



Lost Companion

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Riley signs a companion contract with conditions. No sex. Her life as a companion to a half-Hmrain is fun, and they both feel the therapeutic effect. When the contract runs out and someone snags Riley, Lord Roth travels to find his daughter's lost companion and bring her home.

Riley is shipped with a bunch of Terrans to Arro, a world with a compatible population and a bond house. After getting the assessor to lower compatibility numbers, she gets an offer to be a lady's companion, except the lady has wings and is related to the Overseer of Arro. No pressure.

Living as Ranna's companion is fun. They travel, go to shows, share crafts, and spend five years with minimal disruption, until a night at the theatre ends with Riley being drugged and hauled off-world.

Ranna's father is the overseer of the planet, and when the Terran he is about to contract to is taken off-world, he gets his ship in pursuit. His lost companion will not be out of his grasp for long. He has a future in mind for her, and locating her is the first step.

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Chapter One

Riley sat in the dropship heading for the surface of Arro. She was with another fifty Terrans who had been selected for their people skills. She was going to be a household servant.

Tessa sat next to her. “I am super nervous. Are you?”

“I am fine. I have been a maid before.”

“But... these are aliens,” Tessa hissed.

“Sugar beet, out here, we are the aliens. Get used to it. We were selected as a bulk purchase so that the wealthy here can be trendy. It’s all the rage to have a human.”

Tessa blinked. “Oh. Right.”

“Did you finish your etiquette and serving courses?”

“Mostly.”

“Oh, boy. How do you greet your bondholder?”

“Uh. Hiya?”

Riley had the immediate urge to give a crash course in service, but there wasn’t time. “Just remember, if it isn’t in the contract, you don’t have to do it, and if they give you

a vague description of duties, you can ask them to be more precise. Don't fall for services as required. The bond house should nip those terms right away."

"What if they don't?"

"Ask the house representative to look over the points. Don't care if they are busy. Wait for them. If your bondholder doesn't want to wait for a contract, they are probably up to no good. Terrans are getting kidnapped into the sex trade, and it isn't romantic, unless you like fucking tentacles."

That seemed to get through Tessa's bubble.

They rocked again, and the dropship jets fired and settled their vessel down. Riley unclashed her harness and got to her feet. Her bondholder was going to have to clothe her. In the meantime, it was the station suit until she got to the bond house.

Tessa said, "Wait for me."

"Why? We aren't going to the same place after the bondhouse. You are on your own, Tessa. Best get used to it."

Riley inhaled the air through the open door and left the small pod where she and Tessa had been confined. She didn't dare tell Tessa that it was because one pod could be pierced, and they wouldn't lose the entire cargo. They were cargo.

There was a transport waiting, and a male with a tablet looked up. She bowed from the waist a slight ten degrees and said, "Riley Emmery, Terran, household service training."

He smiled slightly. "Lovely bow, Riley. The bond auction is waiting on the arrival of this vessel."

She nodded. “Shall I get on the transport?”

“Please. It looks like we will have to pry some of your people out.”

Riley walked calmly to the transport and sat on one of the benches. A slow trickle of humans left the shuttle, and the male with the clipboard checked them off.

By the time the last Terran was on the ship, the clipboard male was impatient. He hopped into the front of the transport, and it rose. They were being whisked toward a large building at the edge of the city. The bondhouse.

When they settled, the clipboard male said, “Males first. The handlers are waiting to bring you in.”

The men got up and walked to the loading area of the transport, stepping down and walking toward the handlers.

The male with the clipboard smiled at the remaining sixteen women. “We will wait until they clear the passageway and go to the males’ quarters before you go in. History has taught us that it is best to keep them at a distance.”

Riley waited, and when they were given permission, she was herded with the rest of them, walking into the building and down long halls to an area that had attendants who ushered them into radiant showers and then a knee-length smock before they led them one by one to a small office where a yellow male with silver eyes was there to do a final assessment.

Riley sat calmly and placed her hand in his. She felt lust boiling in her, and she breathed and exhaled to calm it.

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He gave her a sober look. “You don’t wish to be for Hmrain?”

“I like taking care of people. It makes me happy. Anyone can experience lust that they can consume.”

“I cannot lie and say you don’t have a high rating, but I can lower it to noticeable and not exceptional.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I can take that chance. The offer is very kind.”

He smiled. “I had heard your kind had a high level of companion class. You are the first batch I have met.”

“It seems to be linked to the level of effort required to survive.”

“Interesting. Well, you don’t need to change into companion clothing, just walk out to the right, and they will take you to the auction.”

“Thank you, may your day be bright.”

He smiled. “You get extra points for cultural attentiveness.”

Riley blushed and headed for the door. She walked out of the room, and an attendant was watching for her. “Miss Riley, please come with me. The auction is underway.”

She followed, and the woman asked her if she would consider a sexual posting.

“No. That isn’t my field of interest.”

“Very politely done.”

“I believe honesty is best.”

The attendant walked with her to an auction floor, and she waited in line while the women ahead of her went up for bond.

Tessa went up, and she danced, which made Riley wince. Even back on Earth, dancing was indicative of sexual interest under certain circumstances.

The bidding was strong, and Tessa got excited when she saw the number that she would end up with after her service was over.

When she cleared the floor, Riley walked out at her attendant’s urging and stood as her résumé was rattled off.

“Sexual contact is not on the menu with this one.”

She waited, and to her surprise, the number started rising. It went astonishingly high, and then there was a pause, and someone said, “End of auction. Private bidder.”

The number flipped up to seven figures, and the attendants beamed as she was led off to the side where a veiled and cloaked figure was waiting. The female grabbed her wrist and chuckled. “Come with me, Riley.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Riley walked with the woman to a contract room where they were escorted to a podium, and a contract was designed with rapid strokes of the stylus.

When the drafting was done, Riley walked over and read the contract. She blinked as she read what the woman wanted with her. She looked for any hidden clauses, but there were none. She was to be a lady's companion and a host, so learning to entertain was part of her education, paid for by her lady.

She smiled and looked at her new lady. "Are you sure?"

"I am sure. I have been looking for a companion, and you meet my criteria."

Riley signed, ocular scanned, and gave a drop of blood. Her bondholder did the same, raising her veil for the scan. The attendant gasped.

The veil lowered, and her lady said, "Come with me, Riley. Our transport is waiting."

Riley followed her respectfully, and the woman with the Hmrain marking on her forehead grabbed her by her wrist and hauled her to her side. "If I wanted a meek servant, I would have bought one. You are smart, you are determined, and you had a chance to take an easy life, but you value your dignity."

Riley walked with her, and the transport was a sleek skimmer-type arrangement that looked expensive. The lady got into the transport, and Riley hopped in next to her. The driver immediately took off and got them away from the auction house as if it were distasteful.

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The lady turned to her and said, “My name is Ranna. You can call me Ranna or Lady Ranna. I live on an estate in the countryside and wish to begin being more social. I have been in self-imposed exile for two hundred years. You are my means to return to being a useful member of society.”

“I am the pet for display so that no one looks at you.”

Ranna chuckled. “I knew you would understand. Are you willing to do it?”

“Of course. I live to be useful. What happens when you don’t need me anymore?”

“I either release your bond or buy you a house next to mine.”

“That sounds more than fair.”

“Good. I listened to my instincts about you, and when Amorro mentioned to me that there was a very sprightly Terran who was almost Hmrain-companion level but wanted a life that didn’t involve being under a male, I knew that you were the one for me.”

“He squealed.”

“He wanted to offer me the Terran with the most benefit to either of us.”

“That sounds sensible.”

“I think so. I will have clothing made for you, and you will dress to match me when

we are walking in town. What I wear isn't common on this world, so having someone with me will help my return to society."

"I will hold your hand and skip or throw rose petals at your feet if you need me to."

Ranna laughed. "Thank you."

The sky showed a sunset happening, and three rising moons were taking over the vault above them.

"This is lovely."

"Is it?"

"We haven't had a sky to look at for a few years. This is... beautiful."

Ranna tilted her veiled head skyward. "I suppose it is."

Riley was shivering after the two-hour ride, but the sky, the clean air, and the promise of a beautiful landscape kept her going. New world. New chance to have a life.

The manor was huge, and Ranna walked ahead of her. Riley shivered but kept her teeth from chattering by holding her jaw slightly open. Ranna walked to a cozy sitting room and gestured for Riley to sit. "You will now see what only my trusted staff has seen."

Riley sat, and Ranna lifted the veil and pushed her cloak back. Riley knew that style of marking. "You survived."

Ranna blinked. "I did. They offered me a chance to repair them, but I wanted to wear them. I wanted to remember."

Riley asked, “How long ago was that?”

“One hundred eighty years.”

“I see. It is your right to wear the marks. They took mine as soon as I got to the station.”

Ranna blinked. “You?”

Riley shrugged. “What others do to you reflects on them, not you.”

“What did you do?”

“My friends hunted them down and killed them.” Riley smiled. It was a cute conceit. She had done it herself.

Ranna blinked. “You didn’t do it yourself?”

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“Oh. Well, if you ask. Yes, I did.” She held up her hands. “These are my friends, lefty and righty.”

Ranna smiled and laughed softly. “That is what I thought. You have that tightly wound look that comes with holding yourself together. Why are you shaking?”

“I got cold on the way here. I have issues regulating temperature, and the bond smock doesn’t help.”

“Oh, of course.” She reached out and took off her cloak, wrapping it around Riley with a flourish. The warmth wrapped around her, and she sighed as she shivered.

Ranna smiled. “I will tell the housekeeper we want tea.”

Riley was speechless. Ranna was a Hmrain, but her wings had been shredded. It was like the scars on her face. She was reminding herself about the horror. Riley was sad, but she shivered in the thick cloak. The warmth slowly sank in, and when Ranna returned, a woman with soft yellow fur and wide black eyes came into the room. “So, you are the Terran that Lady Ranna had to have.”

“Pleased to meet you, mistress.” Riley nodded while shaking.

“What is the trouble?”

“Just a little cold.”

“Why?”

Riley smiled. “No fur?” She stuck her arm out and turned it from side to side.

“I see. What sort of tea would you prefer?”

“I have no preferences yet. Everything is new.”

The woman paused and nodded. “That isn’t a bad answer. Why are you here?”

“My world exploded.”

“Why are you here?”

She looked at Ranna. “My guess is she wants to see herself, so she is setting me up to be her mirror, her echo, until she can live normally again.”

Ranna smiled. “It’s time. Also, if I give her joy, I can consume it, so it is motivating for me.”

The housekeeper blinked and smiled, showing a lot of teeth. “That is a worthy goal. Tea and snacks, it is.”

“Mistress, what is your name?”

“Horib. Ranna’s father hired me.”

“Pleased to meet you, Horib. I am Riley.”

The housekeeper nodded; her neatly braided crest of hair gleamed as she turned and returned to the kitchen.

Ranna smiled. “So, you have grasped my intent.”

“I am good that way.”

Ranna stroked her hair. “I think we will get along fine. I am hoping to have our arrangement seamless when my father visits in two months.”

“Your father?”

“Lord Rath. He trains warriors on the other side of the world. Maybe we could visit them one day.”

“Wherever you want to go, I will go.”

Ranna smiled. “How long do you think you can keep that up?”

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“As long as you need, or five years to the end of the contract.”

“You are looking forward to leaving me already? What if I wish to keep you as a companion?”

Horib brought in the tray and poured for both of them.

“If that is your wish, we will negotiate then, but right now, I have a hard stop to my safety, and I need to plan for what will happen next.”

Ranna paused. “That makes sense. So, one of the things I will encourage you to do is seek out education for occupations here on Arro. If this works out, I would like to keep you as a friend.”

Ranna picked up her cup, and Riley did the same. She inhaled all of the flowers of summer in the tea and took a sip. She exhaled slowly as the floral warmth drifted through her. “This is lovely.”

“Eat the pickle sandwiches. They are delightful.”

Riley didn’t know which ones were the pickle, but Ranna pointed to narrow things down. Ranna ate with her but let Riley take on most of the snacks. They sat together, and Ranna called a seamstress to get some clothing. Measurements were to be taken first thing in the morning.

Ranna smiled after the call. “I would offer some of my clothing, but my clothing has a split in the back.”

“Fair enough.”

“And Horib is too short for your clothing.”

“Right. Not by much.”

Ranna laughed and said, “Are you done?”

“I don’t eat ceramic, so yes.”

“We will take a quick walk around the grounds, and by then, you should be tired enough to sleep, and Horib has made up your room. In the morning, there will be maids and gardeners around the home, so this is the quietest time. You can stare at the sky again.”

Riley got up, removed the cloak, and extended it to Ranna.

“Keep it on. I am fine right now. This is my home, and I love a cool night.”

Riley shrugged, put the cloak on, and hiked up the front to six inches of clearance. “Lead on, Lady Ranna.”

Ranna grinned and walked her through the house and out to the back area, where the dome of the sky was exposed and the stars and moons were slowly dancing.

Riley stared up and said, “Oh, wow.” She held up the cloak and spun slowly, making the stars turn.

Ranna laughed softly as she watched her, but Riley didn’t care. She was safe, she was fed, and that really covered most of her wants.

* * * *

Horib listened to asound that was so rare and so precious. Lady Ranna was laughing. Less than one day, and her companion was having an effect. Horib made a call to Lord Rath to tell him about his daughter's new plan to try and rejoin the world.

Watching Ranna interact with the Terran, Horib had hope for the first time since she had come to the manor.

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Chapter Two

The sleep that she got was interrupted by minor house sounds, and she bolted upright more than once. By dawn, she was exhausted.

She was sitting up and had made her bed when Horib opened the door quietly. “Oh! You are awake.”

Riley nodded. “Yes. Sorry. I am not used to an actual bed anymore.”

The platform was raised and very comfortable, but she was used to the barracks at the station and sleeping rough on the ground. Comfortable was no longer in her wheelhouse.

She ran her hands through her hair.

“Did you sleep in the shift?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to mess anything up.”

Horib paused as she set a tray on the small table. “And you only have one item of clothing and need to keep it in place if you want to run.”

“Yeah. That’s it.” She yawned.

“Sit, have tea. Relax. I will let Lady Ranna know to take it easy on you.”

“Thanks. When does the seamstress show up?”

“She’s on her way.”

Riley walked to the tiny table and sipped at the eye-opening tea that tasted like roses and kicked like coffee. There was a soft egg with a purple yolk, toast, and slabs of meat.

“Arro meals are heavy for breakfast, fruit for midday, and whatever you like for dinner. I gave you half of a normal breakfast serving.”

“Thank you.” She mumbled and ate quickly.

“Well, you don’t have ration lock, that’s good.”

“I have always been highly omnivorous.”

“That’s good. I am guessing it got you through.”

“That it did.”

Horib paused. “I read up on your world.”

“It’s dead. For the foreseeable future of everyone on it. First came the asteroid strike, then the earthquakes and roads tearing apart, then power went out, medications ran out, and then disease spread, and it spread fast at first, and without medication or heating, people died in the thousands.”

“Then starvation.”

“Correct. Then the station came, and my area was sorted in order of usefulness, so I

lied and stayed with those I was with until we were brought onboard, and then I got outed as useful.”

“What is your skill?”

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“Programming and childcare.”

“Interesting combination.”

“I think so. I was a nanny, a caregiver, and I stayed with the children under my care until they were put into a crèche grouping and sent to Lefaver.”

“They are good with children. What happened to their parents?”

“They ran. They told me to take care of them, and they left their children with me.”

“Usually, they keep bonded groups together.”

“Oh, the kids blamed me for their parents’ disappearance. They panicked every time I had to move us for fear of their parents never finding them. They rejected my care and separated themselves from me.”

Horib said, “You never showed them the message.”

Riley finished her meal. “There didn’t seem to be a point to making them feel that rejected.”

“But you let them direct their rage to you instead.”

“I’m a big girl. I can take it. It was better to leave them to their illusions.”

“You know that they will be able to get the details of their intake when they are

adults.”

“If they want the information, my phone was downloaded for recordkeeping. The kids made me keep it in case their parents called or texted. They really didn’t understand how communications worked.”

Horib sighed. “That is tense.”

“Yeah. A small sliver of an eventful two years.”

“Was there violence?”

“Yes. Some received, some administered.” She chuckled and finished her tea.

“Yeah, I sense that about you. So does Lady Ranna.”

“Which is why she set a ridiculously high bond on me. I had better be entertaining as hell for the next five years.”

Horib chuckled. “You are off to a good start, but you know she will feed off your emotions, right?”

“I know. It’s a Hmrain thing, but several of my people have been taken on as consorts, and they are fine and well, so I am not afraid of that. She knows I am a Hmrain match.”

Horib blinked. “Right. Of course.”

“I am not into females, but on my world, young ladies of wealth would hire well-trained young women who had fallen on hard times and needed an income. They would be in a servant-sister position, and so far, this is what Lady Ranna has offered

to me.”

Ranna’s voice came from the doorway. “You have a good grasp on the situation.” The door swung open completely. “That is what I want from you, and I hope it benefits both of us. Are you ready to dress like an Arro lady?”

“Nope, but anything is better than the bond shift.”

Ranna grinned. “That’s the spirit. Come on, time to get naked in a room full of ladies.”

“Ah, that takes me back to school locker rooms.” She got up and followed Lady Ranna down to a sitting room on the main floor. “Just don’t snap a towel at me.”

Lady Ranna turned her head and smiled. “I will save that for a spa day.”

Riley chuckled and caught up with Ranna as they got to the sitting room, where a selection of food was on a warming tray along with more of the morning tea.

Horib came in and served Ranna tea before leaving to answer the door.

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Ranna looked at her and frowned. “Riley, you look horrible.”

“It is going to take a bit of effort to get used to the quiet of my own room. I haven’t had that kind of space for years. I kept bracing for an attack.”

Ranna paused and nodded. “I understand that.”

Riley realized what that meant and pressed her lips together. “I have questions.”

“I will answer them. Thank you for your patience.”

“So, the clothing won’t be too weird, will it?”

Ranna chuckled. “I don’t know what is normal to your senses.”

“Trousers, leggings, long sleeves, tunics that cover my butt?”

“Dresses of varying designs, undergarments to suit each design, cloaks and veils, boots as footwear.”

“Ooh. Boots. I love boots. And underwear. Mine all wore out.”

“Ah. Well, these will be nice and comfortable.”

“Well, I like you already.”

“Your Hmrain common is good.”

