



# Maklr

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Maklr has dedicated his life to helping the injured. When the human females began to arrive on Kлага from slavery situations on various planets, he requested a more permanent position. He was sent to Kлага to be the head medic at the transitional living center for the humans. Though he has a team of Klagan doctors at his beck and call, he still prefers a hands-on approach to heal both the bodies and minds of the rescued humans. Nell is one of the first rescued humans to arrive in the transitional living center on Kлага. She needs time to heal and process her trauma. She's withdrawn into her mind, shying away from any attention. Around Maklr, she feels almost comfortable, and is inexplicably drawn to him. Are her feelings just a form of Stockholm Syndrome, or could it be something much more? Could he possibly be her salvation?

Can a Klagan Medic Warrior resist the urge to keena bond his fated one to him while she's so traumatized? Can a withdrawn woman learn to trust her instincts and have faith in herself once more?

This is Book 4 in the Klagan Warriors series, but it can be read as a stand alone, though it does feature characters from prior novels. It has a HEA, no cheating and no cliffhangers.

**Total Pages (Source):** 62

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## Chapter 1

### Maklr

Maklrgrabbedthemedi-tabletwith one hand and grimaced at the sight of the bar indicating slow, yet steady, progress. “Why do results take so long?” he grumbled under his breath as his fingers drummed a staccato rhythm against the cool metal of the desk. “Come on.” He smirked as he used one of the human’s favorite expressions before dropping into his favorite faal-hide leather chair and leaned back far enough to prop his feet on the stool under the desk. “I said it wouldn’t happen, but it did. They’re rubbing off on me, especially theirexpressions. I’ve learned a lot from them already, but there’s so much more to the humans than I realized.” Maklr raised the glowing tablet to eye level. “Ugh, still not done.”

He rested the tablet on the desk, crossed his arms behind his neck, and stroked the recently shaved side of his head. A shock of white hair from his mohawk fell over his deep violet forearm and blended with the crisp, clean white of his lab coat. Dark purple eyelashes fluttered shut as he rocked his head against his arms, careful not to scratch his bronze horns against the leather of the seat.

His thoughts drifted to the most recent human refugees brought to Klaga. Their bruised and gaunt bodies from time in captivity with cruel overlords, compounded with a look in their eyes that could only be described as haunted, would trouble him forever. The successful reintegration of warriors and blending of Klagan and human cultures weighed heavily on his shoulders. Maklr exhaled a breath he didn’t realize he held.

Ever since the Klagan military had discovered a recently contacted planet was the target of an Elodian invasion, the Klagan military mobilized. Since they had sent soldiers on missions to rescue humans from their Elodian capturers, Maklr no longer worked timed shifts. Instead, he spent all hours of the day and night trying to make the adjustment to life on Kлага bearable for all concerned. Scouting ships became a more common, but not yet frequent sight, at the spaceport near Kлага's capital of Dorbound. These ships carried some of the most precious cargo, in Maklr's opinion, injured warriors returning from battle, sometimes bringing humans along. As the head medic, Maklr bore the majority of the burden of their health.

Maklr's sleep schedule had been thrown out the proverbial window after the first waves of wounded warriors and new residents landed on Klagan soil. His ability to function on minimal sleep for the last few months had become legendary among the warriors. Most of the human staff regarded Maklr's work ethic as extraordinary, even going so far as to consider him a superhero. Maklr wasn't completely oblivious to the gossip, but he made every effort to hide the constant stress of his career.

The stress of managing the new medical facility Sovereign Giald placed Maklr in charge of was taking its toll. Haggard lines formed at the corners of his eyes, and his normally immediate response times had grown slightly slower. The Sovereign hired other Klagan medics and certain humans who had trained in the medical arts to help ease the ever-growing number of patients, but Maklr felt the health of all residents of Klagan society fell under the umbrella of his responsibility.

The tablet dinged a low chime, pulling Maklr from his reverie, showing the results had finished compiling. Maklr bolted upright, rubbing his eyes, before tapping at the screen. He frowned and scratched at the base of his horn. "Nothing. How can this be?" His hands fixed his hair into his signature mohawk, as he stared at the results.

Test number one. Negative. The word stood out on the tablet's screen in enormous bold letters. He scrolled down. The second test's results were the same. Another

negative. “Stars, please, let there be an answer somewhere in this list. I ran every test I could think of,” he pleaded. As his finger scrolled, revealing the same results each time, his heart sank.

“How is this possible?” he murmured. Each of the fifty-one tests appeared with the same word: negative. “I don’t understand. How am I supposed to fix it if nothing is wrong?”

Soft footsteps tapped against the smooth floor. A familiar voice came from behind him. “Can I come in?” Maklr turned to see Charlotte, a human woman hired by Sovereign Giald to serve as a therapist, standing in the doorway.

