?”

He pressed his mouth to her neck. “I touch you, not a bot. I make you gasp, not a bot. I take that dazed expression in your eyes, and I remember it.”

She shuddered and clutched at his shoulders. Her body was still hot, and she wanted more.

Wenvari lifted his head, smiling. “I admire your capacity for pleasure.”

Reem smiled. “If not my stamina?”

He aligned them and slowly slid into her.

Reem let her head fall back as he lifted her and lowered her with delicate slowness.

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She dragged her breath in as he moved her carefully over him. He shuddered, and she felt a slick offering that let him move her more easily. She pressed her forehead to his chest and looked up at him when he whispered to her, kissing him when he tilted his head to hers. The slow coupling stroked her nerves, and when she came, it was in a cascade of shivers that moved her in a slow shimmy against him.

Wenvari chuckled. "I can still feel you pulsing around me."

She nodded. "So can I." She pressed her forehead to his chest. "I think I need to eat something."

"Of course, Reem. We will get you something in a moment." His hands stroked her back, and he smiled. "You have satisfied me; it is only fair that I do the same for you."

"You have about half an hour. My head is pounding and not in a good way."

He threaded his fingers into her hair and massaged her scalp. "I will pay attention. I will keep you safe and healthy."

She smiled and rocked her head against his hands. "It is a strange pain."

He moved slowly but efficiently. "What do you need?"

"Tea with honey. Fruit. Fast and accessible sugars." She opened her senses, and her body was completely out of balance.

He slid out of her, leaving a wave of cum running out of her, but the pounding of her

head got more intense.

She tried to black out, but it wasn't letting her. Time paused to her senses, and he held a cup to her lips that tasted of oranges and lemons. The pain eased, and she opened her eyes carefully.

He was holding a glass to her lips, and she drank slowly. She paused and murmured, "I should have eaten something when I got out of the unit."

"I forgot to offer it. I was so happy you were free."

"Yeah, I seem to remember that." She sipped again and relaxed.

"Is it better?"

"Yes, but my monitors are still screaming at me."

"They are visible to you?"

"Yes. Implants in my eyes. They have a separate composition and are telling me that I am physically exhausted. You were right. Stamina will have to improve over time."

She looked up at him, and his grey features had lemon-yellow lightning in them. "It's okay. What colour am I?"

"Dark green." He smiled. "Purple and blue streaks."

"Well, dark green is tired but not distressed. Purple is well...you know what purple is."

He chuckled. "Why did you get the emotional-sensing nanites in your hair?"

“To make the populace more at ease with me. Occasionally, I had flares of emotion, and they felt better when they could see it.”

“Understandable. What else do you need?”

“More juice; keep it coming.”

He nodded. “Yes, Consort Reem.”

They spent two hours setting her to rights. He murmured, “Let me know when it’s calling for collagen and protein.”

“Why?”

“Because you are destined for wings, and I will make sure you have everything you need when it comes time for them to sprout.”

“I am getting Hmrain wings?”



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“No, you are getting Assessor wings.They are lighter and might not enable you to do more than glide, but they are lovely.All the colours available to any species.”

She looked up at him.“Why?”

“Birthright.They could have overwritten your genes, but it is much better to work with them.”

“Right.I think so.”She groaned and stretched.

“You were working as comptroller while I was inside you.”

She flushed guiltily.“Someone had a question.”

“We will have to get you an assistant.”He cuddled her against him and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.“You shall not split your focus while with me.”

“What if I need a distraction to slow down?”

Wenvari chuckled.“Ask me.I would rather you hurtle into pleasure as fast as you can so we can do it again, but I understand how tiring that may be for you.”

“Yeah, foolish mortal that I am.”

“You have gained an extended lifespan.You can live as long as you wish.The longest time that a consort has remained with their Hmrain was over five hundred years.I am betting that you can defy what others have done before and remain with me longer.”

She narrowed his eyes. “You had better be exceptionally entertaining.”

“Or our children will be. That should occupy your focus now and then.”

“I...oh, right. I was rebuilt.”

“With Hmrain eggs and a working womb.”

“Who got their eggs into me?”

“The designers put the cells in that unit.”

“Oh. Delightful. Well, here’s hoping my cycles ease up.”

“I looked forward to your visits to the centre.”

“I know.”

“How do you know that?”

She looked around the room they were in. “You followed me across space. You arranged for me to see my cousin, if only for a little while.”

“Apologies for my impatience.”

“If she leaves Aten, she will do it at the side of her partner, and I know she will come to Wenavik.”

“You have faith in her?”

“I do. We were not very close as adults, but as children, our lives were twined.”

Wenvari nodded. “As much as I would like to remain here, I think we should dress and go for a walk.”

“Probably a good idea. Need to keep my legs moving.”

He smiled. “That is a lovely thought.”

“What?”