“I always had an easy time with languages.” She changed dialects. “I can manage formal Hmrain as well.” She switched, “Also, Arro.”

Ranna smiled. “Good. We will have to find an obscure language for you to communicate with me so that we can gossip.”

“English, a Terran language, is pretty obscure here.”

“Perhaps. Maybe Vecchin manual. It’s silent.”

“I am rarely silent.”

Ranna laughed. “I am noticing. It will be good practice. I will get you the files.”

Riley was about to get herself a cup of tea when a large green woman stomped in with bolts of fabric strapped to her back. Another female of the same species came in behind her. Ranna sipped at her tea. “Lagolian, thank you for coming so quickly. I wasn’t expecting to pick up a companion, but here she is.”

Riley grinned and curtsied then straightened and waved. “Hello, madam.”

The green woman huffed. “Here to sponge off the lady?”

“Absolutely.”

The room paused, and Ranna laughed, a bright wave of sound that stunned the locals.

Horib brought in more teacups. “She’s done that twice since she met her companion.”

Lagolian paused. “I see. Well, we need a footstool for her as I am not bending over that far.”

Riley refused to make the easy joke, but she met Ranna's gaze, and the lady smirked.

Horib came to Ranna. "Lady, do you wish your veil?"

"No. I will no longer wear the veil and cloak in my home."

"Very well, Lady." Horib grinned when her back was turned to her lady, but Riley caught it.

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When they had the footstool, Riley hopped on, and Lagolian began measurements. The assistant dutifully recorded the numbers.

“Now, what designs can she wear?” Ranna smiled.

To Riley’s astonishment, the windows were darkened, and a fashion show of her in an array of outfits began. While the fashion show went on, the assistant was sewing something. Horib got in on the decisions, and Riley tried some of the fruit on the table.

Horib said, “She needs a court outfit if she is to be presented to your father.”

Riley blinked. “Presented how?”

Ranna laughed. “He won’t even look at you while you are my companion.”

Riley exhaled slowly. “Oh, good.”

Horib said, “You don’t wish to honour our overseer?”

“Not with my body. No.” She sighed. “I want to learn who I am again after all the things I have been forced to do. I used to be the kind of person people wanted to be near, and I hope to be there again.”

Ranna grinned. “You are close.”

Lagolian asked, “My lady, don’t think I am impertinent, but you are in remarkably

good spirits.”

Ranna pointed to Riley. “I am passively feeding off her, and she has such delightful energy. Pursuit of joy is in every pulse of power she gives me, and it is helping.”

Lagolian blinked and turned to Riley. “You know she is feeding off you?”

“Yup. It is part and parcel of her heritage. I don’t mind. My species can be passively drained indefinitely and deliberately drained several times per day, but we aren’t going to do that because I am not starting an intimate relationship. It’s in my contract.”

Lagolian blinked.

Riley explained it. “While I currently don’t want a male to touch me intimately, I do not have sexual attraction to females.”

Legolian’s assistant huffed.

Riley shrugged. “Sorry.”

Ranna chuckled. “She’s a little small for my taste as well. Maybe one of her taller male counterparts could be available.”

“Run them past me first. The disaster didn’t bring out the best in a lot of my people.”

Riley sighed. “All female enclaves only survived if they simply killed any men trying to force their way in.”

Ranna blinked. “Were you in one of those?”

“Nope. One of my charges was a teenage male. He would have been destroyed, so we

kept walking until we found another group we could wait with. That is where the current aversion to sex came in.” There was something about a group of women that gave her the ability to lance bits of her memory.

Ranna gasped. “Oh.”

“Yeah. So, here, I have a female bondholder, a contract that doesn’t include sexual contact, and I just have to behave myself and be the best companion I can.”

Ranna reached out and squeezed her hand. “You are doing well on day one.”

Riley smiled. “Hooray!”

The other women laughed, and the attitudes softened. Lagolian took up needle, thread, and some kind of laser and worked with her assistant while they talked about life on the Education Station and her first flight on a long-range shuttle.

“I studied my old profession and languages while we travelled. Since we were landing on Arro, I studied Arran, Kevando, Rejick, and Cafor.”

Lagolian smiled and spoke in Kevando. “So, how did you do with your studies?”

Riley shrugged and answered in the same throaty language. “I believe I gained an acceptable competency.”

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Lagolian laughed. “That is very good. But can you fight?”

“On your level? No. Absolutely not. It is on my list of things I would like to learn.”

“Honesty. It is smart.” The seamstress chuckled and kept working.

The assistant was smiling as well.

Ranna looked at Riley. “That’s it. You have no ego. You are not trying to save face; you are simply stating the truth as you see it. I wondered what was so interesting.”

“You’ve got me. Ego is for those with something to lose. I no longer have anything to lose. Any day surviving and anything that I get to keep puts me ahead and is a better day than the day before.”

Ranna nodded. “I believe your first outfit is done. We will do a hem on one of my cloaks, and then we can go to the city tomorrow.”

Horib brought in a dark cloak, and Lagolian took it, starting to hem it up about ten inches.

The assistant handed her the tunic and skirt.

“Should I go elsewhere to change?”

Ranna shrugged. “No. It is fine.”

Riley took off her shift, Horib took it away, and she pulled the skirt on before pulling the tunic on.

“Riley?” Ranna was very calm.

“Yes?”

“You have whip marks on your back.”

“Yes. It would have cost extra to get it repaired, so they just fixed my face when I stated I was not pursuing intimate occupations. Did you want to see the scars on my front?”

Ranna swallowed and whispered. “Yes.”

Riley shrugged, took her clothing off, and spent five minutes explaining what the scars were from. “Stabbed. Cut, stabbed, stabbed in the back, that one was fun. Sliced by one guy while another guy assaulted me. Bit. I used to have a cut across my neck and one across my left eye, angling to my right jaw.” She looked down. “Oh, and I lost a knuckle on my pinky toe on my right foot. I am getting dressed now.”

She got dressed again.

The ladies were sitting there and staring. Lagolian said in Kevando, “Lady Ranna, you have brought a spirit into your home. I pray that she is benign.”

Lady Ranna smiled. “I believe she is. Time will tell.”

Riley chuckled and twisted and turned in the tunic and skirt. “Neat. Very comfortable.”

Lagolian kept working on the cloak, and Horib brought Riley her flats.

Lady Ranna smiled. “I think she is trying to tell me to go out for a walk. Lagolian, you can work out on the back stone if you like. Horib has lunch underway if you want to stay for it.”

The assistant smiled. “That sounds delightful.”

Lady Ranna got up and flexed her shredded wings. She took Riley’s hand, and they walked out to the back yard and started a long walk through the gardens and out to the expansive space.

“You did very well this morning.”

“Well, Kevando don’t have nudity taboos, and I won’t have secrets from you, so it seemed like the right time. Plus, Lagolian measured me for underwear, so I have no more secrets from her anyway.”

Ranna laughed. “That is true. I think if you had said you were interested in females, Hovanic would have been here courting daily.”

“The assistant?”

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“Yes. Well done on not asking her name directly. It would have been taken as flirting.”

“She didn’t offer it either.”

“She wanted you to ask.”

“Yikes. She’s the right size, but I don’t know what to do with all those breasts.”

Ranna chortled. “I am guessing she would love to help you with that.”

“Please, no. I am not up for any of that sort of thing.”

“Aw, Riley, I won’t. I could actually feel the fear and depression that washed through you there.”

“Trusting someone with myself is difficult.”

“And yet, you didn’t argue with my bond.”

“I know what the Hmrain want, and I also know that you are trustworthy when it comes to clauses in the contracts.” She looked up at Ranna. “You want to heal yourself without locking your body in a healing unit.”

“Yes. I am already stronger with one day with you than I have been since the event.”

Riley nodded. “Good. Let’s get you back in the sky. Longing seems to be why you

haven't been looking at it, so let's make it a goal."

"What?"

"Back in the sky by year three. Two years to heal completely, one year to get them strong enough to lift, and then up you go." Riley smiled.

"Are you acting like a nanny?"

Riley chuckled. "I won't tell that you have been bossed around by someone half your size if you will. As far as they are concerned, I am your devoted companion."

"Are you? Devoted, I mean?"

"Very much so. I can see so much beauty for you in your life, you just have to take the strength that got you through it, and you need to wear it on you every time you wake."

Riley squawked as she was caught up in a hug. Her feet kicked as Ranna snuggled her and spun her around. "You are exactly what I need."

When she was back on her feet, she squeezed her lady's hands. "Good. I am depending on you to guide me through your world."

"I am making a list of places to go shopping tomorrow. What are you most looking forward to?"

"Underwear."

Ranna laughed again, and they continued their long walk around the green spaces.

Riley's senses told her people were watching them, but Ranna didn't seem worried, so she just kept walking with her employer.

They walked for two hours and discussed things that neither would talk about in mixed company, including hopes and dreams for the future.

Ranna smiled. "Do you want a family?"

"Only if I could make sure it would be mine. Other things I have thought were mine have been swept from me and used to hurt me. Relationships are tricky, and trusting someone is even worse."

"When we get close to the five-year mark, can I matchmake for you?"

"If you are flying by then and feeling whole again? Yes."

"Deal." She stuck out her hand, and they shook on it. "I will put the amendment in your contract."

“Oh, damn. Forgot about that.”

Ranna giggled. “Never underestimate a Hmrain and a contract. We are relentless.”

“Thanks, I am going to remember that.”

Chapter Three

Riley fussed with her court outfit. “Are you sure this is appropriate? There seems to be some fabric missing.”

Ranna looked at her and grinned. “You are wearing what is considered appropriate for a companion of your species in a Hmrain court.”

“But I am not that kind of companion.”

“I know that, and you know that, but rules are rules.” Ranna was smug in her full court dress as they waited on the stone out behind the house. Her deep blue skin gleamed where the fabric ended.

There was a dark spot approaching with some shiny skimmers on either side of it.

“How about a cloak? I could really go for a cloak right now.”

Ranna giggled. “No. He will probably want you to report to him on my progress once he meets you.”

Riley fidgeted in the semiopaque outfit made of wrapped bands that supported her breasts, kept her neck warm, and a skirt that was hanging on via friction and not much else. Moving fast was off the list of possibilities for the day.

Ranna was happy. Her father was coming, and he was bringing two of his guards, known as the Daughters of Rath. They were deadly assassins, all female, and all from different worlds. The other thing that they had in common was that they had been betrayed by those they were supposed to trust. There was an entire town of Daughters on the other side of the world, and that is where they trained.

Riley stood back and to the side of Ranna, and as the figures got closer, she inched her way behind the larger woman.

As the three landed, Riley was hidden.

Rath walked toward his daughter and took her hands, kissing her cheek, his eyes bright. She got her night-blue complexion from him. “You are healing.”

“Yes, Father.” She reached behind her and hauled Riley out next to her. “I got a Terran companion, and she has been instrumental in the progress I have made.”

Riley stared at Ranna’s father with shocked eyes. He was beautiful, as all Hmrain were, but he had a dark energy that moved around him.

“I did not think my daughter would choose a female, but I suppose there is always room to invite a male into your union later.”

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Riley turned grey. She curtsied quickly and said, “No, sir, it isn’t that kind of contract.”

Ranna laughed and smiled. “She is correct, Father. We are not a couple. I am merely consuming her joyful energy, and she is helping me progress.”

Rath looked Riley up and down, and his gaze made her stomach flip a little. To say he was sexy was a gross understatement.

Ranna started giggling, and Riley knew why. Their link had gotten faster, so her sudden hormonal rush was going straight into her employer.

“Stop laughing, Lady Ranna.”

Rath raised his brows. “You give my daughter orders?”

Riley heard the deadly coldness in his tone. Ranna had her close with an arm around her. “Father, don’t mess with our dynamic. If she is too frightened to be herself, then this won’t work.”

“Your features are lovely, but it is cosmetic.”

Riley got mad. “She has made a ton of progress. Her wings are no longer hanging in tatters; yes, there are holes, but they are healing.”

Rath looked at her, all brave with Ranna hugging her. He looked at his daughter. “Show me.”

Ranna extended one wing, and it did still have holes in it, but the edges had sealed, and the healing was obvious. “I have two years and ten months to fly, and then I can start matchmaking for Riley so that she can stay on Arro. Our contract didn’t have a citizenship option.”

“Because you are not authorized to offer it,” Rath murmured as he examined the progress.

He smiled at his daughter and kissed her cheek. “I am so glad to hear you laugh again.”

“Horib has prepared lunch.”

“Excellent. I do enjoy her cooking.” He offered Ranna his hand; she took it and let Riley go.

When they were inside, she exhaled, and a shadow to her left made her jump. “Holy hell!”

The six-and-a-half-foot figure with the staff said, “We are named for her. He started our order because of her.”

“I gathered as much. I know what happened to her. So, how long have you been off Earth?”

“A year. I was in an early wave. My life was over. Rath gave me purpose.”

“Good. Nice. I am guessing you were given treatments to get taller?”

“Taller, faster, more violent. We can use our rage very effectively.”

“Other Terrans in the ranks?”

“Only one from each species. I am that one. Sorry. No room for runts.”

“My, aren’t we full of ourselves?” Riley looked up and blinked at the extra foot of height her gaze had to cover. “Mind you, we are talking to one who ate everyone’s vegetables.”

The woman chuckled. Her third eye tattoo was bright, and her singular ear hoop was bright in the depths of the hood. She stared at the ring in her lip. “Oh, I am so sorry.”

The woman stiffened. “You know what that means?”

“I have been here for a few months, so yes.”

The woman’s face contorted. “Thank you. Are you content to be a sex pet?”

“I am not. I am the human equivalent of an emotional support animal. When she no longer needs me, she will cut me loose, and I will go. I know what I am. But this is a nice place to begin my journey, and there is no shame in bringing joy and laughter where there was none.”

“Your lady is returning for you.”

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Riley turned and walked toward the doorway, where Lady Ranna suddenly appeared. “Riley, come in.”

Riley sighed and put her mind into pleasant lines. She smiled and walked to Lady Ranna’s side, feeling the pull on her emotions. As hard as Ranna pulled, Riley just fed her more.

When Ranna settled and relaxed, Riley smiled and stood behind and to the side of her while Rath sat across the table.

Rath looked at her. “It seems my daughter is unsettled without you.”

“That will pass when she’s healed.” She looked past his shoulder.

“You think so?”

Ranna chuckled. “When I am healed and she is settled nearby, I think I will consider relationships or travel.”

He smiled slowly. “Grandchildren?”

Ranna shrugged. “Maybe, if I find the right partner.”

Riley watched as they sat through course after course of food. She remained in place and tried to blank her mind every few seconds.

It was a remarkably torturous event. She was hungry. Riley did what she had done

while walking with the kids; she simply inhaled, held her stomach in, and focused on something else.

They ate for two hours, talking and catching up.

Ranna finally said, “Riley, go get your meal. I am in danger of breaking contract terms.”

Riley left without taking her leave.

Horib had a cold lunch waiting for her, and it would have been warm if she had been able to eat it when it was ready.

Riley ate too fast. She knew she ate too fast. She clenched the edge of the counter as she fought to hold onto her meal.

She went to the tablet and flipped through the classifications of the tubers that had been involved in lunch, and she shuddered when she noticed that they were mildly toxic when eaten by her species.

She lunged for the lav, but Lady Ranna was in the way, so she diverted and headed outside to the stone, throwing up in an area where she could clean it up easily.

Horib came out with the tablet. “Riley, I am so sorry. It is a Hmrain favourite.”

Riley threw up again, and then she sat back with a groan. “I’ll get the cleaning supplies. So sorry.”

“You normally don’t eat the things you are sensitive to.”

“I am normally not fasting for eighteen hours.” She leaned against the wall. “I was so

hungry.”

A hand gave her a damp towel, and after she had cleaned up, a glass of water was extended. She looked and flinched. “Thank you, Lord Rath.”

“It is no problem. Lady Ranna is inside reading a list of food that is toxic for you.”

“Oh. She shouldn’t worry. I usually eat around any food that upsets me.”

“How do you know?”

“It burns.”

“You didn’t notice this burned?”

“I shoved it all in and swallowed. I was so hungry, I was blind to what was around me.”

He stroked her hair. “Does it happen often?”

“What?”

“That you are hungry enough to eat blindly.”

“Oh, no. We normally eat meals together. Usually. If she has been consuming from me regularly, she forgets to eat, which means I don’t eat unless Horib sneaks me something.”

“Sneaks?”

“Lady Ranna likes to play in the kitchen when she is feeling good. It isn’t something I can eat.”

“Why didn’t she know about the tubers?”

“They are fresh. Just came to the house this morning.”

“Ah. The bots are coming to clean up.”

“I can clean it up.”

Lord Rath picked her up and walked her into the house. What followed was Rath instructing Ranna to learn what her new pet could and could not do, and not to consume from her for two days. Riley was going to say that was silly, but she passed out.

* * * *

He looked down at the woman and sighed. “Where does she sleep?”

Ranna coloured. “Her room is this way, but she’s slept in my room for the last three weeks.”

“Where is her bed?”

Ranna paused. “She sleeps at the foot of my bed, on the floor.”

“Like an animal. Have you noticed a decrease in the quality of energy that you are getting from her?” He held the woman as they discussed her.

“I thought she was tired.”

“She can’t get a good night’s sleep with you in the room. From what you have told me, she is dealing with her own traumas.”

“She said she can’t sleep in a quiet room.”

“But she needs to. It is part of her recovery. Don’t treat her like a pet. She’s a companion. She deserves respect for what she offers you.”

Ranna sighed. “Is she okay?” She opened a room that was sparse with no personalization.

“She is fine; she is just exhausted, and getting poisoned was the final insult.” Rath sighed. “I feel like I have taught you nothing about taking care of a companion.”

He looked at her. “Does she have sleeping clothes?”

Ranna paused, and from behind the door, Horib opened the wardrobe, which had six

hanging items, and took one of them down. “I can change her, Lord Rath.”

“No, I want to see more of these scars.”

He unclasped her wrap-on top, and it unravelled in his hands. The red bands on her breasts indicated that the fit was not appropriate. He shook his head and released the skirt. The scars had a specific pattern that showed a fight to survive that was admirable. She didn’t have the rage and madness that he required for a Sister of the Abbey, but she was strong.

He sat her up and slipped the gown over her head, lifted her, and tucked her into her bed. He kissed her forehead, and she relaxed and curled into a ball.

Rath ushered the other two out, and Horib picked up the court gown.