“Of course. I could use another set of eyes and perspective. I’ve got a major problem.”

“What?” Charlotte scurried to Maklr’s side. “How can I help?”

“There’s nothing wrong with the woman,” Maklr said, thrusting the medi-tablet into Charlotte’s hand. “These results confound me.”

“Wait. What are you talking about? Who?” Charlotte asked.

“You know, the dark-haired one. The one you’ve walked in with a few times. You know.”

Charlotte laughed. “You’re going to have to be more specific. I walked with a few people. I’m not sure who you’re talking about.”

Maklr scratched the side of his head. “I’m sure you’d know. The quiet one who doesn’t talk.”

“Oh, Nell?”

Maklr nodded. “That’s her name. Nell.”

“What do you mean when you say there’s nothing wrong with her?” Charlotte asked, dropping onto the three-legged metal stool next to Maklr.

“Exactly what it sounds like. I’ve run every test I can possibly think of, and I can’t figure out the reason her voice doesn’t work.” Frustration filled his voice.

Charlotte flipped through the tablet, her lips pursed. “I see what you mean by every test. You meant every test.”

“Of course. Why would you think otherwise?”

“Sometimes when humans say things like ‘every’,” Charlotte air quoted, “they’re exaggerating a bit,” she explained.

“Why would they do that?” Maklr’s voice was incredulous.

“Humans are confusing. It makes no sense. Exaggerations will not lead to correct diagnoses.”

“I agree. Sometimes, people want to be heard.”

Maklr huffed. “I listen. The sooner my patients tell me their ailments, the faster I can run appropriate tests and discern a proper course of treatment.”

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Charlotte shook her head, her voice soft. “Sometimes, people need to take some time to process their emotions in order to heal.”

“What good is it if a patient won’t tell the medics their problems? How am I supposed to treat them?”

“Listen to them. Look for non-verbal cues,” Charlotte advised.

“This is regarding the body language we were talking about the other day, isn’t it?” Maklr groaned.

“Exactly.”

“I still think it’s easier to have the patients tell me what’s ailing them. Otherwise, isn’t that where you come in? You’re the medic that talks to their patients as a healing practice.” Maklr scrunched his eyebrows. “The warriors seem to like it.”

“Sometimes it is easier to share the problem directly. Other times, people want to be heard.”

“I listen to my patients,” Maklr growled. “They need to be direct.”

“You listen, but do you hear them?” Charlotte’s eyes twinkled with mirth.

“Are you asking if I am unable to understand even the most basic speech?”

“No, that’s not what I’m implying. Listening and hearing are two different things.”

Maklr shook his head. "I'm going to assume this is not a translation error, but rather more confusing human speech."

Charlotte sighed. "How do I explain this?" She tapped her fingers against her thigh. "When you ask your patients' questions, and they answer, you're listening to their words in order to search for a treatment protocol." She paused before continuing. "One of the major differences with Klagan medics and psychiatrists is that the humans not only listen to their patients, they hear them. We read body language as well as absorb their words. Humans tend to use more non-verbal communication than Klagans."

Maklr scratched his chin while he absorbed Charlotte's words. "So what you're saying is I'm failing at my job."

"Not at all!" Charlotte said. "We're different species. You're using Klagan methods on humans, and I'm not sure that's the best way to handle a case like Nell's."

"What do you suggest I do?" Maklr asked, his purple eyes locked on Charlotte.

"Talk to her. Ask her questions, but not only listen to her. Hear her."

"She doesn't speak. Besides, I am not her primary medic. She's your patient. You should talk to her." Maklr's eyes flashed.

"True," Charlotte nodded, her blond curls bounced against her back. "But I think you're missing the point about what psychiatrists do."

Maklr shook his head. "I don't think so. You talk to people and listen to their problems. Then, people think they feel better, so they leave."

"They do feel better," Charlotte said, stressing each word. "They don't think they feel

better; they do.” She pursed her lips. “Well, at least after a few sessions.”

“Seems an odd thing to do,” Maklr grumbled. “I don’t understand how talking about pain makes it go away.”

“A mental health therapist sometimes deals with physical manifestations of trauma. Talking things through can help. When your mental health is in better condition, the physical will follow.” Charlotte crossed her legs at the ankles against the lowest rung on the stool.

Maklr nodded. “I would concur with that statement.” His dark claws rubbed against the fuzz on the side of his head.

“Yet, from what I’ve learned about Klagan society in the time I’ve been here, it’s a minor miracle you’re as accepting of humans as you are. The medics I’ve met and have daily dealings with are more dismissive of human emotions.” Charlotte smiled. “And that says a lot about your character.”

Maklr groaned. “Not with the character comments.”

Charlotte reached out to pat Maklr’s hand. “You’re adorable.”