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“Your legs.Right.Let’s get dressed and stretch your muscles.”

She got dressed and asked, “May I remain comptroller?”

“Of course.I don’t want to do it.”The confidence of the statement was absolute.

Reem laughed brightly and got dressed.It was time to be seen by more of his people.No surprises for the people around her.

As they walked the halls, she took care of the colony, and he grinned.“You are very good at that.”

“Thank you.Turns out the cranial implant was Designer in origin.It was meant for a Hmrain but was rejected for being unsuitable for them.”

“Why?”

“A Hmrain with this would just remain in place and manipulate things from behind the scenes.That was not their intention.They needed guardians, not beings simply sitting back and watching.”

“Why do you have it?”

“Because I like the world I am in and the people it has brought to me.Rath has asked me to keep my senses open to communications about breaking bond contracts on the part of the bondholder.Apparently, he has a justice boner.”

“What is that?”

She chuckled and explained how some folks focused on justice to the exclusion of all else.

“That does describe him. He and his consort had a daughter before the consort was killed in an accident. His daughter was his world, and she was kidnapped for ransom and tortured. He takes that sort of thing very seriously.”

Reem said softly, “Did she survive?”

“No one knows. Rath created the Daughters and trained them to control their rage and avenge themselves and others. There has been no mention of his daughter since.”

“Oh, that’s so sad.”

“It is. Our children will be under strict guard until they are old enough to defend themselves.”

“That is optimistic.”

“That we have guards on Wenavik?”

“That there will be more than one.”

“I have confidence that you will be fascinated by a child with my features and want to do it again.” Wenvari smiled and slid his arm around her waist.

“Do you think you will know your own children?”

“Yes. They will have part of you, and I can see that. The slight uptilt of your nose, the

wide expanse of your eyes, and that funny curve to your mouth when I lecture you.”He chuckled.

She felt the twist he was referring to. She changed direction. “Is the apartment above the Pleasure Centre right for your attempts to start a family?”

“No. I don’t need that proximity anymore. I think my estate in Norweller is sufficient for that purpose.”

“Oh. Right.” She got the maps up and found it. “Yeah, that should do.”

She tried to bring up images, but all she could see was the aerial view. “There aren’t any views of your home.”

“Surprisingly, I like privacy.”

“I can’t be comptroller from your home.”

“Of course you can. It’s a six-minute skimmer ride or four minutes if I carry you.”

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She paused. “You would carry me in?”

“Of course. You can’t fly yet, and when your wings do come in, they are not for speed, they are primarily for display.”

“I am still not sold on the wings.”

He lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles. “You will be. You have all the time in the worlds.”

### Epilogue

Reem fluttered her wings as she finalized the documents for the colony expansion.

“Comptroller, you have a visitor.” Her assistant and other Terran, Lina, smiled.

The crying sounds of the infant made Reem smile. “You lasted three hours. I am very proud of you.”

Wenvari carried his daughter in and handed her to Reem. “I don’t know if you are talking about me or her.”

Reem unbuttoned her shirt. “Yes.”

He snorted, and his expression softened. “Pale blue. I love watching pale blue.”

She sat in the very comfortable chair he had provided her.

“Did you get the expansion organized?”

“Yes. Crews start the new living and commercial areas later this week.”

“You know, you were the best decision I ever made, and I am very happy that your cycle is predictable, or this little one wouldn’t be here. You work too much.”

“Whose fault is that?” She looked at him with raised brows.

“Perhaps I should schedule you a vacation or drop your in-office time to twice a week.” He stroked their daughter’s head.

She laughed. “I can work from home with monthly in-person meetings. I would like actually to see the world I live on.”

He smiled. “Then it is settled.”



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“Lina, are you ready to enact Operation Family First?”

“Yes, ma’am. I am ready to take queries here and answer the simple stuff while controlling your virtual visits.”

“Excellent. I am out of here as soon as Wenya is done with lunch.”

“Good. You work too hard.”

It took twenty minutes for her daughter to finish her meal. A burp and diaper change and the family was ready to travel.

Reem put Wenya in the secure carrier and looked at Wenvari. “Well, you are my ride.”

He grinned. “Promise?”

She laughed at his hopeful expression. He was actually good with details; he just didn’t like people who weren’t her. They had designed a new community, and it was being filled with new couples who were looking to start families, blended Wenavik and Terran. They were being given a community that would support their new unions.

She leaned against him as he lifted her and their daughter and kept her stained-glass, kaleidoscope wings folded tightly against her. She used them mainly to entertain her daughter, and in a secondary usage, she freaked out those who raised their voices in her office. They were a combination of butterfly and dragonfly wings and made a hard flicking sound when she opened them. She wasn’t used to them yet and could barely

get herself aloft, so she was content to use them to freak out the unwary or flirt with Wenvari. He couldn't resist when she showed all her colours. He loved to look at her, after all.