When they were back downstairs, he asked, “Whose idea was the court gown?”

Ranna smiled. “It was appropriate, and she hated it.”

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“So, to amuse yourself, you gave her pain.”

“I... was too excited for your visit.”

“Sit. We are going to talk about how to treat a companion. If you are consuming them, the better you treat them, the more energy they output.”

“Oh.”

“She has nothing of an emotional nature in her room. You need to provide her with that. Does she have an account?”

“I keep forgetting to set it up.”

“Make it a priority. She needs to feel free with only the contract holding her here. If she feels bright and free, you will heal rapidly. Now, when you are healed, do you want to go train with the Sisters?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Yes, yes, please.” She paused. “Can Riley come?”

“Of course. Teddy would enjoy it. She is one of Teddy’s people.” He smiled. “It was Teddy’s eye that spotted Riley’s fatigue.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. It is good that you have taken a companion, but you are wearing her out and not giving her anything in return. She needs experience, laughter, and to be part of the energy, and then she can bring it to you. Is she engaged in education?”

Ranna rustled her wings nervously. “She started upgrading her programming skills, but it changes the way she thinks, and I don’t like it.”

“She is an individual who watched her world collapse and who kept others alive during the months where a once-green world was covered in ash.” Rath said, “Her soul died a thousand times, and she hauled herself to safety. That is a being that deserves respect.”

“Yes, Father.”

Rath sighed. “Now, get your tablet and think of things that can energize your companion. If it were an intimate relationship, you would be able to give and take with sexual gratification. It would energize and satisfy at the same time, but you need to work with experiences and let her educate herself.”

“How do I deal with wanting her attention while she works?”

“Assign her programs that you would like to see. House controls. Distant sensors. A menu generator. Clothing design based on activity and menu planned.”

Ranna smiled and grabbed a tablet to write the suggestions down. “I think I understand. She often speaks of becoming more her. This would do it. So, what happens if she makes the program?”

“She gets an emotional boost for success, she will be happy because you are happy,

and you give her a gift of going out or having an event together. Even learning to cook some of the foods from her planet.”

“We could craft things together.”

“You could. You are now thinking the right way. Experiences, not just a steady draw on her.”

Ranna sat and started to write list after list. They talked about Riley for the next few hours, and when he left, Rath was impressed with the progress his daughter had made. She had gone from the emotional maturity of a teen and was moving into adulthood. It was about time she entered the adult world, but they both knew what had stopped her. He had chosen a companion who went mad and tried to sell and butcher his daughter. Keeping in touch with a companion’s motivation was why he had brought two Sisters with him.

He hugged his daughter, kissing her forehead, and she smiled. “Thank you for coming, Father. I am going to try very hard.”

“Good. I am going to keep in touch with Riley to make sure things are moving forward.”

“Are you sure that is why you want to keep in touch with Riley?” She gave him a knowing look.

Rath tried to keep his expression calm when he said, “She is your companion. That is the only interest I have in her.”

Ranna snorted. “Sure. Your vapour tendrils tell a different tale.”

He sighed then smiled. “I will talk to you soon, Ranna. I am very happy with your

progress. I am hoping that one day we can fly together again.”

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He walked out, and the two Sisters came to his side and went through a rundown of what they had learned.

He knew most of the things about Riley until Teddy inhaled. “She’s companion class. Consort class. She got the assessor to fake her paperwork. Her original number is available if you want to see it.”

He tensed. “Show me.”

She shared via the third eye, and he staggered back. “You are... are you sure?”

“Yes, Lord Rath. She has enough power to blow your doors off. We need to keep an eye on her. If others discover her rating, there is going to be a fight.”

“I will reassign her assessor and remove her file from the system.”

Teddy grinned. “You want to charge in there, grab her, and fly off with her.”

Lord Rath looked at the other Terran. “To quote you, shut up. She’s helping Ranna.”

Teddy snorted.

He looked at her. “You need a tattoo and some more earrings. Go kill someone.”

The other Sister laughed, and they left his daughter’s estate.

From the sky, he could see the checkpoints, the security gates, and the guns waiting

to halt anyone who made a move toward his little girl. He had failed her once; he would not lose her again.

* * * *

Riley sighed and watched the figures on the skimmer and the dark shape fly away. She turned back onto the pillow and exhaled slowly. She could feel the kiss on her forehead, and she replayed it over and over as she settled into sleep again.

She might be wired to jump aliens with wings, but she wasn't going to do it without a nice dinner and maybe an evening at the theatre. She smiled at her own foolishness and dreamed about men with wings wrapped in moving shadows.

Riley sat up at dawn, her chest heaving. Her skin was tingling, and her body throbbed. She groaned and walked to the bathroom, peed, and jumped in the shower. She really wanted to cool herself down before she saw Ranna. Lust was super easy for Hmrain to pick up, according to what she had been able to read on the station.

When she was cool, she got dressed and pulled her hair back in a ponytail. She had woken up with underwear on, so that was something.

Riley walked into the kitchen, and there was a huge display projected above the island. Ranna was humming with excitement. "Pick something you want to do today, something you want to do this month, and something you want to do this year."

The list was extensive, but Riley smiled. "I would like to go to a local restaurant. No offense, Horib, but it would be nice to sit down, eat, and people watch."

Horib nodded. "Yes, it is getting creepy being watched all the time."

Riley grinned. "But you are adorable and so fuzzy."

Horib laughed. “Keep choosing.”

“Um, I would like to work on programming this week and go to the abbey by the end of the year.”

“Nice. I have a selection of programs I would like you to work on to get yourself familiar with our systems.”

Riley blinked away happy tears. She didn’t want to thank Ranna. She knew that it was due to being taken to task by Rath. The thought of him caused a hot flash, and Riley saw Ranna focus on her.

“Riley, what was that?”

“Hot flash. It happens when I haven’t eaten for a while.”

Ranna smirked. “You don’t say. Let’s start you with tea, and then Horib made you some broth. We also studied all foods that you may react to, and they are banned from the house.”

“Lady Ranna, you are scaring me.” She waved her hand in front of Ranna’s nose. “Are you in there? Blink once if they are holding you against your will.”

Ranna took her hand. “I have been treating you like an accessory, not an enhancement. You make me better as long as you can be you. I forgot that. I also promise not to make you wear anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

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Riley stared. “Now I am really worried. Have you been hypnotized? Are you all right?”

Ranna sighed. “My father explained a few things that I was not thinking about. In a Hmrain sexual companion relationship, the Hmrain provides their companion with energy and other factors that keep their companion healthy. I haven’t been doing anything to help you feel better. I have simply been draining what I could from you without giving thought to how you would replace it. My father suggested crafts or hobbies.”

Riley ignored the hot flash.

“There! You just did it again.” Lady Ranna smirked. “Both after the mention of my father.”

That cooled things fast.

“Fine. I get all hot and bothered at the mention of your dad. Don’t worry. It won’t affect me at all, unless I am talking to him and slip in my own drool.”

Ranna smiled. “Hmrain were designed to be attractive to other species. I would be more surprised if you weren’t attracted to him.”

“So, it isn’t a problem?”

Ranna grinned. “For another female, no. But you are obsessed with contracts, and I know you are at my side until we finish our run.”

Riley started on her broth and the protein tea and kept eating as Ranna went over the new rules for how they were going to live together.

Ranna looked nervous. “What do you think?”

“You know I love a fresh start,” Riley responded. She gave Ranna a blast of enthusiasm that made her blink. They were off to a new start.

Riley stood near Lord Rath as Ranna flirted with some of the Hmrain half-breeds that he had brought in for her. “Aw, they grow up so fast.”

Rath laughed, causing many locals to look at them in the foyer of the theatre.

The chime rang for the patrons to get into their seats. A male, who was emerald and shiny, offered Ranna his arm, and she took it.

Rath offered Riley his arm as well. “You did very well with her.”

“After the first few months, it was easy. You did well coaching her.” She took his arm, and they made their way through the crowd that parted and up to his private box. Ranna was in the balcony next door, laughing softly and whispering to the male who was courting her.

“Do you think he is the best match?”

“Yes. His blue-skinned buddy is bad news. He wanted me as the free gift with purchase. That’s not good.”

“Noted. I will make sure he is removed from Arro. Unless you wanted him.”

“Uh, no. He and I don’t have compatible energies. I would be dead in weeks.”

She shivered. Rath took her hand, and she warmed up right away.

He spoke quietly. “What are you planning for your next adventure?”

“I was going to open a small shop that caters to Terran replicas. I won’t sell much, but it will be nice to be surrounded by memories of home.”

“You will leave Arro?”

Riley swallowed. “I wasn’t thinking about it. I mean, I am comfortable here, but if I will get in the way of Ranna’s new union, I guess I should leave, right?”

He smiled. “After all the effort you have put in to raise my daughter, I believe that I can offer you a place to stay while you make up your mind.”

She gave a weak smile. “I don’t think proximity to you will help.”

“I disagree. The only thing holding me back has been your contract.”

She blushed as the theatre slowly filled. “Right. I am sure it is just a pity effect. I have seen images of your past companions. You have a type, and I am not it.”

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“And yet, it is you I see when I close my eyes. Do you dream of me?”

“I am not going to answer that. If I did, you would be lecturing me on how to work with Ranna.”

He snorted softly, lifted her hand to his lips, and kissed her knuckles.

Thankfully, the play started, and the lowering lights obscured her furious blush.

It was an intense romance, and Rath kept his wing around her back, so she knew that the city would be talking the following morning.

She murmured, “What will the Sisters think?”

“That you are honourable and punch like a girl, I believe that was the phrase Teddy used.”

The lights came on after the play, and Rath helped her to her feet. She looked at him.

“I have to use the lav.”

He laughed. “You use that excuse a lot.”

“And yet, it works every time.” She patted his arm, and he kissed her forehead before she escaped. She walked down the stairs and to the restroom. She completed her task in record time and was out in the hall when mist wrapped around her, pulled her back, and she felt an injector in her neck.

The rest was darkness.

* * * *

Ranna looked at her father and said, “Where is Riley? It’s been twenty minutes.”

Rath frowned. “She went to relieve herself and has not returned.”

Ranna blinked. “She does not take long. As she puts it, she is in there for a purpose, not for socializing.” Ranna moved rapidly down the stairs and to the restroom. She looked down the hall and back up. She returned to her father. “She’s gone. Someone took her.”

Nizzen said, “She probably went for a walk.”

Ranna looked at him in outrage. “She would never. She never leaves my side. Not once in five years.”

Rath activated his com. “Are there any diplomatic vessels that have left in the last five minutes?”

“Just a moment, Lord Rath.” There was a pause. “A Zymar courier shuttle has left our soil. They asked for permission to accelerate in system, and there was no reason for it not to be granted.”

“Determine trajectory and find out where they are going. I need their destination.” He started moving. “I also need my ship readied.”

Ranna had tears running down her cheeks as she followed. She was sending orders to Horib.

Nizzen touched her, and she flicked his hand away. Ranna muttered, “My best friend is missing, and it was that Zymar asshole who took her. I am going to disembowel him and then turn his guts into shoelaces.”

Rath looked at her. “One of Riley’s sayings?”

“Yes, delay takeoff for twenty minutes. I want to send her comfort objects with you. She will need them if they hurt her.”

Rath’s eyes flared white. “They are not going to hurt her. I am contacting Nelako’s grandparent and declaring war.”

“Horib is on the way with the items. She will meet us at the spaceport.”

“Fine. Twenty minutes from now, or Riley will have to seek her comfort from me.” Rath took flight.

* * * *

Ranna took to the sky with her new metal-encased wings. Nizzen came with her, asking, “Is it such a big deal?”

“She has been my link to healing and reality. She has been my companion for nearly five years. She’s put her sanity at risk and fed me energy when she barely had enough to keep her body working, and she did it all with a smile on her face. She is worthy of respect and care. If I ever have a child, she will be there when it is born.” She growled. “Yes, it is a big fucking deal.”

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His feathered wings kept pace with hers as they flew to the spaceport. Nizzen looked at her and said, "I believe I understand now. She is part of you."

"She is. She helped me process things I had been avoiding for centuries. I could not stand against her relentless cheer."

Her father headed straight for his shuttle, and Ranna saw the streak of light that was Horib's emergency vehicle. Ranna dove toward the ship and took the parcel from Horib before streaking over to her father's side. She landed and ran inside the shuttle. "I want to come with you."

"No. You have been in this situation once before. I don't want to risk you again. I will get the companion back." He looked at her, and she glanced between him and the captain.

Ranna swallowed and thrust the bundle at him. "There is her favourite blanket that we made, a necklace that matches one I made, a dagger that the Sisters gave her, two outfits with underwear, and some shoes. She prefers boots, but Horib tried to keep it compact. Bring her home in one piece, Father, or I will not forgive you."

He took the bundle and hugged her with his free arm. "If I do not get her back, I will not forgive myself. You will have to get in line. I will bring our companion home."

She looked up at him. "Our companion?"

"By the time I bring her back, your contract will have expired. Her next contract will be with me."

Ranna blinked back relieved tears. “Will I get a new brother or sister?”

“Not if I don’t get moving. Now, get clear of the shuttle. We are going to move fast.”

Ranna nodded and left, grabbing Nizzen and flying for the station.

When she landed a safe distance from the shuttle, she looked to Nizzen. “Now, tell me what you know about this.”

“I thought it was a joke. He said he wanted her, had heard her people were powerful companions. When she rejected him, he got mad. He said that no station bitch was going to reject one of the greatest bloodlines of the system, but then he said he was leaving after the theatre.”

Ranna looked at him, pulled him to her, and kissed his forehead. The information streamed into her. She was relieved. He was telling the truth. He was a bystander, not an involved party. “I am very glad you didn’t participate. I am beginning to have affection for you.”

Nizzen sighed in relief. “I am as well. Why is your father so concerned?”

Ranna looked at the shuttle lifting off. “I think it is because she is leaving as my companion and returning as his. I have to say, I am not upset about it. She is going to make a great mother.”

Her suitor blinked. “Oh, fuck. That explains so much. Nelako is dead.”

Ranna watched the ship streak skyward. “He will be. My father is brutal when it comes to women being abused. The abusers don’t survive the initial greeting.”

* * * *

Riley woke in a coldchamber, and it was on a warming cycle. She looked up through the clear field and blinked. Female faces were peering down at her. One of them was Terran.

She opened the capsule, and the Terran lifted her out and hugged her. “Ohmygod. I never thought we would be able to wake you.”

“Oh, what a welcome. I gather that the creep kidnapped me.”

“You have been sold to a brothel on a mining world.”

“What? Fuck no.”

The ladies nearby murmured.

“We also happen to be in the middle of a revolt. I am sorry it took us so long to wake you, but it wasn’t a priority.”

“No problem. How long has it been?”

“Three months.”

“Oh, that’s not good.” She looked down and was still wearing her theatre dress.

“What kind of revolt?”

“I am Sam, and I used to be a cook at the mine. One day, someone from admin grabs me by my arm and walks me over to the brothel, telling me that the contract I signed gave them the right to reassign me.”

“Did it?”

“I don’t think so, but they said it did, and we are trapped here. Stuck servicing the most brutal and grimy males and females in the sector. They stowed you here and told us to keep you hidden. Do you know why?”

“I have friends who will look for me. Is this a Hmrain system?”

“No. It’s a shadow system in dispute.”

She laughed. “Great. This is going to be fun, then.”

Sam said, “Is it? They said they were bringing the Daughters of Rath to stop the uprising.”

“I need some water, and are the Daughters here?”

“They are in orbit. We can hear some of their signals.”

“Can you get me to a com? My legs are wobbly.”

Sam and another woman wearing barely anything supported her and walked her to the com, where another exhausted woman looked at her nervously.

“May I use the com?”

“Begging doesn’t get us anywhere. They say they are coming to end this tomorrow.”

Riley sat in the com seat and used the Daughters' secure frequency. "Good day. This is the brothel, coming to you with a request."

"How did you get this frequency?"

"I was on Arro, and there was a test, Martegel."

"How many tries did it take you?"

"Five, but who's counting? I would very much appreciate it if you didn't bring the pain to the escorts."

"Riley? Is that you? Are you all right?"

"I literally got out of a cold sleep capsule five minutes ago. So, what has gone on while I have been away? Did Ranna ever pick a proper manicure colour?"

There was relieved laughter on the other end. Martegel said, "We still have to appear. It's our contract."

"Cool, cool. But you don't have to do anything, right? You just have to witness the end to the conflict."

"Technically, we have to participate in it."

"Great. Cheer me along. I need a shuttle to get the ladies out of here." She looked at some. "How many are you?"

"Thirty-eight. Thirty-nine with you."

She returned to the call. "Thirty-nine escorts, all in need of a sudden change of job."

They are breaking bond contracts and altering terms to fit their wants. None of these women signed up to work in the brothel.”

“Oh. That does change things. The warship will drop the large shuttle, but you have to get to it. Can you manage that?”

“I hope so.”

Sam waved. “We have three defense units here, but we are having an issue reprogramming them for our purpose.”

Riley nodded. “Good thing I am well-rested. I have some work to do.”

“See you tomorrow, Riley.”

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“Kisses to everyone on board.” She put the headset down and smiled at Samantha.
“So, you mentioned defense units?”

“Cargo handlers, but we haven’t had much luck changing them over.”

“Show me where they are. I have a few programming degrees, and I love getting dirty.”

The other women were drifting in slowly, and as Riley stood up, another Terran said,
“Do you really know the Daughters of Rath?”

Riley smiled. “I know them, and I know Rath. They might kick my ass, but he will make sure they don’t hurt me, so stay close, and we will get out of here.”

Sam helped her move to the area with the heavy equipment. “Why is this even here?”

“Oh. We stole it. Now, why won’t they hurt you?”

“I was Rath’s actual daughter’s companion for five years. She and I worked through some things, and she was trying to get me and her dad together, but then a slimy half-Hmrain grabbed me, and the next thing I know, I woke up here.”

“So, you are going to be a consort?”

“Maybe. I dunno. Companion anyway.” She looked over the units and found the tablet nearby. “I am just going to putter. Do we have any weapons we can mount on them?”

“We do. We just didn’t want to waste them if we couldn’t get the bots moving.”

She linked the tablet to the unit and asked, “What has been the problem with them?”

“The movement is all over the map. It’s like they are jerking and twitching instead of walking.”

“Oh, that is fixable. Get me some water and a place to sit, and I will get this thing walking in a few hours.” Riley looked at Sam. “How much time do we have?”