Maklr pursed his lips. “I fail to see how taking an interest in my patients makes me adorable.” He pointed a jet-black claw at the tablet. “This is my job. I need to know what’s wrong with her and how to fix her.”

Charlotte’s curls bounced as she shook with laughter. “One day you’ll understand human expressions.”

A rough scoff rumbled in Maklr’s chest. “Not likely. In fact, I’d hazard a guess it’ll be around the same time as I perfect the interpretation of human body language.”



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“Do you want to practice reading my body language again?” Charlotte asked. Noticing the look of horror on Maklr’s face, she quickly followed with, “Or if not mine, I have an idea who you can practice with.” Charlotte’s eyes twinkled with mirth. “That is, if she’s agreeable.”

Maklr leaned back on the seat, his lab coat stretching across the broad muscles in his chest. A pensive expression passed through his features. “Who do you have in mind as my test subject?”

“Nell.”

## Chapter 2

Nell

Twelve. That’s how many steps it took for Nell to cross the room the Klagan government gave her while she recovered from her ordeal with the Elodians.

Ordeal. Nell grunted.

For as long as she needed this place, the Klagan government officials and the human ambassador, Jana, promised any sentient species rescued from the Elodian’s clutches could stay. Twelve steps across and nine steps wide.

Larger than the box the brothel had called her room, and certainly larger than the miniscule cell the Elodian’s provided for her on their harem ship, where she could only sit on the floor with her legs crunched to her chest, Nell found comfort in

counting the steps it took her to cross the transition center's room.

Five steps. Nell stopped near the foot of her single bed and smoothed an invisible wrinkle on the cream and blue blanket.

Blue and cream.

Everything in her room, and most of the transition center where Nell now called home, was painted blue and cream. Nell supposed that was due to the influence of the human therapist, Charlotte.

According to Ivy, the woman assigned to be Nell's buddy upon her arrival on Kлага, the Klagans had never heard of a therapist for mental health until the humans arrived and Charlotte assumed the role.

Over the course of the months Nell lived in the transition center, she'd noticed the subtle, calming blue everywhere in the center. From kitchenware to accents in the bathing facilities and delicate accents on towels and garments, multiple shades of blue abounded.

Afraid of what the future held, Nell hadn't wanted to leave the rescue ship until a kind purple Klagan medic with a shocking white mohawk with purple tips, and multiple humans had come aboard and convinced her to leave.

Once on Kлага, Nell remained stoic; a silent figure, uncomfortable in her new surroundings, yet content to absorb as much information as possible. Her desire to survive in any situation outweighed anything else.

Nell paced her room again, attempting to remember the name of the human woman who lived and worked in the transitioncenter, who had taken her to this room months ago when Nell stepped foot off the rescue vessel.

The room remained as plain as the day she moved in. Perhaps it was Nell's way of remaining unattached. The more she personalized things, the more it would hurt when an inevitable change occurred.

Ivy, her buddy, attempted to help Nell shop for items to personalize the space, but Nell steadfastly refused. Ivy had explained the center's purpose, to facilitate the transition from whatever kind of situation the humans had found themselves in after the Elodian invasion of Earth.

Nell knew she was under no pressure to stay in this transition center; she was free to move out whenever she wanted. Though the Klagans wanted to keep their planet's ecosystems in check, Sovereign Giald and his council decreed the humans would always have a home on Kлага, especially now that some warriors found their mates with humans. Some couples had even formed akeenabond - the rarest of the bonds, only formed with a true mate.

Nell smiled as her gaze fell upon a small plush animal of a creature found on Kлага on her nightstand. Charlotte had given her the toy when Nell stared intently at it for multiple therapy sessions. Charlotte told her the animal was acaton, a purple and orange creature resembling a domesticated Earth cat. Except, normal cats didn't have two lethal horns on the top of their heads, fangs laced with venom and triangular spikes down their backs covered with a powerful neurotoxin that could take down massive Klagan warriors with the slightest touch. Cute animals, but deadly foes, like most things in the universe. Never underestimate anyone.

Nell glanced at the only decoration on her wall, a timepiece resembling a digital clock. Nell placed the plushcat on the bed, propped on her pillow, careful to keep the covers wrinklefree. She stood in front of the plush before reaching out to give it one last cuddle before leaving the sanctuary of her room.

Though it had taken multiple attempts, Nell felt safe taking the elevator by herself

three floors to the ground level of the transition center, where Charlotte had an office where she held weekly therapy sessions.

Nell supposed part of her ease came from the ivory carpet, soft sky blue walls, minimal furniture. Charlotte's couches were a rich navy with soft eggshell-colored pillows complete with fringe, which Nell enjoyed twisting during her sessions; sessions that mainly consisted of Charlotte talking and Nell nodding or shaking her head, refusing to speak.

It had been months since she uttered a word, unable to trust her voice not to crack, lest her emotions take over. Rational. That's how she preferred to classify her decision. Those who didn't talk back were less likely to be punished or beaten by the Elodians.

That's what she became. Reliable. Quiet. Seen but not heard. Reliable women received food on a more frequent basis than those who misbehaved on the harem ship. Survival. Everything Nell ever did was for her own survival.

"Hi, Nell!" Ivy called from down the corridor. "Are you headed out?"

Nell inclined her head and pointed toward the elevator before she gestured at her wrist where she normally wore a watch.

"Ah, gotcha. Care to walk down with me today?" Ivy asked. Nell nodded. Ivy smiled gently. "Great. Let me tell you about the things Navil says are in the works." Ivy launched into a long-winded dissertation about what she'd overheard from her mate and some of the women in the center.

The first time Nell met Ivy's mate, Navil, at the decorating party for the first Klagan-human Christmas celebration, her panic over the muscular green warrior sent her into the corner of the transition center's communal area holding her knees and rocking

back and forth. Before she realized anything was amiss, Ivy rushed to Nell's side and took her back to her room.

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It had taken a few days for the shame and embarrassment Nell felt to subside before she emerged from the safety of her four walls. By the time she gathered up the courage to attempt to apologize to the green alien, Ivy and Navil had become one of the few true keena bonded pairs on Kлага. Nell was truly glad for her friend's happiness.

Neither Ivy nor Navil judged her for not speaking. Ivy talked enough for all three of them. One night, a few months after the Christmas incident as Nell thought of it, she visited Ivy and Navil for a long weekend away from the transition center. Though proud of herself for taking such a gigantic leap and exploring her new planet of Kлага, Nell remained characteristically quiet as she ate dinner with her friends. Over the course of the meal, she snuck glances at Navil's green skin, so different from the other Klagan warriors of varying shades of blue and purple. Differences that had once freaked her out had become a source of comfort.

"Scars are something we all carry, Nell. Mine are external, so everyone sees them and passes judgment. It's only when we learn how to accept ourselves for having them that we can truly let go of the past and live." Navil's sage words repeated in her mind.

"You have arrived, my dear." Ivy swept her arm in a wide arch, like a television presenter on a game show. Ivy squeezed Nell's hand gently. "You're doing great. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks for walking with me," Nell whispered.

If only I could learn to let go of my past and live like the person I was before...

## Chapter 3

### Maklr

Maklr strode through the medical center's first floor, ducking into patient rooms, adjusting medications as necessary. Rounds, the humans called it. The term made sense to him; he walked in circles most of the day, going from one room to another, constantly checking on his patients. Sometimes, he would linger in the room when he sensed a patient needed his presence.

Today was different. He blazed through his rounds with uncharacteristic detachment before disappearing in his closet-sized office on the ground floor of the building. For the first time in revolutions, unease consumed Maklr's thoughts. His hands shook more now than they had during the presentation to secure funding. He inspected every area of the brightly colored office, making sure there was enough space between the three chairs. One chair, the one he intended to use, rested against the far wall below a large window. Light yellow curtains hung to the floor, tied back with a deep purple ribbon. The other two chairs faced him from the opposite wall. Whoever sat in either seat would not only be able to see out the window, but also through the door to the hallway, which Maklr intended to keep open. A slight frown crossed his lips as he sat in each chair, noting the distance between them.

After trying to rearrange the furniture again, Maklr concluded that there was nothing more he could do to add more personal space in the small office. He stood, smoothing the pristine lab coat from invisible wrinkles, and glanced at himself in the mirror. He fussed with his appearance, smoothing errant strands of white hair between his horns into his signature mohawk. Once satisfied, his palms felt clammy while his stomach clenched, threatening to rid his body of the only meal he managed to eat after he woke. To calm his nerves, he paced the length of the sterile laboratory next door to the office, his action futile. Seeming to mock his nerves and anxiety, the large clock hanging on the wall in the lab commanded his attention. Eager for Charlie's

scheduled arrival, Maklr's gaze drifted to the timepiece after each lap of the lab.

Weeks ago, once funding had officially gone through, he insisted on utilizing Charlie's expertise as a therapist in order to create a more accommodating rehabilitation center. When the first wave of rescued humans arrived on Kлага, Maklr filled copious journals with observations on their interactions with other humans as well as citizens of Kлага. Now, armed with his first-hand knowledge and the information sent to him from the Earth Force, Maklr felt confident in his ability to assess patients and properly implement a treatment plan. He'd treated a multitude of injuries to humans, returning each to full health. All except one.

Nell.

Maklr was determined to solve the enigmatic puzzle named Nell. He had discussed her condition at length with Charlotte and ran every diagnostic test available, yet Nell overall remained silent. Favien scoured the archives at Maklr's request for similar cases to Nell's condition, but had come up empty. On the rare occasion Maklr heard her speak, her voice sounded sweet, yet meek to his ears. He yearned to hear more.