“Nine hours.”

“Fuck it, I am going fast.” She got to typing and focused on the program, smoothing out the rough movements and making them suitable for inexperienced drivers. “You will be able to dance in these when I am done.”

She kept her head down and typed like mad. In ninety minutes, she was doing her first test, and half an hour after that, she was doing the second. When Sam was walking in the first unit and the women cheered, Riley got around to the next two units. They each uploaded and were ready to roll in two hours. The ladies ate, drank, and put on as many layers as they could. She was offered a position in one of the units and accepted. She had already dealt with horrors. This was nothing new.

Chapter Four

Riley had to cut up her gown a little, but she was still wearing it when the signal from the Daughters came through.

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Sam said, “We can go out this way.”

“Isn’t the path behind that wall?”

“Yeah.”

“Are we trying to maintain property value?”

Sam grinned. “Hell no.”

“Good. Do you want to take point?”

Sam lumbered the unit to the wall and said, “Don’t mind if I do.”

The ladies took cover while Sam used the pulse guns to make a hole large enough for the mechs. She lumbered through. Twenty women lumbered after her. Pixie was next, and fifteen more. Riley took up the rear with her weapons at the ready.

They thundered out with the mechs going as fast as they could and Riley speaking to Pixie and Sam through the coms. “Okay. Remain calm. The Daughters of Rath are going to look scary and deadly, but as long as we continue at a steady pace, they will leave us alone.”

There was a wall of males who were protesting their sexual outlet getting away. When a few of them stepped forward, Riley fired right in front of them to drive them back.

They approached the shuttle, and Sam said, “Riley, there is a Hmrain circling over this area.”

She had a hot flash. “You don’t say.”

They continued walking, and the men got more agitated, lunging at them to see the women scream, and some cried. In a practised move, they got to the shuttle, and the mechs crouched and turned their backs to the crowd as they guarded the females entering the shuttle, providing the rioters with nothing to grab at but smooth plates and few crevices to get through. The door to the shuttle opened and the girls filed in

Riley felt a thud on her back, and there were hands trying to claw her out of the mech. She ducked and dodged as the other mech pilots got out of their units and into the shuttle. She unclashed her harness and tried to drop away from the grabbing hands, but someone grabbed her ankle and pulled her out of the safety of the mechs.

She screamed and tried to stop the hands pulling at her clothing, but there was tearing, and she heard a roaring in her ears. Her attackers began flying off, and then careful hands were lifting her and cradling her against a familiar chest.

She was shivering and holding tight to him. He kissed her forehead and said, “Found you.”

He carried her into the shuttle, causing some consternation from the ladies, but then the Daughters came in, and soon, the shuttle was lifting off.

Rath was holding her, caressing her hair, and kissing her. “I found you.”

She looked up, and he had a sad expression on his face when he saw her tears. “A minute earlier would have been nice.”

“I had to wait until they took action against you.”

She sniffed and asked, “Why do you smell like blood?”

“My wings are not for decoration.”

“Oh. You need a shower.”

“So do you. We will make it a priority when we get onboard.”

She shivered and tried to cover herself with the shreds of her theatre gown.

“They didn’t press you into service?”

“No. I think they were scared to. The ladies woke me up.”

“So, the last thing you remember?”

“A blueish mist and a hypo to the neck. Then I woke in the same clothing I went down in.”

“That might have saved someone’s life.”

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She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight. He held her close and wrapped her in his wings.

Riley clung to Rath until he set her on her feet in the bathing chamber of his stateroom. He stroked her back. “Do you want help bathing?”

“Yeah. Then a trip to medical to seal the wounds. I have enough scarring for a lifetime.”

Rath was carefully removing the different layers that had sealed to her skin with blood. “I wish I could kill them again.”

She blushed as he moved down her body, removing the shreds. Rath helped her into the solar bath and set it low so she could rotate slowly to get the grime and blood off her body.

When she was done, he set it to high and baked off the results of him using his wing edges as a guillotine.

“I promise I will be my normal glib self when I am healed and dressed.”

“So, the key to keeping you soft and pliable is to keep you undressed?”

“Lord Rath, please.” She looked away and covered herself, swaying.

He muttered a soft apology and carried her to the bedroom, wrapping her in one of his tunics before pulling on his standard leather pants and boots. He picked her up,

kissed her forehead again, and said, “I will save our normal commentary for when you are whole again.”

She nodded, the scent of her blood coming back to her. He walked swiftly through the halls to the medical bay, which had a lot of women filling the space.

A doctor rushed up. “I have kept the regen unit open. Oh, Miss Riley, you must be in pain.”

“Yes, thank you, Doctor Morriger. You are your charming self.”

The doctor froze, and Rath wrapped his wings around her to protect her as they walked through the med beds and to the private space with the regen unit.

Rath set her on her feet, removed his now bloody shirt, and tucked her into the unit. “Rest and heal.”

“You are not the boss of me.” She didn’t look at him.

“Not yet. Give it an hour.”

She stared at him with her eyes wide while he closed the unit with a slight smile.

The machine lightly sedated her, and the injectors began their work to increase her clotting factors and repair skin, tendons, and muscles.

She dozed for what felt like five minutes. She was woken up, and the unit opened to show Rath there with a familiar pile of clothing for her. She swallowed over the lump in her throat and got dressed in her favourite clothing. “Ranna got this for me.”

“She did. Horib drove their emergency unit to get it to me before we launched. The

bastard led us on quite the chase, but having me on his tail changed his plans, and he dumped you here.”

She was wearing a loose blouse with tight sleeves and a set of trousers with a skirt attached, like a full-leg skort. Both were in a soft fabric in a dark grey. The underwear confirmed that nothing else had gone on yet. She was still allowed her choice.

The soft boots that finished the outfit made her smile. “Thanks for bringing all this.”

“To feel the change in your mind, it is worth it.” He held his hand out to her. “We need to get you to a com unit so you can contact Ranna. She’s out of her mind with worry, and now Nizzen understands why you are so necessary for her.”

She put her hand in his as she had been doing at events for the six months that Ranna had been dating.

He wrapped his wing around her back, and she relaxed as they left the privacy space and walked through the med bay. Sam was on a bed and getting bruises, and something internal was going on. Riley could tell by her face.

Sam looked at Rath and blinked. “So, you were right. He came for you.”

Riley blushed. “Rephrase, please.”

Rath pulled Riley in close. “Any time she needs me, I will come.”

Sam blinked slowly as Rath’s rich, low tones washed over her. “Right. Got it.”

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He smiled. “Terrans are so easy. We will have a discussion and give you ladies options for new placements on our way home.”

Sam said, “No brothels?”

“No brothels. But, that being said, Hebor is looking for compatible females. Their Hmrain has his own mate, so it is just his nobles that are looking for matches.”

Riley said, “I want them to meet prospective matches before any bonds or contracts.”

“Of course, but the longer we dawdle, the more frenzied Ranna will be.”

“Not if we continue on to a com unit so I can set her mind at ease.”

He chuckled. “Then, we shall proceed.”

Riley waved at Sam, and they were on their way.

* * * *

Sam looked at Pixie. “Do you have that tablet?”

“Yup.”

“Look up Hebor. I want to know what the population looks like.”

Pixie laughed and punched it in. “Oh. Oh wow. Anthropomorphic felines and a

variety of canines.”

“Wait, like guys that purr?”

Pixie did some fast research. “Yup.”

Sam chuckled. “Cool. I like Riley. She’s trying to arrange a meeting before the contract.”

Pixie grinned. “I am very glad that we cracked her unit before they attacked. She’s handy.”

“She is. Can you check to see if any of the other girls are compatible?”

“Huh. About twelve of them are. Rath probably knows already.”

“What about the others?”

“They match Arro’s people. Rath’s home world. They can easily blend in if they want to.”

Sam sighed. “They deserve a safe place.”

“It is fairly safe. No world is completely safe unless you are alone on it, and even then, the environment can kill you.”

“True. It’s just a better grade of danger.”

“More stylish as well. Riley’s outfit was very cute.”

“I don’t think Overseer Rath picked that one. She looked way too comfortable.”

Pixie paused. “I think you are right. Do you know anything about the ladies who were supposed to smite us?”

“No, but Riley does. I am sure she could fill us in.”

“You think she is going to be mingling with us?”

“Well, maybe we could ask someone in the crew.”

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The crewmen were moving around them, checking on the intimate repairs that most of the ladies required. Sam sighed as her treatment concluded and the two STIs she had been gifted were treated.

When she left, the next lady went in for the same treatment. Sam was brought to a sort of barracks arranged for them in one of the holds. There was clean bedding, fresh clothing waiting, and a food dispenser against a wall.

Ryutha came by. “An assessor is coming by to check and double-check our classifications. Oddly enough, the mining office wasn’t reliable.”

“Ya think?”

Sam lay back on her bed and sighed. “Well, this was an unexpected turn of events.”

“The rescue?”

“The Hebor. They are a match for about fourteen of us. The rest can settle on Arro.”

“Oh. You are heading to Hebor?”

“Yes, but Riley is asking for us to meet candidates before we are asked to lock into a contract.”

“Why does she have that pull?”

“She’s about to become Rath’s partner. Companion or consort, it’s a powerful

position.”

Ryutha sat and scratched her lavender ear. “You mean that someone was stupid enough to kidnap a consort?”

“Yeah. I am guessing they aren’t walking around anymore.”

“No kidding. Wow.” She smiled. “I am on the Hebor list as well.”

“Yay. We can shop together.”

“You think that it will be a possibility?”

“From what I heard, it is a nice setup. One of my kind is consort there, so it should be okay. Well, I hope so.” Sam chuckled.

* * * *

Riley felt pretty good considering she had been in cold sleep for three months. Rath walked her through the halls to his quarters.

“I think this is better done in private.”

He sat at the desk, dialled up the coordinates, and pulled her onto his lap.

Ranna’s face filled the screen, and she screamed in joy. “Riley!”

Riley saw the relief from terror on Ranna’s face. “Hey, Lady Ranna. Deep breaths. Nice and slow.”

Ranna stared at her and then burst into sobbing laughter. She sobered. “Riley, are you

all right?”

“I was in cold storage. I woke up yesterday.”

Rath murmured, “And she immediately helped an uprising and rode a mech into battle.”

Ranna smiled. “That sounds like her. You are really all right?”

“I am. Thank you for sending the clothing with your father.”

“Horib grabbed your favourite blanket, two outfits, your favourite shoes and some other stuff. We both wanted you to be as comfortable as possible, as quickly as possible.”

Rath whispered in her ear, “I wished that for you as well.”

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Ranna smiled slowly. "I see my father has let you know that our contract is complete."

"No, he didn't mention it. I suppose there are signs." One sign was under her thigh with all the subtlety of a freshly baked traffic cone.

Rath chuckled against her ear. "Really? Point them out to me."

She shivered. "You are trying to become one with my ear. That would be one of them, Overseer Rath."

He chuckled. "Anything else?"

"You are holding me with your fingers wide across my ribs, and your erection is moving under my thigh." She paused. "Overseer."

Ranna clapped a hand over her mouth, her gaze amused.

He licked her neck. "Why are you calling me Overseer and not Lord Rath?"

"We no longer have a close association. I am supposed to go back to the bond house to start over, right?"

"No. You are not leaving my side again. The next time you need the lav, the door will be open, and I will be waiting."

Riley jolted as Ranna started laughing again. "Uh, that isn't going to work."

His fangs grazed her neck. “Why not?”

“I am pee shy. I can’t pee with folks watching.” She kept her gaze on Ranna’s. “I will explode, and it won’t be pretty. Lady Ranna found out during one of our spa days, where we were sharing a massage room.”

Ranna nearly fell off her chair as she convulsed with laughter.

Rath lifted his head. “Seriously?”

She was crimson, but she said, “Seriously.”

“Riley, I intend to have you spread wide so I can examine every part of you. Your shyness should fade.”

“Um. Did you have to say that in front of your daughter?”

Ranna was still giggling. “I have heard worse but not something with that kind of intent behind it. Riley, are you going to be my new mom?”

Rath laughed and looked at his daughter. “Are you satisfied that she is alive and well?”

“I am. Only my Riley could colour up like that. I am going to take out this relief on Nizzen. Boy, is he going to be surprised. See you when you get home, Riley.”

“See you, Lady Ranna. Thanks for laughing at me.”

Ranna grinned. “My pleasure.”

The connection winked out, and Rath hugged her and buried his face against her

neck. “You have no idea how worried we were.”

She ran her fingers through his hair. “They weren’t stupid enough to do anything to me with you following. How did you get on their tail so quick?”

“Ah, Ranna identified that you never spend that much time in the lav. There was a male scent mixed with yours, along with a chemical trace left behind. That was enough to know you had been taken. From there, Ranna called Horib to bring your comfort items in case things got bad for you. I got my shuttle ready, and the warship got prepped and fuelled. I was less than thirty minutes behind that little bastard, but he was in a diplomatic courier ship.”

“Oh. So, you caught up with him?” She looked at him.

“No, I contacted his grandparent. He has more grandchildren who are not felonious. Nelako did not find his family’s home a safe place. Zymar was very apologetic that his grandson would have the bad taste to grab a woman contracted to a Hmrain.” He grimaced. “He had already sold your pod to the mine, but we didn’t know it yet. So, I had to backtrack and arrived just in time for the contract with the Sisters to be requested. Technically, they fulfilled the contract. They got the women under control and stopped their aggressions against the miners.”

“And then I called them.”

He sighed. “And then you called them. Why didn’t you call me?”

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“I didn’t know you were on their ship. I just knew that the Sisters were here and that as long as I let them know what was going on, they wouldn’t take action against the brothel.”

He sighed. “When they told me you were talking and you had just woken up, I was relieved. When I saw that crowd of males trying to tear into you, I was furious.”

“I wasn’t really impressed myself. It hurt.” She sighed. “But hey, I got to use my programming skills on the mechs, so I will look on the bright side.”

“But you knew they would come. That is why you used the mechs as a barricade.” A hard edge had entered his tone.

“Um, yeah. That was the point. I was still pretty weak after being in cold sleep, so I slipped, and they grabbed my dress and used it to haul me out.”

He looked at her, and there were a few stars in his black eyes. His face was set in a deep scowl.

“If you are looking for a reason to punish me, I was not contracted to you or anyone at that point. I was free to get myself clawed to bits, or whatever.”

“You were never free to be hurt, but you are correct about my rights versus your rights.” He reached for a contract tablet. “Look it over, and sign it.”

“How romantic.” She snorted. She took the tablet and saw that it had a consort contract on it. “Whoa.”

“What?”

“You aren’t starting at companion and then considering options.”

“No, of course not. I have been passively drawing from you for five years. I know very well what you are.” He chuckled. “Why do you think you and Ranna were invited to the city so often?”

“Oh. Right.” She focused on the contract while she was blushing crimson.

He smoothed her hair back and ran his fingers through it while she read. He was vibrating softly, and she tried to focus as her eyes skipped past lines that she had to read over and over.

“You are taking a while to read that.”

“I am stumbling over the whenever-whenever clause. You spend a lot of time with the Sisters. Helping to train them, and that could be embarrassing, not to mention cruel to a number of them.”

“Fair enough.” He reached out and added an exclusion to the abbey where all the encounters would be private to avoid distressing new Sisters.

She nodded and kept reading. The contract time was indefinite. There was no expiry date.

She paused. “What?”

“Hm?” He was nuzzling her shoulder.

“There’s no end date. There is always an end date, or it isn’t a contract, it’s a bill of

servitude.”

He lifted his head and sighed. “Ranna mentioned you were fixated on contracts.” He scribbled a date in five hundred years.”

“That’s far beyond my lifespan.”

“It will be up to me to supply you with all you need.”

“Still too long.”

He huffed and changed it. “Two hundred.”

“Still stupid, but at least plausible.”

Rath said softly, “Did you just call me stupid?”

“No, Overseer. Of course not.” She continued reading.

She got to the financial compensation and stared. “The mountain house, the beach house, and the seaside château?”

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“All places I have seen you and wished that you could stay with me. Places you have shared joy with Ranna and myself.”

“I shared joy with Ranna there. I didn’t know that you would be there.”

He chuckled. “That is as we wished it.”

“So, how long have you been plotting against me, Overseer?”

He stroked her shoulder. “Since the first time I heard my daughter laugh again. The plot continued when I saw what she was doing to you, and I realized you wouldn’t make it to the end of the contract without help. Once I involved myself in your care and survival, I was hooked.”

Riley swallowed. “Right. You are going to take me shopping?”

“Oh, yes. There will be a few alterations to your wardrobe, but you will have some outfits like the one you are wearing.”

She muttered, “Like at the cabin.”

“Yes, though I would prefer you curled up to me for heat.”

A wave of warmth ran through her at the thought.

He pressed a kiss to her shoulder, but she could feel the smirk.

“That was what you were designed for, right?”

He laughed. “Partially. We are designed to spur that response in matching partners. When Ranna mentioned it, I didn’t believe it. She mocked you into a response, and there it was. She also got your actual assessment for our world’s records. That was illuminating.”

She swallowed and saw the notation that Ranna had added. Any children would have to call her Sis Ranna, and she would take them for any birthday where she was on the same world. She would teach them to fly and laugh and bargain for treats in the kitchen, just like their mother had taught Ranna.

Tears dripped onto Rath’s arm. He pressed kisses to her temple and cheek. He whispered, “Sign it.”

She giggled and closed her eyes to feel his heat surrounding her.

He chuckled. “You can wear me anytime you want. Sign. It.”

She opened her eyes and signed the contract. The blood prick and ocular scan were done. The pad lit up, and Rath gently took it, signed it, and set it aside. “There. Now I can call a few seamstresses who have your measurements on file. I am going to dress you up as my little princess.”

She gasped at the betrayal. “How could you?”

He turned and set her on the desk and leaned over her. “Convince me not to, Consort.”

She looked up into his amused features and blinked. “Now?”

“Now.”

“How long until we get to Arro?”

“Three weeks. Are you planning to talk the whole way?”

“I thought you had met me before.”

“Convince me that you can be trusted with choosing your own clothing.”

“How?”

He caressed her cheek and tapped her lips. “Convince me.”

She leaned up and was about to touch him when she said, “I can’t. Not allowed to touch you.”

Rath smiled. “You are the one female outside of family who is allowed to. Riley, Consort of Rath.”