For every potential solution Maklr entertained, Nell remained a conundrum. Physically, nothing prevented her from talking. All of her lab work returned within normal parameters. After a lengthy deliberation, Maklr decided to take Charlotte up on her offer, and set their joint plan into action.

Over the months since the first Klagan warriors encountered humans, Maklr studied remnants of Earth's history. A few Klagan warriors remained on Earth, helping to rebuild the Elodian-ravaged planet. They called themselves the Earth Force, and had proven instrumental in providing details on human physiology and their medical centers. Maklr's ultimate plan formed when one of the Earth Force coalition sent images of places humans called hospitals. These large buildings had painted walls in soothing colors, rooms appearing to house exercise equipment, outdoor and indoor



recreational rooms, as well as laboratories and sterile treatment facilities, unlike anything on Kлага. The varying images fascinated Maklr.

At night, long after his shifts ended, when he should have been home for the night, Maklr found himself wandering to the official Klagan documentation center, or library, as the humans called it. Maklr studied the images of human hospitals alongside one of Kлага's premier historians, Favien. Desperate to change the medical facilities on Kлага into structures more like Earth, Maklr enlisted Favien's help in scouring the annals long hidden away in the ancient libraries on Kлага, studied only by researchers. While Klagan medical techniques and technology appeared far superior to human medical tech, Maklr found both technologies limited. Some injuries, such as loss of horns or limbs, were severe enough that even Klagan regeneration beds would not regrow a lost appendage. In that case, the warrior needed to learn how to adapt to their new reality and life without a limb. At best, Klagan rehabilitation after the regeneration beds had done their jobs was minimal. In Maklr's opinion, humans had better methods for limb reconstruction and recovery. Eager to have the Klagan medical centers incorporate the human ideas on illness and recovery, Maklr sketched plans for a complete overhaul of the facilities based on Favien's research and the information sent from the Earth Force.

In order to obtain funding for the proposed overhaul of the medical center, Favien and Maklr prepared an in-depth presentation for Sovereign Giald, ruler of Kлага. They included documentation of human successes, as well as pre-recorded interviews and testimonials from wounded Klagan warriors who had worked with human doctors, therapists, and psychiatrists. Months of research compounded with firsthand accounts.

Maklr and Favien researched for the Sovereign, who listened intently, a neutral, pensive expression on his face throughout the entire presentation. As Maklr concluded the presentation, the Sovereign stood, pounded his right fist against his chest twice in a warrior's salute before stating, "Any funds you require are at your

disposal. Do what you must for both our people.”

Now, with months of research complete, today was the day the actual work on the medical center began. Nell would arrive with Charlotte under the guise of inspecting Maklr’s designs for the new hospital rehabilitation center. Maklr hoped to bring Nell out of her self-imposed shell as an integral part of the design process, as well as to practice his ability to read body language. Today was a test for both of them.

If both Charlotte and Nell deemed the plans satisfactory, Maklr would bring them to the Sovereign for formal approval. Construction and upgrades would commence. Before the next mid-winter celebration, Maklr wanted to have the updated facilities working at full capacity. Though unsure of the qualities Nell could bring to his plans, Maklr readily agreed to Charlie’s suggestion of incorporating Nell’s ideas, if only to get her to speak more.

Maklr’s comm tablet dinged. “Maklr,” Charlotte’s voice rang from the comm. “We’re walking up the path.” “I’ll meet you at the front entryway,” Maklr said. His feet moved of their own volition, racing to greet the women. He paused at a mirrored intersection, taking precious seconds to wipe stray wrinkles from his lab coat and to ensure the pleats in his work cargo pants remained crisp. He took two slow, casual steps forward, closer to the door before leaning back to check his mohawk remained in place. Maklr stepped outside into the early afternoon sun, and held the door open for Charlotte and Nell to pass through. His eyes narrowed as he focused on Nell’s posture; her shoulders slumped so as to appear smaller.

“Good afternoon,” Maklr said, his hand extended to Charlotte in the traditional human greeting. She shook his hand before pulling him into a hug.

“Thank you. I’m excited Sovereign Giald approved the funding.” Charlotte’s eyes danced, soft lines forming at the corners of her eyes with her wide smile.

“When he first said to do whatever we felt we needed with the place, a heavy weight lifted off my chest. I know he wants the best for our people.” Maklr turned to Nell, offering his hand. “I know this is a human custom.” Nell glanced up, an unreadable expression on her face. She glanced at his proffered hand before swapping her gaze to Charlotte, who nodded in encouragement. “Thank you for allowing me here,” she said, her voice so low he had to strain to hear her, before placing her hand in his.

A zing shot through Maklr’s body where Nell’s delicate hand rested in his. He forced himself to remain still so as to not scare Nell with the electric shock he felt humming up his arm. He blinked rapidly to determine where the shock originated.

Charlotte cleared her throat. “Tell us about your plan for the center. Nell has her tablet in her bag. She’s going to take some notes and make some suggestions.” Maklr’s fingers loosened and he dropped Nell’s hand.

“Of course. My apologies for making you stand in the harsh sun.” Maklr gestured for the women to enter. The three stood in the stark entryway. “Nell, I don’t believe you’ve ever visited this building, have you?” Nell shook her head. She reached into her crossbody bag and pulled out a tablet and began tapping on it, shielding the screen from his view. “What’s your plan for this area?” Charlotte asked. “I’d like to paint it a soothing color, and add curtains to the windows.” Maklr pointed at the six floor-to-ceiling windows providing natural light into the room. He watched Nell crane her neck to look at the height of the windows before she turned her attention back to the tablet in her hands. “Do you have any color in mind?”

“Jana said something about blues and greens being a source of comfort for many people,” Maklr replied, smiling as Nell bobbed her head in agreement.

“They are. Most of the rooms in the transitional housing are shades of blue. Right, Nell?” Charlotte asked, implementing the plan to get Nell to speak.

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Nell nodded. She didn't meet anyone's gaze.

"Let's walk this way." Maklr gestured down a hallway with two empty rooms on either side. "I thought these rooms could become therapy rooms, and the open area at the end, a lounge. Jana's already added a few couches with plush pillows and blankets." He pointed to three gray sofas in the center of the room. "She's working with Cyok and Bavrillz to get a large video screen to act as a window or a display." "What would it show?" Charlotte asked.

"The Earth Force sent Favien and Dara as many images as they could find and transmit. They've worked nonstop to upload them into our database. Jana wants it to project soothing scenes from different areas on Earth interspersed with locations on Klaga and other home planets of patients."

"That sounds like something that could aid in recovery for some patients. I would be wary of images of Earth at first, though," Charlotte cautioned. "Why?" Maklr's eyebrows scrunched in confusion. Nell remained stoic. "Some of us can never go back to Earth. There's nothing left for us there." Charlotte sounded resigned. "Klaga is home now." "Oh, Charlie, Nell. I didn't think about it that way," Maklr said, a deep flush creeping up his neck to his sharp cheekbones. "I'm sorry." He tried to cover up the horrified expression that flitted over his features before either woman noticed. He cleared his throat and continued toward a set of stairs through the empty room. "I meant to say that my ultimate goal is to make this building a softer, less sterile place, while still providing top-notch care as well as a sanitary treatment facility." "A noble cause," Charlotte said, following Maklr's lead up the stairs to the second floor. "One that will be appreciated by all citizens." She glanced behind at Nell and gestured her forward. "Since Strels, Isir and Emily are in constant contact with Earth helping

maintain the protective shielding, I thought perhaps on one of their visits they could gather some memorabilia from Earth to bring to Klagan.” Maklr pursed his rich purple lips. “Now I wonder if items would cause more harm than benefit.”

“Perhaps,” Charlotte stood between Maklr and Nell, squeezing both their biceps, “one of the mental health therapists could make that determination on a case by case basis.” She looked at Nell. “What do you think, Nell?”

Nell shrugged and pointed to the stairs. “There’s more?”

Maklr grinned at the soft sound of Nell’s voice. “There are thirty rooms on this floor, with another thirty with the same floor plan on the floor above. There is a basement area which is unfinished, but if either of you can think of a plan for its use, we can certainly do that instead of using it as storage.”

“Why this?” Nell gestured in the general direction of the transitioning center.

Maklr shot a quick look at her before turning his attention to Charlotte, silently seeking her input. “I believe Nell is asking why have a residential space here when the Klagan government built the Human Transitioning Center already.” Charlotte turned her attention to Nell. “Is that what you meant?”

Nell nodded.

Maklr smiled, softening his sharp features. “This center is meant to provide a transitional medical treatment space for humans who may need more extensive medical treatment rather than immediately joining the Human Transition Center and begin a more immersive integration into Klagan society with job training and moving to independent living situations. According to the Sovereign, the plan is to provide resources for all residents and citizens on Klagan to obtain training to become productive members of society, no matter how long it takes.”

Nell blinked slowly and nodded.

Charlotte turned to Maklr and mouthed, “I’m trying.”

“Nell, do you feel up to continuing?” Charlotte asked.

Nell linked her arm in Charlottes. Maklr led the two women around the empty rooms, describing his plan for making the rooms capable of providing medical services as well as decorating them so they became less clinical and sterile. He spared sideways glances at Nell, changing his decor ideas based on her facial expressions. “I think you’ve seen everything we’ve done so far.” Downstairs, Maklr raised his shoulders. “That’s about it. I’d welcome any suggestions you have to make this place more comfortable.”