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“Third person. Classy.” She touched his shoulder, pulled herself up, and kissed him. He remained there, warm and still, and then his lips shaped to hers, and she tasted his breath then the sting of his tongue against hers.

Knowing that Rath was venomous and feeling it were different. Her head spun, and she clung to him as her body took the venom and turned it to heat in her veins.

It was quite the first kiss.

Chapter Five

Riley was panting as the burn moved through her. Rath held her close in a chair cut for his back while she whined and twisted.

He stroked her hair and kissed her head, shoulders, and hands. “Ranna never stung you?”

“No, it came under sexual activity, and that wasn’t in our contract.”

“It is in ours.”

“I noticed. What is the venom doing?”

“Oh, that wasn’t the venom. That was the start of the nanites. There will be more, but I thought I would start small. I must say, I am really looking forward to continuing to explore you.”

She looked at him and saw a drop of shining liquid at the corner of his mouth. “Are you drooling?”

He grinned, and she saw that the drops were coming from his teeth.

She touched his lips and covered the deadly dentition. “Oh. Let’s just put those away.”

He laughed. “We are going to dinner in the captain’s quarters. I will pick something for you to wear. The Sisters will be joining us.”

“Nothing too slutty. I thought you only brought the two outfits from Ranna.”

“There are these things called fabricators. I ordered clothing for you the moment you made contact with the Sisters.”

She focused on anything other than the hormone riot inside her. “When is dinner?”

“In fifteen minutes. It takes ten to walk there.”

“You are a monster.” Riley narrowed her eyes at him.

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He slid her off his lap. “You noticed, and I haven’t even undressed with you yet.”

She snorted and stood up. “What do I need to wear?”

Rath chuckled and stood, walking to a flat wardrobe on the wall, bringing out over twenty outfits.

“What the actual hell?”

“I was stressed, and I had them all made based on tradition and what you would hate based on what you have stated in the past.”

“Why what I would hate?”

“Misdirected irritation. You were out of my realm of safety, and it made me mad, so I could either kill everyone on the mine station until I found you, or I could make you outfits and trust the Daughters to bring you home.” He flicked through the clothing and pulled something out.

“Until you swooped in and burned off some of that energy.”

“Not even close. Here, put this on; no, you can’t leave the room.”

She blinked and nodded. “Right. No privacy if you are with me.”

She pulled off her clothing and set it aside, taking the folded dress from his hand.

“Thank you, generous Overseer.”

“Please don’t thank me while naked again.” He closed his eyes.

Riley smirked and pulled the dress on. It was shimmery with cleavage that went to her navel, and her back was slit down to her coccyx. The fabric was opaque, and the skirt was full but wasn’t bad for a consort gown.

She sighed. “You can open your eyes.”

He opened them and smiled, reaching for her hair and setting it loose around her shoulders. “There. That will conceal your neck while we can have a civil dinner.”

“Neck?”

“Yes, your shoulders are a close second for allure, but they are mostly concealed.” He smiled. “Shall we?”

He held his hand out to her, palm up. She slid her hand into his, and he leaned in and kissed it. Her body was rioting, and she was pretending it wasn’t. His grin showed her he knew it.

They left his quarters, walking the halls at a slow and steady pace. She knew she had a blush to her cheeks as they walked because a lot of the crew were grinning.

She muttered, “This would be easier if I hadn’t met them at your palace.”

He chuckled. “Deal with it.”

“Stop quoting me.”

“No. I had to listen to you for five years; you are going to find out what I learned.”

She groaned. “I may regret babbling in your general direction.”

“You might.”

They made it to the captain’s mess, where two guards snapped to attention.

The space had four of Rath’s elite squad and the captain chatting to Sister Welowik.

All heads turned their way when they entered.

Rath smiled. “I would like to present my consort. Riley.”

The Daughters all pressed a hand flat to their sternum and bowed. The captain saluted with a hand to his shoulder.

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“Uh, thanks. As you were.” She looked at the table that was set for six. Six. Oh, no. She asked sweetly, “Rath, please tell me that we aren’t using traditional seating.”

He grinned. “I feel it is only fair that you get used to it. I am not letting you out of my sight.”

The Daughters grinned. Welowik nodded wisely. “It is good to get used to what is expected.”

Riley made a face.

One of the crew whispered to the captain, and he grinned. “Dinner is ready.”

Rath led her to the Hmrain chair and settled before pulling her onto his lap. The size difference was apparent.

Katura giggled. “My lady, you look... petite.”

Riley shielded herself and made an exceptionally rude gesture to the Arro.

There was a tap on the top of her head, and she looked up to Rath looking down. “That is not used in polite company.”

“I hadn’t taken into account the difference in your size from your daughter’s. When she hauled me onto her lap, there was only a slight difference in size. Like—” She held her hands a foot apart. “—that much.”

“You will grow, Riley. All consorts do.” He paused. “Ranna pulled you onto her lap?”

“When we watched scary vids. She used me as a living shield.”

He snorted. “She does not like those vids. Why was she watching?”

“I was curious, and she was trying to be a good friend. It was on the list.”

The Daughters grinned. They knew about the list. Everyone in contact with Ranna knew about the list as they were asked for contributions to the occupations, events, or hobbies that Ranna tried to get Riley to try.

He wrapped an arm around her as the food was carried to the table.

Teddy grinned. “You look like a doll.”

“Imagine the earlier gesture.” She smiled. “How was the visit with your cousin?”

“It was fun. Went to Kifessan, travelled with them to Aten. Met Ra and his consort, Harwin. There were a bunch of other Terrans with their Hmrain as well. They looked... different from a standard human.”

“Wow. What do their consorts wear?”

Teddy smirked. “A lot less.”

Riley blinked, and Rath hugged her tight. “I told you I was easing you into things.”

“From what I am sitting on, easing is going to be necessary.”

He sighed, took some food, and shoved it into her mouth. She took the hint and started chewing. The group at large laughed at her, and when the meal was done, she sat back with Rath holding her.

She leaned her head against his chest and listened to the conversation about the circumstances of the mine and the escorts.

When Teddy asked, “Consort Riley, what happened after you woke?”

“Oh, when they said y’all were there, I thought I would try and let you know I was there. From there, I had some water, and then I went to fix the disabled mechs. I am guessing that purging their systems was a way to spend more time at the brothel, but I got them reprogrammed for the ladies and myself to move in, and then we napped for a few hours. After that, it was up and out.”

Katura asked, “Why did you walk that way?”

“Because I remembered my lessons. Only guard what you can cover. I am regretting putting that on the list.”

The Daughters laughed.

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Teddy said, “Are the ladies going to accept Hebor?”

“The compatibles? Oh, yeah. I just have to meet the guys first so I can make a judgment.”

Rath blinked. “You want to meet single males of Hebor?”

“No. I just want to watch their body language as they meet the ladies.” She patted his hands on her ribs. “You are welcome to wrap yourself around me while I do it.”

“Fine. What is your psychic rating?”

“Natural immunity. Why?”

“All of the Hebor upper class are empaths or telepaths. They will prod at your mind.”

She twisted and placed her hand on her chest, blinking slowly. “Great. Will you protect me?”

He dipped his head and kissed her. She clutched at him as his tongue stroked hers.

Teddy murmured, “Close your eyes, Consort Riley, you look terrified.”

Riley closed her eyes and twisted toward him. He held her against him as she deepened the kiss, knowing about the stinger and the venom. The hand cupping the back of her head was sweet, but the fingers grazing her sex outside her gown were highly distracting.

Her pulse thudded in her ears, and she moved against his fingers and then felt his smile against her lips. She calmed herself externally and nodded. “You are right. I am easy.”

He wrapped both arms around her and murmured, “I like that you respond to me. It isn’t a bad thing.”

Teddy said clearly, “If it makes you feel better, Riley, I have known Lord Rath for five and a half years and have never been tempted to get into that position. You two are simply destined for each other. Deal with it.”

Riley laughed and pressed her forehead to Rath’s collarbone.

“Let’s have dessert in my quarters, Riley.”

“Do I have to look around or stand up?”

“No. I am going to wear you through the ship.”

“I will walk.”

“Oh, no. I am not letting go.” He changed his tone. “Let us know when we get to Hebor.”

“Yes, Overseer.”

“Thank you.” Rath rose to his feet with an arm around her back.

Riley mumbled, “Night, everybody.”

The Daughters of Rath laughed and remained in the dining room. Rath left the room

and began the walk through the ship's hallways. She braced herself for a ten-minute walk, but they were in his room in one hundred sixty-two seconds. He walked faster than she did.

He set her on the bed and removed her boots. "Riley, I am guessing you know what we are about to do."

"Yes, I have read the pamphlets. I had to explain it to Ranna because I lost a bet." She shrugged.

He paused. "What?"

"Yeah. We took turns reading mating practices of different species every time we lost a bet."

"You got Hmrain."

"Yeah. Ranna picked my penalty."

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He grinned. "I wonder why she would do that."

"Oh, zip it, honourable Overseer."

"You may call me Rath. I want you to use my name. In fact, when we are naked, I want you only to call me Rath."

She stared at him. "What?"

"You heard me. Your ears are keen, your mind is sharp, and your body wants me."

He gave her a frank look. "I very much want you as well, Riley, so do you want to remove your dress, or shall I tear it off you? That can be its own kind of fun."

She slid the dress off her shoulders. "That's a little advanced to me."

"Do you know what the capsule did to you?" He removed his boots and slipped off his shirt.

"Based on where I feel arousal, it restructured me a little."

She stood and let the dress fall to the floor. She sat back on the edge of the bed and wiggled her butt a little. "Nice fabric."

He laughed, but it was a strained sound. "You are lovely."

"Um. Thank you. You look pretty fit for someone who does a lot of admin."

“I have worked out my tension over your disappearance in the gym. Not being able to kill more of them was irritating, so I am afraid I will take it out on you.”

Riley squeaked. “What? I was stabbed in the neck with a hypo.”

“How about I will reassure myself that you are alive and safe?”

“Um. Okay. How?”

“Allow me to demonstrate.”

He stepped toward her, and she backed up as he got closer. When she was where he wanted her, he gripped her ankle and pulled her toward him. He grinned and shook his head.

She knew what was going to happen when he widened her thighs and dropped to the bed between her knees.

“I have been most curious as to the source of your heat.” He parked his chin on her mound and looked at her. She was up on her elbows and staring at him in horror.

He laughed, moved, and his tongue was cruising across her clit a moment later.

Riley squeaked.

Rath reached with one hand and pushed her flat, stroked her cheek, traced her lips, and then moved down to caress her breasts. Meanwhile, his tongue had found the heart of her and was delving deep.

She held her breath, and his thumb rubbed her clit. There was a soft whine coming from her as he slowly built her arousal until she felt her sex start gripping his tongue.

He slid three fingers into her, and she moaned and bucked when he gently took her clit between his teeth and scraped slowly. She yowled and bucked. He sucked her clit, and she fell apart.

Her pulse filled her body. Every inch of her felt the rush. She looked down at Rath, and he smiled at her, his black eyes lit with stars. She blushed and held her arms out. “Rath?”

He moved over her and kissed her, sharing the taste of her sex.

She ran her foot over his thigh and noted he had ditched his lower clothing at some point. She wanted him. She had always wanted him, but a contract was a contract, and a Hmrain was terrifying. Even Ranna’s dad. Especially Ranna’s dad.

He had a hot yet concerned expression. Riley smiled. “It’s okay, Rath.”

He shuddered. “Hearing my name from you without a sarcastic title is good.”

She stroked his neck and pulled him down. “I can save the sarcasm for when I don’t want to know what you feel like inside me.”

He kissed her softly. “That sounds like an observation. Ask me.”

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Her eyes widened in shock. His erection rubbed at her, and she trembled.

Riley looked up at his stellar eyes. “Rath, please?”

His smile showed a certain level of satisfaction that she didn’t understand. He leaned down to kiss her, and the maelstrom started.

Kissing, touching, stroking, and an insistent pressure between her thighs. Riley could feel him moving into her slowly, and there was a pressure and release as he moved deeper. When another contact with her clit occurred, she jolted. She could feel both of his hands, and there was something else on her clit as the pressure built in her, and then he slid in further.

She was confused, but then he pulled back and slid further in, and she gasped as she started to cum. He held her and began to go in deeper, and the suction on her clit continued as she continued to shudder and moan, clawing at Rath’s shoulders.

Riley fought for a grip, but Rath kept her off balance until he saw the tears in her eyes. At that point, he bit her, thrust deep, and groaned as his hips held him in deep. She wrapped her legs around the back of his thighs and held on as her body tried to decide whether it was happy or confused by what had just happened, but she was filled with heat, and her aftershocks continued long after they would have normally ceased. She swallowed when she realized the sense of fullness was dissipating.

Rath raised his head, and then he nuzzled her. “A successful first time. You are lovely, Riley.”

“Thanks for that.” She flinched as another aftershock clutched him. “I have seen the previous companions and consorts. I don’t look like them. I am outside of your normal type.”

He frowned. “That isn’t... You have mentioned that before. Ranna spoke of it.”

“Yeah. It’s still true.”

He cocked his head. “You do realize that I am far more concerned with energy patterns than faces. If casual lovers resemble each other, it is because I don’t want to put the energy into learning them.” He rocked gently inside her. “You, however, I am willing to put the effort into, and anything else you will let me do at any given time.”

She blinked and laughed weakly. “You made a joke.”

He grinned, and his hips bucked. She was flooded again and squeaked in discomfort.

“Aw, sorry, Riley, but you need help getting stronger.”

The throbbing on her clit started again, and when the aftershocks began again, she rode them out.

Rath kissed her softly as her body figured out what was going on, and the pressure ceased. She exhaled in relief, and he smiled and kissed her softly, his tongue slowly teasing hers.

When he finally lifted his head, he stroked her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Full and flat. No major aches and pains.”

He cocked his head. “Do you want me out of you, Riley?”

“Yes and no.”

He chuckled. “Tell you where you want me.”

She was embarrassed. “Do you have time to cuddle me?”

“Cuddle?”

“Hold me until I relax and don’t feel like I was just flung across the stars.”

“Ah. May I remain inside you?”

“Yeah, we can lie on our sides with one of my legs on your hip.”

“Fine, unlock your legs, and we will tip to the side.”

She stiffly did, and he held her close as he tipped to his left side. He slid his leg between her thighs and supported her left leg.

Rath cuddled her close and held her as he wrapped one of his wings around. “Good?”

She was in a warm, little cavern that smelled like sex and Rath, with him inside her. She snuggled against his chest. “Perfect.”

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He held her close, and she felt another surge inside her. She gasped and scratched at him as she dealt with the pressure. Rath crooned to her and stroked her back, cupping her hips. “It will be fine, Riley. I am just providing you with what you need to be stronger and healthier.”

She blinked. “That doesn’t feel like a vitamin supplement, and what is on my clit?”

“What?”

“The small flesh button at the top of my sex.”

“Oh, the stimulator has it. It helps bring you to climax faster.”

“Stimulator?”

“It is similar to that button, but it is a stalk designed to suck and tug. Any other questions?”

“Um, when you were coming inside me, why was there pressure and release?”

“I have a banded cock. When you are receptive, the bands will swell and lock us together.”

“Why? Who do they think is going to try and get in next?”

“It is to make sure that you are awash with me.”

“That has such a lovely connotation.” She yawned and curled up against him. She felt another surge, and she whimpered, but she still headed into sleep.

* * * *

Rath held her protectively and basked in the wave of energy he had just received. Ranna had only received a portion of the energy that he had just received in one prolonged encounter.

She continued to take in the nanites as his body produced them for her. When she said his name, there was no way that he wasn't going to be inside her as soon as possible. Getting her to ask just confirmed that she wanted him as well.

He smiled and held her close to him as her body put the nanites to use. It would keep her asleep for quite a while, and she was going to end up taller and stronger. He hoped she didn't mind, but it was going to happen. He wanted her with him forever. That meant she needed to let the technology do its job.

He would do his and cuddle her.

Chapter Six

Riley woke up clean and in bed. Rath was at a desk and doing admin work. She looked at the pillow next to her, and it had a head divot. He had stayed with her as long as he could.

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“Hello, Rath. How long was I out?”

“Three days. We are nearly to Hebor. How are you feeling?” He got up from his desk and came to sit on the bed, taking her hand.

“A little unbalanced? Um, so we...”

“We did. The first time is always a little awkward.”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “I think I fell asleep before we were done.”

She looked at him sheepishly.

“You fell asleep when you were tired. I remained inside you until I couldn’t be there any longer.” He ran his thumb along her wrist.

Riley took inventory. “I think I need a shower, a trip to the lav, and a clean outfit.”

He smiled. “Do you want help?”

“Help me stand, and I will let you know from there.”

Rath chuckled and helped her stand and take a few steps. Riley took the necessary steps to the lav and closed the door. She was in mid-pee when the door opened, but Rath wasn’t there.

He spoke from his desk. “Get used to it. You in a restroom fills me with anxiety.”

She snorted and finished up, she took a flash shower, and then walked out naked and looked for clothing. She found a simple dress that was a little on the clear side and pulled it on.

Riley looked around. “You hid my boots?”

“You will have footwear when I am free to take you for a walk on the ship.”

“Fine. What do I do in the meantime?”

The food dispenser chimed. Rath pointed at the food dispenser. It was at the wrong angle. “Wait. Am I taller?”

Rath grinned. “The fabricator is working on a new set of boots.”

“So, I am taller?”

He stood up and walked up to her. Where she had been below nipple height, she was now up to his collarbone. “What the hell?”

He grinned. “Riley, this is part of being a consort. My body is altering yours for maximum compatibility and longevity. This also lets me feed from you more efficiently.”

Riley looked down, and her body was tight with muscle, her breasts were about the same size, and she felt good. “This explains the balance issue.”

He chuckled. “I am glad you are not too upset.”

“Ranna is going to be pissed. It was way too easy for her to get me in a headlock before.”

Rath sighed. “My daughter will not be engaging in horseplay with you.”

“What about if I tackle her?”

He slapped his hand over his face. “Wait until after you have produced a brother or sister for her, no matter how many decades it takes.”

“Decades. Right.”

He gave her a funny look. “Why do you say it that way?”

“How much did this situation slow my endocrine system?”

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“I don’t know.”

“Okay. It won’t take a few decades. Well, it will if we only fuck once every few years.” She tapped his chest.

He pulled her against his chest. “I was thinking every few hours to start.”

She grinned. “I think I heard my food.”