“Thank you for having us.” Charlotte said and nudged Nell.

Nell pressed a few buttons on her tablet and placed it in her satchel. Wordlessly, she stuck out her hand.

“Incoming wounded,” a computerized voice announced through the loudspeaker. Red lights flashed, illuminating the crisp white walls.

Maklr’s head snapped toward Nell and Charlotte. Nell stood motionless, all color drained from her delicate features. He tamped down the urge to rush to Nell’s side and reassure her that she was safe with him, that he had everything under control. His arm raised from his side to take her hand in his. Just as he was about to step closer to her, three Klagan soldiers wearing field medic uniforms barged through the double doors. Carrying a wounded soldier in a fireman’s hold, one field medic bellowed. “More incoming.”

Chapter 4

Nell

Nell jumped, raced to the wall, and pressed her body against it. She heaved a sigh of relief as the cool tiles touched her back, helping to soothe her chest, grounding her focus. Emergency lights flashed, and she clamped her eyes shut, covering her ears with her hands. In doing so, her tablet clattered to the ground. Nell's heart pounded and she felt nauseous as bile rose in her throat.

"Nell!" Charlotte's voice cut through the cacophony of the ward. "We need an extra pair of hands over here."

Without opening her eyes, Nell shook her head.

Charlotte called out again. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

Nell's eyes cracked open, searching for her friend and Maklr through the chaos. Charlotte stood near the doors, holding them open for stretchers to pass through. Maklr donned a lab style jacket and had gone into full triage mode. His commanding voice directed medics where to place the incoming wounded.

Another Klagan Nell didn't recognize hurried to Charlotte's position, relieving her of that duty. Charlotte sprinted around the medical equipment to Nell. "Nell," she whispered, her voice filled with urgency. "We need you. I don't know what's happening, but it's bad."

Nell's eyes, wide as saucers, remained unblinking.

"Can you help?" Charlotte placed her hand on Nell's shoulder. "Focus. Breathe."

"I can't." Nell shook her head. "Can't someone else do it?" she whispered.

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“No. I need to call for more medics. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t ask you. Maklr and I can’t handle everyone on our own.”

“I can’t,” Nell protested.

“You can.”

“I...” Nell reached for her fallen tablet. “I’ll call for help.”

“Please.”

Her fingers trembled against the tablet’s screen. Three attempts later, Nell succeeded in dialing the code Charlotte provided. She sucked in a breath when Sovereign Giald himself answered the call.

“You’re not Charlotte,” he said, eyes narrowing. His regal features hardened. “This is my private communication code. How did you get it?”

“No.” Nell whispered, wrapping her free hand around her knees as she shrank into a ball on the floor.

“I cannot hear you,” he said. “Speak up.”

Nell brought the tablet closer to her mouth. “Wounded soldiers, Sir. Maklr and Charlotte need help.”

“How many?” The Sovereign’s brusque tone made Nell want to crawl into a deep



hole and never come out.

She sucked in a deep breath and counted to three before she answered. For a split second, she debated with herself over answering the Sovereign's question, and hanging up. A soldier cried in pain, and Nell knew she had to answer. It was the least she could do for the citizens of the planet who readily accepted humans. "Of the wounded?" Nell shook her head. "I don't know." She flipped the tablet and panned it around the chaos unfurling in front of her.

"I'll arrange for off-duty medics to report." The Sovereign ended the call.

"Charlotte has a direct line to the Sovereign." Nell's fingers trembled. "Why?"

Nell's gaze fixed on Maklr. She watched him move from patient to patient, his expression neutral as he silently assessed the individuals before barking orders to Charlotte. He glided between wounded soldiers, head nodding as he gestured to the handful of able-bodied warriors.

Charlotte moved with certain movements, displaying more empathy than Maklr, taking time to caress the injured and whisper words in their ears.

The scene unfolding before her tugged at Nell's heartstrings. She longed to get over her fear of the aliens. No, not aliens. Not all aliens were evil. She was the alien on this planet. These injured soldiers, Klagan warriors, were her people now. Rescuing more humans or other aliens from the Elodians likely caused their injuries. Guilt formed a ball in her stomach. "I didn't do this to the soldiers. It's not my fault."

Nell twisted her head away from the wounded. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the tiles. Although she was now clean, her dark brown hair hid part of her gaunt face from lack of a balanced diet. Bruises left behind by the Elodians had long since healed in the time she'd lived on Kлага. Her reflection showed a human woman,

physically healed. Her mental health was another story. Tears welled in her eyes as she glanced at the shell of her former self. “I want to be whole again. I don’t know if I can.”

“I can do this.” Nell gave herself a pep talk. “They’ve given you so much. You’d be dead without them.”

“Nell, come here,” Charlotte called. “I need you.”