Rath sighed. “Eat.”

She laughed and patted his cheek before moving away from him and getting her food. She was going to smack his ass but knew that food would be a distant memory before he finished with her.

She grabbed her food from the dispenser and ate standing up. Her body wanted to be upright in the worst way. She wanted to flex and stretch, but Rath was watching.

When the standard Arro fare was done, she put her tray back through the recycler. She went to wash her hands and face and then returned to the main bedroom.

“Where is the fabricator?”

“The quartermaster’s office. You can choose what you want. Go there and get a scan. I would wait a few days until you reach your final height.”

“You aren’t serious.”

“I am. Very.”

“Did this happen with Ranna’s mother?”

He paused and smiled sadly. “No. She was a Varcadden, and our union kept her alive fifty years past her lifespan. After that, she had no family other than Ranna, and when she was injured in the accident, she didn’t fight. She let herself go to her ancestors.”

“Ouch. How could she leave Ranna?”

“Varcaddens have a different attitude toward their children. She didn’t want to have her, but the baby was mine, and she had to carry it to term. When Ranna was born looking pure Hmrain, her mother lost all interest.”

“Oh. Heck. Does she know?”

“Ranna? She knows. Varcaddens’ known disgust for any species not their own is not a secret. Her mother also had journals and diaries that went to Ranna as her daughter.”

“Oh, if I had known...”

“You were her friend, laughed with her, made minimal issue with the difference in your social standing, and you made her stronger while telling her it was all right to be vulnerable. You did more than enough.”

She blinked rapidly. “But...”

“She is older than you by two hundred years, so your adoption of the friendship attitude was just what she needed.”

“Plus, my being insanely perky didn’t hurt.”

Rath smiled. “That was a factor. She was able to get enough passive energy to heal herself, which was not something I had imagined.”

“I am amazing if I do say so myself.” She smiled. She was watching Rath out of the corner of her eye and trying not to stare at him. In theory, if she wanted him, he would oblige, and there had not been a moment in the last five years that she wasn’t interested.

She fidgeted and asked him, “Is there a tablet or something that I can use?”

He finished whatever he was doing and got to his feet. Rath walked over to her and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her against him. “You are welcome to use me.”

Riley looked up at him and blushed. “I thought you had other things to do.”

“There is nothing that I would rather be doing.” He nuzzled her neck. He licked her neck, and she felt the sting of his tongue; his teeth held her still.

Throbbing started and moved through her body from that contact. She went limp in his arms as her lust took over. Her breathing got faster, and she clutched at his arms. The soft fabric of his shirt hampered her efforts to claw him.

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She whimpered softly, and Rath detached the stinger from her skin and licked softly at the bite site.

She listed to one side as her legs went limp.

“You react quickly. What are you feeling, Riley?”

She rolled her head back, knowing that her pupils were wide, skin was flushed, and lips were puffy. “What the hell, you winged asshole?”

He grinned. “Now, now. Call my name, and I will put you out of your misery.”

“You put me into my misery. Aw, I am wet.”

Rath laughed. “Really? How delightful. Lie down on your belly, and I will check on you.”

She growled at him, turned, and flopped to the bed. She was twitching with every caress of air, and when he pushed the skirt up and out of the way, the cool air on the damp mess of her thighs was just embarrassing.

She pulled a pillow over her head and screamed when his fingers pushed her thighs apart and cool air rushed in to let her know what a mess she had made. She moaned as his fingers slid into her, and she whined when he put a hand to her back and held her in place while his fingers slid slowly and withdrew.

She felt the heat of him over her back, and he moved the pillow away before moving

her hair and nibbling at the back of her neck.

“You know what I want to hear.”

“Please, Rath?”

He kissed her ear. “One more time.”

“Please, Rath, I need you?”

He shuddered against her, and she felt his cock pressing into her. The soft, wet sounds made Riley cover her head, but Rath just laughed softly and continued the squishy endeavour. When his belly pressed to her butt, he began to move with determination.

Whatever was on his erection was rubbing incessantly against her g-spot, and she vibrated with tension for the first handful of strokes, and then her release started, and his constant thrusts kept it going.

At some point, he stopped, buried deep inside her, and the feeling of fullness happened again until he reached under her to stroke her clit, and her channel fluttered around him. The fullness eased, and he whispered in her ear. “Good Riley. You are spectacular.”

She grunted. “Asshole.”

“Not my preferred place to play, but if you insist...”

Panic roared through her. “No!”

She pushed up and thrashed to unseat him.

Rath pressed her down. “Easy, Riley. I was making a joke.”

She blinked as the panic receded. She was still partially up on her arms. “Oh.”

He leaned to one side and looked at her. “Riley. What happened?”

She stared at him blankly and panted softly, but she knew an explanation was in order. “Can you get out of me, please?”

He nodded. “I can, but I will stay with you.”

She sighed and ignored her body’s rippling with pleasure as he withdrew.

He curled around her from behind. “Whenever you are ready.”

“Okay. Here we go.” She told him about being caught by her own kind, and the male who preferred her over some of the other caught women liked to make sure that there wouldn’t be a child, so anal assaults occurred frequently.

She explained the rest of her time waiting to get her ass off Earth and her captor’s shock when he couldn’t keep the women he had claimed via murdering the other men in his capture squad.

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Rath just held her as she told him everything. When she finally stopped, he asked, “How can you have so much relentless cheer?”

“To spite the fuckers. If I ever see him again, I am going to use a pulse blaster on his groin, but aside from that, I don’t dwell on it.”

Rath kissed her temple. “He’s dead, remember? You and Ranna had more in common than I thought.”

“Correct, but it still plays out in my mind now and then.”

“Which explains so much.”

“I thought so.”

“I believe we should have a conversation as to what you will and won’t enjoy.”

“I would have taken you anywhere after the sting or would have climbed you beforehand if I had the nerve.”

He chuckled and caressed her belly. “You need simply to demand me when you need me.”

“I have never been able simply to demand someone. There is a learning curve involved here.”

He turned her to face him. “I have no issue with your past and only wish a claim to

your future. If something does not give you pleasure, it is useless to me. If it gives you pain, it spoils my absorption.”

“Oh, so it’s all about you.”

He chuckled. “It absolutely is, and because of that, it is now about you.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Rath. It’s keeping me grounded.”

He rolled her onto her back. “Now, reach down and guide me into you.”

She went up on her elbow and wrapped her fingers around his cock. She felt the bands that ran around his circumference and blinked. “Oh. Ridged for my enjoyment.”

He laughed. “If you enjoy it, I am delighted.”

She guided him to her before she stroked the base of his erection until she felt the small, spongy surface that clung to her fingertip, squeezing and massaging. She pulled back, and the frond followed.

“What do I do with it?” she muttered, followed by, “How long is it?”

He chuckled and said, “As long as my member, in case I have a mate that needs coaxing. It can attach to any stimulation point and help my partner to satisfaction.”

“What if the species doesn’t have that kind of point?”

“Then I would not have opted for them as a partner.” He continued to ease and rock against her as his erection disappeared into her.

Riley watched it go and widened her legs a little more when he needed more space to push in flush against her. She suspected her eyes were bugging out. “It fits.”

He grinned, his fangs gleaming bright. “It does. You are a treasure, Riley.”

“Treasure?”

“Your species easily adapts to our needs and the depths that the designers created to make us compatible with many species. There is something very feral about thrusting deep and watching your partner shiver with appreciation and not pain or fear.”

Riley closed her eyes and stroked his biceps. “Less chatter, more moving.”

He chuckled and started to move.

She gasped, moaned, and arched into him. The ridges on him rubbed on the way out and again as he surged in. He stroked every inch of her as he pushed in, and she realized that the designers hadn’t wanted to miss any chance for them to please a mate.

The tension and heat filled her until she felt her limbs were made of lazy lava. She tried to hang onto him, but her hands couldn’t grasp onto anything. It was like her entire nervous system was shorting out.

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He leaned forward and flicked his stinger at her shoulder, and the fire in her nerves caught as she came. Her body tried to hold his, but he continued to move, and she gasped and twisted as pleasure moved over her, through her, and along every inch of her.

She rode the waves until he finally shuddered and spilled into her. She felt soft kisses on her eyes, cheeks, and lips. He whispered, "Can you take it in?"

She whispered, "Move back one ring."

He carefully backed up, the pressure built, and when the mild snapping of her tissue happened. She went off on a wave of pulsing and claspings.

He let out an encouraging croon, and she felt more heat fill her, which caused the fluttering again.

She felt him wrapping her in his arms, a wing eased under her, and then he rolled to his back with him still inside her. The other wing wrapped around her, and she was in a Rath-scented burrito.

He murmured against her ear, "If you need me, just press your hand flat against my chest, no matter the situation."

She nodded. She was waiting for her body to stop pulsing, but she nodded off.

Riley stood next to Rath as they left the shuttle with the dozen ladies for Hebor. Sam and Pixie were in the mix. Sam kept staring at Riley, so Riley flipped her off. Sam

giggled.

Rath walked toward the Hmrain who was landing, and she came with him, backed by his wing. Heboren's consort was with him and looked fairly pregnant.

Rath and Heboren did that weird forearm clasp that muscly dudes seemed to do. Heboren smiled. "Congratulations on finding your consort."

"Congratulations on your consort and impending child."

Heboren smiled. "It will be our second."

His consort snorted. "Missing the important part. Hello, miss, I am Nova."

Riley smiled and extended her hand. "I am Riley, Consort of Rath, inhabitant of Arro."

Nova blinked. "Not a citizen?"

"Nope. I went from my first platonic companion bond to this." She pointed at Rath.

"A bit of a jump."

"Not really. My platonic bond was with his daughter. I was her emotional support human."

Rath snorted.

Heboren blinked. "You have children?"

"A daughter from a consort three centuries ago. Riley is something else."

Nova asked, “Will your daughter be upset?”

Riley snorted.

Rath grinned. “I have seen my daughter more in the last five years than in the previous hundred. She was parading Riley in front of me at every opportunity.” He shrugged. “My daughter has a smug streak and knew what she was looking at when she saw Riley.”

Riley smirked. “According to Lady Ranna, she was looking at a huge pain in the ass.”

Nova giggled. “So, you have found some more Terrans?”

“And other species who are compatible with the races here. Sam and Pixie are the Terrans.”

Nova smiled. “Will you introduce me?”

“Sure. As long as Heboren is holding to letting them choose out of a limited pool.”

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The dark black-gold Hmrain nodded. “Yes, Lady. They will be able to choose among those criteria.”

“Neat. Where? When?”

He gestured to a building off to the left, where the ladies had been directed.

Riley grinned. “Cool.” She started off in that direction until Rath picked her up and held her with her feet still moving.

Nova was laughing, and Riley looked up at Rath. “I promised I would be there.”

“Yes, but you can wait for our hosts.”

“Even if I don’t want to?”

“Yes.”

She stopped and muttered, “You can put me down. I won’t sprint off.”

He pressed his lips to her ear and murmured, “Nope. You have shifty eyes.”

Nova was laughing wildly as Heboren supported her.

Riley was carried to the meeting room, and Nova was right behind her.

What appeared to be an older tiger-marked male was keeping things calm. Sam was

hiding behind him.

Riley said, “Sam? Sit rep?”

“Young leopard guy got grabby, wolf guy took offense, and they tugged at my arms. Hot stripey guy came to my rescue.”

Nova chuckled. “Na’ith, the female likes your colouration.”

Riley noticed that Nova was speaking English and winced. “Oops.”

Pixie was hiding behind a very elegant Anubis-looking male. She looked all the way up. “Oh. Hi.”

His eyes crinkled in amusement. “Hello, little Terran.”

His English was flawless.

“Lord Kra’ten. This is Pixie.”

Pixie stared up at him and waved. “Pleased to meet you.”

Riley noted that she hadn’t moved from his side at all. Not even stepping back.

Sam was enamoured with Na’ith. The other ladies were slowly moving toward the males that they were drawn to.

Riley sighed, and her mind was at ease.

Sam was talking to the male she had chosen, and his body language was very protective.

Pixie's male had taken one of her hands and was leading her to a corner of the open space that seemed to be a meeting hall or something.

Heboren chuckled, lifted his wrist, and made a call.

Five minutes later, two magistrates with contract tablets arrived, and Pixie and her male were at one, and Sam and hers were at another.

Nova sniffled. "I am so happy for Na'ith. He had a crush on Lily, but she was meant for Nebel, and she and her Hmrain are doing well together. Why were they pulling at Sam?"

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“She’s receptive right now.” Both the Hmrain said it in unison.

Riley chuckled. “Oh. Got it.”

Rath had explained the significance to her in gory detail, from between her thighs. While she considered it an annoyance, a male with mating on his mind was very focused and highly appreciative of her.

The magistrates were a little shocked listening to the Terrans negotiate, but their males were grinning. Riley wasn’t worried about the issues of the past coming up. Each of the ladies had filled out a detailed dossier about who, what, and when things had gone bad for them.

Riley leaned her head against Rath and watched the lines of couples heading to get contracts together. “I hope they are happy here.”

Heboren said, “Now you will have to leave it to the males they chose. I think a few are going for single-year contracts.”

Riley nodded. “Handfasting.”

Nova muttered, “I am guessing there isn’t a Hmrain version of that.”

Rath and Heboren murmured, “There is not.”

When they had finished, signed, and confirmed the contract, Sam and Na’ith came back to Heboren. Na’ith smiled. “Thank you for this opportunity, Lord Heboren.”

Heboren nodded. "I am glad you have found someone, Captain."

Sam blinked. "Captain?"

Nova smiled. "He's the captain of the Deadly Star. He's also a duke, I think..."

Na'ith nodded. "Correct, Lady Nova."

Sam blinked. "Oh." She frowned with indecision and then looked at Na'ith. He lifted her for a kiss, and her expression smoothed out. He stroked her hair and held her head carefully. When he lifted his head, he smiled and said with her, "Oh."

Heboren said, "Na'ith, you are dismissed. I don't want to see you for six days."

Riley smiled. "Bye, Sam. It's been short but fun."

Sam nodded. "Keep in touch."

"I will. I know his com codes."

Sam laughed, Na'ith bowed with Sam still in his arms, and then he left the building. Riley had prickles of tears in her eyes when the same scenario was enacted with Pixie. Her very sharp-looking male bowed to Lord Heboren, thanking him for the opportunity.

The other females of differing species were responding well to the males.

Riley sighed. "Okay. I saw the two I wanted to see."

Nova said, "We have to remain to witness all the contracts."

“Oh.”

“How long have you been with Lord Rath?”

“About a week.”

“Oh. That’s a fun phase.”

Lord Rath gave Riley a look. “I am right here.”

She was going to pat his chest, but his eyes lit up, so she patted his jaw instead. “We know, pumpkin.”

Heboren laughed. “It is an interesting species. At the end of the line, no possible way for them to gain assistance, and yet, they still can’t keep their mouths from being disrespectful.”

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Riley snorted. “I wasn’t disrespectful; I am just having fun with another Terran who has a Hmrain as a pet.”

Rath started laughing. Heboren shook his head. “Your lady is a bad influence.”

“She raises the spirits of all around her. It is an important skill that I will not curtail.”

Nova leaned on Heboren. “He’s not wrong. My heart feels lighter just after a few minutes.”

Heboren looked at her. “Fine. Anything that lightens your heart is fine with me, but Lady Riley, you might want to watch who you are dealing with.”

“I normally deal with the Daughters of Rath or the actual daughter of Rath, and they just knock me over when I get out of line.”

Rath said, “I will give you a list of her scars. It was exceptional, but she has grown, and her skin has healed, so I cannot point to the trauma she has been through. That her soul has recovered enough to want to help others smile again is enough for me.”

Heboren sighed. “I am being too strict?”

Nova stroked his cheek. “You are being protective. You want everything to go properly as your people are watching and listening.”

“True.”

Riley smiled. "I have seen the two ladies I was concerned with get contracted. They are safe. I am good to keep travelling home."

Rath murmured against her, "Stay as the other ladies are looking to you for comfort."

"Oh, shit. I didn't realize. Lemme down."

Rath set her on her feet, and she went to talk to the ladies in line and talk to their suitors as well. She stopped a contract from being finalized and ran negotiations for the lady. The male backed up a little, but then he grinned and inclined his head. He agreed, and even for a year, they had contingencies in case of pregnancy. Formal union would kick in if both were agreeable, and if they weren't, a home and income would be provided for the next five years for the female and child or the male and child.

The male blinked and said, "That is not likely."

"I am aware that not all females are inclined to be parents. So, it is good to have contingencies."

He nodded. "Right."

"But she still gets a payout for providing a child. It takes a lot out of the female."

They finished their contract with the addenda, and then she started talking to the next female, asking her what she most needed in a union. Then the wolfy guy got the same questions. They lined up fairly well, and she took them to the second magistrate and rapped out the requirements for the contract. The couple both signed with a smile, so Riley kept going.

Rath watched with a smile, and Heboren had a dawning understanding. Nova was just

happy there were more humans around.

* * * *

Rath watched her flit from couple to couple, and the faces got thoughtful and had understanding and deeper interest in their soon-to-be partners.

Riley made people happy because she was interested in what they wanted. She wanted people to be happy because happy people were less dangerous. That was a little sentence that had stuck in his mind. Even now, she was thinking about danger. That had been why she hadn't thought of the others immediately. She was with him, and she felt safe.

Chapter Seven

Riley smiled as she realized that she had set foot on several worlds she would not have been on otherwise. Hebor, Korvil, and the hated mining world were now places that she had walked that she had never imagined.

Now, it was home to Arro and all the friends she had made there.

“Why are you smiling?”

“I have travelled more than any human before the asteroid. It’s funny.”

He lifted her hand and kissed it as the shuttle approached the spaceport. “Soon, we will be back home.”

“You don’t like travelling?”

“I want to be at home, on Arro, with you, and my daughter and her new partner visiting every few weeks.”

She grinned. “Wow. You have gone from the master of an abbey full of deadly warriors to a homebody.”

“If you are there, that is home.”

“Whoa. Don’t stop your life for me. I have plenty of hobbies to keep me busy.”

“I am not stopping my life for you. I am still the overseer of the system. I have to do all of my admin tasks, but when they are done, I want to spend my time with you.”

“I am glad to hear it. It’s relaxing to know that no one is dependent on me.” She grinned. “It means I can be a bit of butthead.”

“You do that anyway, Riley.” He grinned.

They came in for a landing, and she asked, “Oh, shoot. Should I have packed that transparent wardrobe you got me? I just brought the keepsakes back.”

He grinned. “Lagolian is already waiting to get your new wardrobe underway.”

“Oh. Fun.” She smiled. “She made all my clothing before.”

“I know. I am trying to give you as many points of familiarity as I can.”

“Thank you, that’s very sweet.”

He grinned. “I expect to take it out of your hide later.”

She sighed and got to her feet. “Fine, but I still have pretty thin skin.”

“I know. And so soft and silky,” he murmured from behind her as she headed for the exit with her bundle of sweet memories in her arms.

They walked out of the shuttle, and she was heading for customs when he caught her in his arms and took to the sky. She curled against his chest and breathed deeply of the scent of Arro.

He said, “I asked Ranna to wait at my residence.”

“Good. I hope she and Nizzen have made progress.”

“I hope he’s still alive. He was trying to convince her that you weren’t important when I last saw him.” Rath chuckled.

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“Oh. Well, I mean our contract was almost done.”

“And mine was waiting a moment later.”

“You didn’t mention it.”

“I have seen how fast you can run.”

She snickered. “You are pretty spry, though. I could have done without you hanging me up by my ankle.”

He chuckled. “It was an interesting view.”

She snorted and saw his residence down below. He banked, and she clutched at the items sent by Ranna and Horib. He landed in front of his home, and she blinked as she saw his staff staring at them.

“What did you do?” She looked at him.

“This is proper for my mate and breeder.”

She winced. “I was going to mention it, I swear.”

“When?”

“End of first trimester?”

He snorted and walked toward the crowd. “You and I are going to discuss this lack of pertinent information when we finish your welcome home party.” He crossed the entryway, and the staff followed them in.

Riley blinked. “My what?”

He walked to the ballroom. The lights blazed, and everyone she had hung out with in the past five years was in the space, and they all cheered when she was carried in.

Riley looked at Rath, and she burst into tears. She wrapped her arms around his neck and wailed.

The folks there were confused, and then Riley said out loud, between sobs, “I. Didn’t. Think. I. Would. Make. It. Home.”

She was surrounded by friends who touched her cheek, neck, or arms. Whatever they could reach to soothe her.

Ranna stepped up and said, “Of course you would make it home, silly, you are the mate of Rath.”

Ranna pressed a kiss to her temple. She whispered, “Can I call you mom now?”

Riley started laughing and turned to her. “Someone is. You are going to be Sissy Ranna sometime this year.”

Ranna grinned. “Really? Father, put her down, please.”

Rath’s voice was thick. “I think I just learned why she didn’t mention it to me. You wanted to tell Ranna first?”

Riley nodded.

He kissed her forehead, and she felt the psychic link snap into place. This was why the Sisters had a third eye tattooed on their forehead. It was their link to Rath and each other. Now Riley had the link to, even temporarily.

Riley looked to Rath. "Please set me on my feet. There are people here I need to hug."

He sighed. "I suppose since I authorized this party, I should let you enjoy it."

He slowly lowered her down his body and took her blanket and comfort objects. "Come to me when you are tired."

"Yes, Lord Rath." She smiled brightly then turned and hugged a surprised Ranna. "I got bigger."

Ranna laughed and hugged her, swinging her around. "I swear, if he were in front of me, I would take his head off."

“I think your dad did.”

Ranna smiled. “He won’t tell. You really didn’t tell him that you were pregnant?”

From a few feet away, they heard, “No, she did not. I had to figure it out myself.”

Ranna giggled. “You got so tall!”

“Your father contributed to my genome in a few ways.”

“Well, he has always been generous.”

Riley looked at Rath, and he gave her a knowing look as he spoke to some of the other guests. “Um, yes. Very giving. That is one of the reasons you are getting a sibling so soon. He’s very determined.”

Ranna laughed. “Come on, let’s walk a little further away so I can find out how you and my father got together. Was it romantic?”

“Well, he announced that my contract with you had expired, and then we were off. It was hot.”

Ranna giggled. “I hate to say it, but that does sound like him.”

“Yeah. Thanks for warning me about the tongue thing. It could have been a nasty shock.”

More giggles.

Some of the Daughters of Rath came by to congratulate her and swear their service to her as they did to her mate.

“Thank you. I hope never to need your services.” The ladies grinned and moved off into the party.

She moved around the party, greeting and thanking everyone for coming. When she ran into Nizzen, he paused and then bowed deep. “Consort of Rath. It is good that you have returned.”

“Thank you. I hope that your courtship is proceeding apace.”

“It is. I believe it will move on now that you have returned. Ranna was very worried.”

“I had a few nervous moments myself. I had never reprogrammed a mech before.” She smiled tightly as she heard some blame in his tone. “Are you... blaming me for your friend abducting me? Of a Hmrain descendant sneaking up behind me outside the lav and jabbing me in the neck with a hypo and carrying off a woman one-third his body weight and half his height? How am I to blame for that?”

People around them stared, and someone must have alerted Rath because he was soothing her. It was that point where she realized she had screamed half the sentences.

Nizzen paused. “When put like that, you are absolutely correct. I apologize if I caused you distress.”

“You caused me rage. There is a difference.”

Rath said softly, “As you have asked to remain here, I believe that a year spent in victims’ services might help you to understand. Developing empathy for those that we watch over is important.”

Nizzen paused. “Or I can just promise to do better.”

Rath chuckled. “Or I can beat you until you are on the edge of death, and you can slowly recover after being at the mercy of someone stronger than you are.”

Nizzen got really nervous. “I will be glad to work with victims’ services.”

Ranna sighed. “I think I need to go shopping for someone with more empathy. I know I have been distracted by Riley’s abduction, but I should have seen this before. You don’t actually like people.”

Nizzen stepped toward her, and she blocked him with her wing.

Riley stepped toward Nizzen. “Emotions are high tonight, just as they were at the theatre when he grabbed me and you used your blending skills to get us out of the building so your buddy could have some fun.”

Ranna gasped. “No. You said he acted alone, Nizzen.”

“He was supposed to take you off-world and sell you when he was done!” Nizzen clapped a hand over his mouth, and one of the Daughters chuckled. “Nothing better than the truth. Lord Rath, may we remove him?”

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Rath surged forward and punched him, crumpling his face and leaving his eyes blank. “Now you may remove him. If he survives, I will send his broken form to his family, and if he isn’t broken enough now, he will be.”

Riley looked at Ranna and said, “I am sorry. I didn’t know if he was with you during our com calls.”

Ranna came to her and hugged her. “I will take one of you over a dozen green monsters.”

“Okay, but I am going to help your dad with the search. My people are on a number of worlds, including ones with defenders. I think a guardian here would be a nice touch.”

Rath sighed. “I will look with you. You would pick one because you think my daughter would like the look of his cock.”

Riley grinned. “Aesthetics are important in a Hmrain descendant.”

Ranna giggled. And the room relaxed. The blood on the floor was mopped up, and the party resumed.

An hour later, Riley was sitting on a couch in the corner, and Ranna sat next to her. “I am fine with him being gone. There was a weird intensity to him that made me unsettled. He was fun enough, but he wasn’t good in a crisis. I am made of crisis, as you know.”

“Very well. It’s how we met.”

“Father looks happy.”

“I like to think he is. I have a new trick that I can do, but it will bring an end to the evening.”

“Do tell.”

“No. After I finish talking to my favourite stepdaughter in the whole world—”

“Your only stepdaughter.”

“That as well. Anyway, I want you to find happiness with a guy who takes your breath away. You deserve to feel more than happy with a night out or dinner. You need to want to see him every minute of every day, and when he isn’t with you, you think of ways to make him sorry for not being with you, and then you see him, and the plots go right out of your head.”

Ranna sighed. “That sounds delightful.”

“It can be, but that is what I want for you, and I want to look for candidates to find it. First, they have to like females. They need to be in an appropriate age range. Nurturer. Funny. Serious when needed. They need to think you are the pinnacle of beauty, even if you are dressed in loose trousers and covered in mud. Oh, and while they can have weird body piercings, they shouldn’t insist on you getting them. That’s just manners.”

Ranna took her hand. “They must like my family.”

“That’s too much to ask.”

They giggled.

“Okay. Show me your trick.”

“Well, I have had a lovely time, and I am tired.” She got up and walked to where Rath was talking to a crowd of people. She thought about him inside her, about being wrapped around him, the sting of his tongue, and the piercing of his teeth. By the time she was at his side, she was breathing faster and feeling distinctly flushed. She took his arm, looked up at him, and tapped him twice on the sternum.

She was in his arms, and he flew out of the party while Ranna’s laughter rang out.

Rath set her on her feet and stripped her efficiently. As agreed, there were no negotiations. He simply stripped her, and then she surprised him by unbuckling his belt and getting his erection free of the fabric concealing it. She knelt and took him into her mouth, drawing back and working her tongue against him as his wings widened for balance and his hands formed fists at his sides. She could only get to the fourth band on him, but he wasn’t complaining. She kept working, sucking as she moved her hand around him, and finally, he started trembling, and she tasted salty pear.

Rath lifted her and stared into her eyes for a moment before kissing her and then placing her carefully on the bed. He dropped to his belly between her thighs, and the true party got going.

They were having breakfast with tea with Rath occasionally pausing to kiss her hand, and in the extreme, he lifted her high, parted the loose panels of her tunic, and kissed her belly where his mark was spreading. It was a DNA test for dummies. His nanites made his mark when his baby had gotten started.

She smiled. “Do you have to return to normal business today?”

“There are a few things I need to do, including contacting Nizzen’s family and explaining that he involved himself in the kidnapping of a consort presumptive.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s going to suck.”

“It will. Please be in the residence when I get home after addressing parliament this evening.” The two sentences were both heavy.

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“I will be here. I need another nap. There was something lumpy in my bed.” She sipped at her tea.

He grinned. “Just like that, my mood is lifted, but please be in the residence. Your fitting for your new wardrobe starts in an hour. I believe Ranna might be keeping you company.”

“I don’t need a nanny.”

“It is her or one of the grumpiest Sisters from the abbey.”

“Fine. Ranna.”

“I am sure she will be happy that you greet her arrival with such enthusiasm.”

“She’s seen me in the morning before, Rath.”

He laughed. “I think I am going to take to this new domesticity.”

“I hope so. With the baby on the way, there is no going back. You settle in, or I will think of a suitable way to end that threat.”

He leaned over and kissed her. “I have had a union without affection. This one might even contain love.”

“If you look closely, it might already be here.”

His eyes lit, and the stars flared. He set her on the edge of the table, worked inside her, and slowly fucked her until his adult daughter and the seamstress arrived. They slowly backed out of the room, and Rath smiled down between slow kisses. “The first day for you as Consort of Rath.”

She held tight to him as he continued to move slowly, and she shivered and jolted with each thrust. When the small stalk attached to her clit, sucking and squeezing, her climax struck, and she bit his bicep while he chuckled.

He reared back and thrust deep, eliciting a scream. She felt the heat of the spill inside her, and her body worked to take it in. She was still changing, but her height was now set. Riley hoped her body was saving up for some sharper teeth.

Rath kissed her softly. “That is a fun way to end breakfast.”

He withdrew from her and tidied her up with a napkin from the table. He folded it when he was done and tucked it into a pocket of his tunic. “I might need energizing later in the day.”

“You are not going to sniff a sex napkin.”

He grinned. “They are broadcasting my return. Watch me.”

He helped her get to her feet and laughed when she wobbled.

Ranna called out, “Is it safe?”

Rath snorted. “You are two hundred and fifty. You are old enough to know how sex works.”

“Yes, but she’s my best friend. It makes things odd.” Ranna chuckled. “And the last

time she was that sweaty, we had been off at a spice tasting.”

Riley settled and managed to keep everything inside. She would get rid of anything left in the lav.

She grabbed a clean cloth from his place setting and dampened it in water, blotting at her forehead, cheeks, neck, and then in her cleavage.

Rath growled and grabbed for her.

Riley smacked his hand. “Stop it right there, Overseer. You have things to do today, and you can do me later. I promise to be somewhere you can find me.”

He grinned. “You just slapped a Hmrain.”

“Right. Does that get a punishment?”

“Life imprisonment.”

She smoothed his tunic and smiled at him. “I look forward to a long and confined life. Now go and yell at people. You know you want to.”

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He nodded and turned to leave. She smacked him on the ass. He whirled with his eyes wide.

She held up a hand to stop him. “Parliament!”

He kissed her hand. “Later, we are going to discuss your flippant treatment of the owner of this world.”

Riley grinned. “I look forward to it. Hurry home.”

He flared his wings and flew off to his offices.

When he was gone, she settled back at the table and looked at Ranna. “So, did you think I pulled that off, or is he going to storm back in here and plow me against that statuary?”

Ranna swallowed. “You and my father seem to complement each other.”

Riley laughed, and Lagolian came into the room with eyes wide. “Holy hells. Were you showing off or...”

“No, Rath actually likes it when I stand up for myself and demand his attentions. It makes him feel less like a bully. The slap on the ass was just to see what he would do. Normally, I wouldn’t have done that while you were here, but I think that is what stopped me from being flipped to my belly on the table. We traumatized the warship crew.”

Ranna smiled. "I think I know why. My mother was always angry when he came to her, but you are laughing and holding your arms out, not negotiating for money for each encounter."

"Ouch. That's rough. No, I let him know that I just want him for him because I do. I also want this little whatever it will be. I know it will be strong, it will have wings, and it will be loved."

Ranna blinked. "I am jealous."

"You are loved, Ranna, but if you try and climb into my uterus, we are going to have a fight on our hands."

Ranna laughed. "Right. Now to the serious matter of clothing."

Lagolian nodded. "I didn't bring my assistant this time. I think she would weep at what has become of you."

"What? Six foot one and addicted to sex with a winged warlord?" She smiled.

Lagolian laughed. "Yes. That."

They got together, and Ranna helped with the measurements. When they got around to discussing fashions, Riley got an impish grin. "I have an idea for a theatre outfit. I can only wear it for another month or two, so it would have to be first on the formal wear."

Lagolian grinned, and Ranna sat astonished as Riley described what she wanted.

The seamstress said, "Give me three days."

“Excellent. Ranna, you may not want to come out with us for this one.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Ranna opened her tablet and got looking. “Ah, I have just the performance here. I will tell them to ready our boxes.”

Riley chuckled and sighed. “I am pretty sure I will need to get to the theatre first or wear a cloak or something.”

“I will have one made up.”

Ranna grinned. “I think you are going to be good for him.”

“That, or I am going to be the first woman to give a Hmrain a heart attack. Either way, things ought to be fun.”

Riley was nervous, and Rath kept looking at her curiously. He was meeting with some governors and magistrates when she stepped into an open space and removed the cloak. The soft slither of silk rang like a gunshot. Rath’s head whipped toward her, and the light in his eyes could have illuminated a dark night.

Her corset was black leather, exposing the bites and puncture wounds on her neck and shoulders.

Golden chains wrapped one wrist around her arm, across her back, and around the other arm. It was the skirt that was tricky. Light panels of silk that moved when she did showed the gold chain swagging around her hips and barely keeping them in place. There was enough fullness in the panels to cover her but not if she moved with any kind of speed.

Ranna was nearby and watching them. Rath moved rapidly and pulled her against him. He lowered his head next to her ear. “Whatever you want, you can have it, just

keep this dress.”

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She laughed. “Your reaction was what I wanted. Now I have to ascend the stairs very carefully, or I am going to flash everyone.”

He chuckled and said, “I could fly you up there.”

“No. That would be worse.”

“What about we skip the evening and spend time discussing the construction of this magnificence?”

“How about we go to the box, I will crawl onto your lap, we can activate the screens, and enjoy the new ambience.”

“I am despising the five years you were beyond my grasp right now.” He released her and offered her his hand. They headed for the stairs ahead of the bells.

“That was a purpose that let me become this. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Yes, my dearest consort, my love, my Riley.”

“Oh, don’t get too sweet on me. I want you rough, I want you hard, and I want you fast.”

His hand clenched on hers.

It took two minutes to make it to the overseer’s box, and once inside, she slammed the locks, the screens, and the sound deadener, pushed him into the chair and climbed

into his lap.

She was slick, she was ready, and he went in easily. He held her hips, tilted her back, and her breasts freed themselves from the corset at that angle. He found her nipples with his tongue, and he sucked hard as she tried to move on him. He was bigger than usual, harder, and as he started to work her up and down on him, she started cumming and continued to as she thrashed and held his head to her.

She moaned and gasped as he moved her as requested. Hard, fast, and rough. Her body felt like it was made of nothing but energy as he slammed her to him. The ache as she was well and truly screwed made her smile as he continued until a wave shook her so hard she ended limp and sweating.

Rath had his head buried between her breasts, and she had her fingers threaded in his elegantly coifed hair. He was breathing hard, and when he looked up at her, his eyes were filled with wonder.

She smiled, and the bell began to ring, summoning people to the play. He pulled her to him, and their kiss was filled with so much unspoken affection.

He said, "I think the theatre is my favourite thing."

She grinned and said, "I think I need to arrange myself a little, but I am stuck on you. Did you get bigger?"

He chuckled. "Your little speech about how you wanted me gave me quite the effect."

She shrugged. "It seemed the proper place and time. I had to do this before the baby started showing. In public, I mean. I will totally do this again once my belly starts to curve."

She felt a jerk inside her. Rath had his head back and flexing as his cock shuddered over and over.

“Oh, I didn’t bring anything to contain the spill.”

He chuckled. “Good.”

She tried to flex around him, but there was no flex. It was like he had taken an imprint of her maximum capacity and was using every inch.

When he withdrew, she gasped and tried to contain the heat, but it still started to trickle slowly out. He stood, activated the audio and the one-way view, and then got comfy on a couch with her as she had to fight him for possession of her breasts. She wanted them in, and he wanted them out. Since the screen was up, she let him have his way, and he played with her through the first and second acts.

Her neck and shoulders sported a specific arrangement of hickeys that he was very proud of. He murmured, “I am glad you don’t wear jewellery.”

“I am thinking it would be a good idea about now.” She sighed as he traced the sensitive chain he had created.

She felt that she was just lucky that he hadn’t figured out he could order her to be breasts out at any time. It would get cold.

He murmured, “Do you want to go down for the interval?”

She gasped. “No!”

He laughed. “I am having a marvellous time.”

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She stroked his jaw. “I am glad. Have you gotten any benefits out of our contract?”

“Enhanced strength, speed, my wings are now impervious to anything.”

Riley smiled. “Good.”

“What have you gotten out of the contract?”

“A family for now. Ranna, you, and the mystery blob that I am gestating.”

“What about the clothing?”

“The clothing... oh. Did you want me to pay for them? I could. I have funds from Ranna’s contract.” Her head spun as she had to fight her way out of the sensual cloud she was in. “I paid for this outfit because it was a surprise for you.”

Rath smiled. “I meant, don’t you consider the clothing a benefit of being with me?”

“As long as I am protected from the elements, I am fine. Those two outfits that Ranna sent were half my wardrobe. I don’t need more, but you have things to attend, so I will wear a different outfit every time. It is a costume for an event I have no interest in.”

Rath blinked and understanding crept in, “So when you said you wanted me...”

“I wanted you. Given time, I can probably figure out a way to pay you for the rescue mission and the costs of the crew for when you went to retrieve me. Is that what you

are asking?” It seemed a strange conversation to be having while lying against him with her breasts out.

“I don’t want you to pay for that. I have simply never had a companion who is with me for me.”

The playful mood was gone, so she tucked her breasts back into the corset. She moved away from him and sat quietly while they waited out the intermission.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Rath tucked himself away and went to answer it. A beaming Ranna said, “This is some water for Riley. She gets thirsty easily. How did you enjoy the first acts?”

Riley sat still, not knowing what Rath wanted, so she was unable to give it to him.

Ranna looked at her, and her face went white. “Father, what did you do to her?”

Rath let her in and frowned. “I didn’t do anything. We were playing, and then we began to talk, and she went quiet.”

Ranna knelt in front of Riley. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know what he wants. I can pay him back for the clothes, but I haven’t gotten them yet.”

Ranna smiled. “You don’t need to pay him back. It was in the contract, right?”

“Right. Appropriate clothing. A place to live. Food.”

Rath jolted. “And Ranna close.”

Riley looked at him and nodded. “That was it. Everything else was offered, but if things are different now, then—”

“They aren’t different, Riley. I didn’t know the clothing hadn’t come. My schedule has been so busy that you are naked moments after I get home.”

Riley relaxed a little. That was true.

Ranna moved aside and looked at her father. “She’s the most brittle strong person that I know. Riley, if you need a ride home, I am in my box.”

Riley nodded and sat, feeling silly in her playtime outfit. When Rath let Ranna out, he came and sat back on the couch. She stared forward with her hands on her knees.

“Food, shelter, and clothing. That was really all you wanted?”

“Yes, Overseer.”

“And you had it, and you were happy about it, and you tried to show me using this evening as the means.”

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“Yes, Overseer.”

He took one of her hands. “I am sorry that I insinuated you were ungrateful.”

“I will thank you when the clothing arrives.”

He kissed her palm. “And you don’t wear jewels because I haven’t given you any because you didn’t ask because they aren’t essential.”

“Something like that.”

He scooped her up and cuddled her. He whispered how pretty she was, how strong, and how bright her soul was. Her brightness could lead him through the stars.

She cleared her throat. “So, when I do this again, can we skip this part and just go after each other? That part was way better than me feeling guilty because nothing had happened yet and confusion over whether I was supposed to buy my wardrobe or not.”

“I am sorry. Was that what threw you into a spin?”

“Trust the contract. If the contract is in breach, there is recourse. If it is over, it is over.”

He threaded his fingers through her hair and turned her to face him. “Neither of us is in breach, and it isn’t over.”

She smiled hopefully. “Are you sure? There is one more out after I have the baby if you want it.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want out. I just don’t want to see you unhappy. I want as many children as you are willing to give me and as much laughter as you are willing to share with me.”

She looked at him. “Can we leave now? I don’t want people to see me like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like I have been unhappy, like I am upset, and I feel foolish for this costume, but Ranna has my cloak.”

“This outfit is spectacular.” He froze. “You did this to prove to the crowd that I had a mate who desired me.”

“Yeah. It sort of fell flat.”

“I am sorry I ruined your surprise.”

“It’s fine. I should never plan surprises. They don’t end the way I think they would.”

The look he gave her was undecipherable, and he nodded slowly. They left.

Chapter Eight

Riley focused on the charities and other time-consuming hobbies that she wrapped herself in so she would stop seeking affection from Rath. He didn't seem to want to give it.

One of her hobbies was looking through files in search of a match for Ranna. Shopping for superheroes was something she couldn't do back home, so she threw herself into it after the disaster of the theatre night.

Ranna kept trying to ask her what had happened, and Riley didn't want to get into why she felt that Rath had pulled back and gone cold.

Rath was acting different, though. He set up a schedule for massage and maintenance of her hair and nails. Ranna was invited along on her spa days, so that was nice.

On their third week, Ranna asked, "What happened?"

Riley was getting her nails done and sighed. "I think it was because I made myself completely vulnerable, and he didn't react the way I expected, so I pulled back. I don't know how to get back to what I was like before that, and now we are trying just to find the balance we have left."

Ranna asked, "You are still having sex?"

"Sure. Once in the morning and twice in the evening, like clockwork."

“You are getting thinner.”

“Just morning sickness.”

“What?”

“Nausea as my body treats the baby as a foreign entity. It passes eventually in most cases.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“I go to a med centre and get a stabilization shot. Or IV nutrition.”

Ranna blinked. “You are willing to do that?”

“If I have to get genuine affection from Rath via his children, I will use you and them to calm my soul.”

Ranna stared. “Oh, Riley.”

“I know. Pathetic. Attention whore. Take your pick.”

“Oh. That is what is depressing you. It’s you.”

Riley laughed. “That sounds about right.”

“Are you showing yet?”

“Not yet, thankfully, but the mark is spreading.” Riley smiled. “Your sibling is coming along just fine.”

“I am concerned for you. You need more.”

“I will make do with what I get. Eventually, I will have the baby to provide me with what I need. Hopefully. All babies are different. It may be that the baby likes him better, but it will need me for a while, and I am hoping that will be enough.”

“What will you do if it isn’t?”

Riley looked at her. “Maybe you will have kids who want a grandmother. I am trying to create a backup plan.”

“I am sorry that my father is an asshole.”

“He’s been hurt before. Now he’s just focusing on the material aspects of our contract.”

“What?”

“Providing me with food, shelter, and clothing so he can continue to receive sex whenever and wherever.”

“That’s it? My mother was covered in gemstones.”

“He is waiting for me to make demands, and I won’t, so we are stuck.” She felt the tear slowly track across her skin.

The woman finishing the manicure looked alarmed.

Ranna looked over and said softly, “You are crying.”

“Yeah. It happens a lot. Emotional release valve. I can’t punch anyone, so I cry.”

The manicurist smiled weakly. “You are done, Lady Riley.”

“Thank you, Haruska. I am sorry for the emotional outburst.”

“I am sworn to secrecy, my lady. Can you seek another male for emotional enforcement?”

Ranna shook her head. “My father would not go for that.”

Riley said, “Are you coming for dinner tomorrow?”

“I am. Why?”

“I have created a top-five list of defenders and guardians. I just have to ask your father about it tonight. I hope he comes home at a reasonable time.” She yawned.

“What does he do if you are asleep when he comes home?”

“He wakes me up, we have sex, and then I go back to sleep.”

Ranna smiled. “With him curled around you?”

“Um, no. He is energized, so he gets back to catching up on all the time he missed on the rescue.”

“Come on. Let’s get you home, and you can tell me all about the selection criteria you have been using.” Ranna put her arm around Riley, and they headed for the transport that took them back to the residence.

Ranna had lunch with her, and then, when Riley went for a nap, her friend said she had business to attend to.

* * * *

Ranna knocked on her father’s office door.

“Come.”

She walked inside, and Rath looked up. He was vibrating with good health and energy. “Father, I wish to talk to you about Riley.”

“What is it? Do you wish to add a second spa day per week?”

“No. I want to know why you are torturing your breeding partner?”

His head whipped up. “What?”

“She is struggling. Her body is rioting, and you are not paying attention to notice.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s building a child, but you are draining her daily, and she has to rest during her waking hours. She’s ill due to the pregnancy as her body fights to accept it. She’s lost weight. She cries in front of strangers.”

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Rath tensed. “Are you trying to manipulate me?”

“No, I am trying to make sure you have the facts she has been unable to mention to you.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Father, how often have you been together where you have felt conversational? More to the point, how often have you asked her how she is feeling?”

“What gives you the right to ask me these things?”

“I am your daughter, and when I wasn’t treating her right, you told me. Now it is Riley and your child at stake. Smarten up. That is my sibling you are messing with.”

He sighed. “I was trying to get caught up to make time to spend with her at the lake.”

“Did you tell her that? All she knows is that you fuck and go.”

Rath sat, opened his mouth, and then closed it with a snap. “What does she want?”

“She wants you. She wants to cuddle and hold you and babble about what the baby will look like and find out where the baby’s room will be.”

He looked stricken.

“You keep waiting for her to act like my mother. That isn’t going to happen. Riley

wants a life here, a life with you for whatever reason, and the children that that life will bring.” Ranna commented. “There are whispers that you are unhappy with her. She isn’t adorned like your previous companion. She isn’t seen in public anymore. They are guessing you will discard her soon and are laughing at your wasted effort in retrieving the unwanted consort. That is what they are calling her, by the way. The unwanted consort. It’s cute, isn’t it? Of course, everyone who knows her knows differently, but that is a tiny portion of our population.”

“You are joking.”

“Look it up. It’s all over the news.” Ranna stood straight.

He looked at his display and typed in the words. His eyes blazed with fury. “How dare they?”

“No one has seen her at your side since the theatre. They are assuming her risqué outfit embarrassed you, and you are going to look for a new consort soon.”

Rath looked through the news reports, and he burst into flame. Cold, gold flame surrounded him.

Ranna leaned back. “Wow. That’s new.”

He gave his daughter a long look. “Riley has invited you for dinner tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be late.”

He opened the door to his balcony and flew off toward the residence, still on fire.

Ranna grinned and walked out to fly to her own home. Riley needed some privacy.

* * * *

A light touch on her face brought her awake. Her lids fluttered, and then she looked at the source of the contact. Rath was home early, and he was on fire.

“You are on fire.”

“Psychic flame. It’s fine. Why are you sleeping?” He picked her up and cradled her on his lap.

“Uh, I am in the middle of a major hormonal realignment. Sleep does for me now what sleeping after our first couplings did. It removes all stresses and lets me find balance.”

“How much have you been sleeping?”

“After breakfast for four hours, then I work after lunch for a few hours, and then I sleep until dinner time.”

“That sounds like depression.”

“Yeah, I guess it does.” She shrugged.

He kissed her forehead. “I need to take better care of you, little sun.”

“Caretaking wasn’t in the contract. Base medical care was the only thing, and I have had that.”

He looked at her, and she could see a revelation in his eyes. “You don’t expect me to take care of you.”

“Well, you didn’t say you would, and you have kept mostly away from me. I just had to guess about things.”

He pressed his forehead to hers and shared a wave of emotion that shocked her. He liked her. He wanted her. There were warm, fuzzy feelings when he looked at her, and there were flickers of love that seemed to centre around images of her under him as they had sex.

She reciprocated, giving him every time she thought he was handsome or caring or sweet and how that had caused her affection to grow. She added the love she felt for Ranna and the developing baby and wrapped it around her, looking at him in his formalwear at the theatre.

He looked slightly embarrassed. “Your mind embellishes.”

“Don’t care. That is how you look to me.”

He smiled and stroked her cheek. He shared with her looking like herself until she was receptive, and then she glowed.

“Oh. That explains why you tackled me and locked me in the room. So, the glow is gone?”

He saw the blaze of pink that had been around her at the theatre and the pale grey glow that was around her right now.

“Oh. That’s not good.”

“I am upset that I wasn’t looking at you with this vision. I would have known earlier that you were not doing well.”

“Pregnancy is rough for some.”

“Did your family have it rough?”

“No. They sailed through it with a beautiful glow. I always have to make things difficult.”

“I was catching up on admin so that I could spend a few weeks together with you at the lake house.”

Riley smiled. “Really?”

Rath sighed. “Really. Well, the news explains the messages I have been getting from the abbey.”

“What’s on the news?”

“The news is tracking our interactions and commenting on how we haven’t been seen together since the theatre.”

She nodded. “Right. Probable discarding of a consort.”

“Yes, but as you and I know, I have not discarded you. I bury myself in you several times a day.”

She smiled wryly. “I am aware.”

He chuckled.

A chime rang.

“What is that?”

“Ranna arranged for the med service to come to me for scans and things. They are on their way.”

He had a thunderous expression.

“Ranna’s paying for it. I had an issue ten days ago, so she set me up on her med account.”

“A point where I forgot to anticipate what you need.”

She sighed. “Can we just start over?”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Why not? I can start over a thousand times if it lets us put our mistakes behind us.”

“Is that all it takes for it to work?”

“As long as we still want each other. Yes. So, if that’s true, we can just start from now.”

He held his hand out to her and placed his palm up. She placed her hand in his. “What level of me can you tolerate?”

“I can take it all. What do you really want to do?”

“Programming. I already made a bot to look for defenders who are free to move and have all the specifications that Ranna wants in her mate.”

He sighed. “How long have you been working on this project?”

“A few weeks. I have five candidates who will be good for her. They all are compatible with food and the environment of Arro.”

He caressed her cheek. “If you are good with it, we can show them to Ranna tomorrow.”

She smiled. “I guessed you would say that.”

He smiled and leaned in to kiss her. “I can work from the home office during the pregnancy.”

She looked at him. “Would you? I need a hug at the weirdest times, and things have been a strain.”

“Can we consummate this new agreement?”

She looked at her silk nightdress. “Um, I suppose. The doctor will be here in twenty minutes, though.”

He flipped her to her back and slid the silk up, kissing the growing mark on her belly. From there, he slid down between her thighs and licked, stroked, and slid his fingers around and around until she shuddered in his arms, and then he did it again.

By the time she was sitting in front of the medic, she was glowing, and Rath was doting. The doctor was only too happy to discuss the development of the hybrid. They came up with a food and environmental plan for her to keep her calm, as she was very emotional.

Rath kept hold of her hand with his wing around her back when they had the discussion. As fresh starts were, they started strong with plans for their child.

The doctor gave them as many files as she had been able to find about Hmrain-Terran crossbreeds. All were healthy so far, and most had wings.

By the end of the visit, they had a lot of information, and most of her fears had been eased, both by the doc and the warm hand at her back.

Riley patted her belly. “Restarting now. Relationship debugging in progress.”

* * * *

Ranna looked at the displays of Hmrain-born defenders from three different worlds. Riley was laughing. She had been very blunt in judging the looks of the males, and that is when Riley cleared her throat. “Uh, Ranna, just ask them questions.”

Ranna stilled. “What?”

“Live connections. Ask them questions.”

All five guys grinned slowly.

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Riley smiled. “Well, at least all of her comments were favourable. Too favourable in a few regions, but a girl wants what a girl wants.”

The guys chuckled.

Ranna pressed her hands to her cheeks and cleared her throat. “Must have been a bad connection.”

They laughed again, and Ranna asked them one by one what they wanted in a mate. The conversation got rolling, and Riley left the room.

She walked out to the main room, and Rath lifted his head from his tablet. “How are things going?”

“She’s laughing, they are laughing, and they smile when she makes comments about their physical construction. They will begin discussing more invasive topics now that I am out of the room.” She shrugged. “They will all discuss family structure at some point. They all come from Hmrain who have had children via multiple companions. They are used to blended families.”

Rath smiled. “Happy blended families?”

“Sure. I mean the Hmrain are the Hmrain, but the females and males who are still around are nice.”

“You called them?”

“Sure. I am rabidly protective. She’s my first Hmrain, after all.” She smiled brightly.

He extended his arm, and she settled on one thigh. “I am your last.”

“Well, aside from the little ones. Sure.”

“We will get a nanny. I still need your attention often and frequently.”

“Why? You are already burning soul fire.”

“Yes, but what else did the designers install? That is the question.”

“I will look behind your pointy ears. Might be something there.”

“Your ears have pointed as well.”

She shrugged. “Yours are the ones everyone looks at.”

He grinned. “They are spectacular.”

She leaned against his chest and braced herself with her hand. She felt him freeze and looked up at him. “Uh-oh.”

He pressed his hand over hers. “We never reset this after the rule change. Does it still apply?”

She grinned and looked at the closed door. “Can we be quiet?”

He set her on the table and slid her skirt up. “I doubt it.”

She giggled and looked him in the eye. “You are going to make a weird father.”

He grinned as he pulled her toward him. “I already am. She turned out okay.”

Riley grunted as she landed on him. “Yeah, the next one will be half me, so you are going to have to deal with that.”

He slid to the hilt, and she was stuck. He blinked. “Damn, I hadn’t thought about that. I suppose I will have to learn all the ways of your people.”

“You are old, I don’t think you are a particularly quick study. This could take some effort.” She bit her lip as he lifted her off and then let her drop again. She groaned.

“I can put in the effort if the goal is worth it. You definitely are. Now sing for me and embarrass Ranna.”

She started laughing and then sang for him as his body coaxed hers into pleasure.

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Ranna listened to the distinctive sounds and blushed. The five males looked at her with curiosity. Vogar asked, “Is that what I think it is?”

“She’s been very demanding since her pregnancy, and Overseer Rath is always welcome to oblige.”

A particularly loud shriek, followed by soft masculine laughter, tore through the air.

Vogar covered his mouth with his hand. “He sounds devoted to duty.”

Ranna nodded. “Oh, he is. She is, too. She designed the program to carry the channels that are holding your projections.”

The guys all looked at each other, and Mywel asked, “Is she willing to share it?”

“She might be. I will ask her later.” Ranna winced at the giddy warble that came through the walls. “Much later.”

They all laughed.

Vogar asked, “Do you live with your father?”

“No, I live on a nearby estate a few hours away.”

Mywel nodded. “Good. That much sex has bound to be distracting.”

“They are so adorable together. It is good to see them so happy, and soon, I will have a sibling, and then I will have someone to coo over and play with.” Ranna chuckled. “And the way Riley goes into receptivity so quickly, this won’t be the last. I anticipate the day I signed the first contract with Riley to be a planet-wide holiday in no time.”

That got their attention, and she spent the next twenty minutes while her best friend and father went at it one room away.

Riley made life interesting, and Rath had made sure that she would be around for a very long time.