“I can’t.” Nell forced herself to stand. She watched as Charlotte wiped the hair out of a warrior’s face.

Charlotte mouthed something, but Nell couldn’t tell what she attempted to communicate. Nell pointed at the tablet and raised her thumb up. Charlotte threw her hands in the air, gesturing to her wrist in a ‘what time’ motion. Nell shook her head.

A haunting scream, one Nell recognized from dozens of the women she’d been held with during her captivity, escaped the soldier next to Charlotte. She shuddered, trying to shake the memory.

“Maklr, do something to calm him!” Charlotte screamed over the blaring sirens. “Bedside manners.”

“I’ve got my hands full.” Maklr wrestled with a soldier fighting against a sedative.

“Nell! There’s no time. Maklr’s stretched thin enough. It’s up to us.”

Nell shuddered. “I can do this. I am strong enough. I am healed enough.”

The warrior’s back arched, and he screamed again. Nell’s heart broke for the Klagan in pain.

Without any further thought, Nell sprinted from the safety against the wall. She raced across the rapidly filling space with incoming wounded on stretchers and portable regen beds. Her dark hair, now shoulder length, fluttered with her movements.

Words she overheard her first night onboard the ship that rescued her from an Elodian auction block echoed in her mind. “Humans are resilient. They rise to any challenge. What they lack in physical strength they make up with steel spines and willpower.”

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She made it to the screaming soldier. “I’m here,” she whispered. She clasped the warrior’s hand with both of hers. He instantly relaxed at her contact. Wrinkles at the corner of his eyes on his pinkish-purple face, contorted in pain. His head tossed from side to side, and he mumbled something about the bag across his chest.

“We’ll worry about the bag later. Let me take it off you, and we’ll get you help,” Charlotte said.

“No.” The Klagan struggled to sit up despite his obvious pain. He pulled the canvas bag closer to his chest with his free hand. He brought Nell’s hand to the bag. “Gentle.”

Nell blinked in confusion.

“In...” the warrior’s eyes glazed over.

When Charlotte touched the bag, the soldier fought with his limited strength. “Don’t touch.” His voice was low, with a hint of a threat.

Nell placed one of her hands on Charlotte’s arm, pointing with her finger at the sedative she held in her hand.

Nell sat on the stretcher next to the warrior. “I’ll protect the bag. I promise.”

He allowed her to unclasp the hook and pull the bag onto her lap. Nell gasped when the bag began to make a soft noise and wiggled. “Oh!”

“What do you have in there?” Charlotte murmured to the warrior.

Nell flipped the canvas top up, exposing a human infant nestled inside, surrounded by the black fabric of what appeared to be a warrior’s tunic. “Baby.” She placed her hand on the baby’s chest and sighed as she felt the infant’s chest rise and fall with each breath. “Safe.”

In an effort not to startle the soldier, Nell gestured with her chin to Charlotte.

Charlotte peered into the bag. “A baby!”

“Mine.” The sedative took effect, and the Klagan struggled with words. “Human.”

“Is it your baby?” Charlotte asked.

“Mine... protect,” the warrior murmured before succumbing to sleep.

“All right,” Charlotte said. She pulled two identification bands from out of thin air. The band barely wrapped around the soldier’s wrist, while she had to wrap the second twice around the infant’s leg as it poked out from the bag. “Father and child,” she said. “We have to keep them together.”

“It’s human.”

Charlotte glanced at the wounded soldier. “It’s his baby. I won’t separate them.”

“What do I do?” Nell whispered.

“We’ll have to get the baby out of here while Maklr works on the wounded.”

“It’s father.” Nell sat on a narrow piece of the soldier’s stretcher.

“How long until help arrives?” Charlotte asked.

“What is that?” Maklr asked, pointing to the bag. “Protocol dictates that we strip the injured of all nonessentials until we accurately assess their injuries. Get rid of the bag.” He reached for the bag, but Nell cradled it to her chest.

The bag moved as the baby kicked and failed its arms.

“What?” Maklr ran a scanner over the soldier.

“His baby is in the bag,” Charlotte explained. “We’ll keep them together as long as possible.”

“Is the baby injured?” Maklr asked.

Charlotte shrugged. “I don’t know. Can you take the baby out?”

Nell nodded. Her gentle hands lifted the baby from the canvas bag. She cuddled the newborn to her chest. The baby’s blue eyes stared up at her; its tiny mouth formed a perfect O before letting out an ear-piercing howl.

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“Quiet that child,” Maklr commanded. “Its cries will set off the more able-bodied warriors. I do not need dozens of soldiers with their protective instincts going haywire.”

“What do I do?” Nell whispered to Charlotte.

“Anything you can. We promised to keep the baby safe until the father can care for it.” Charlotte placed a cool cloth on the soldier’s forehead. “How long has it been since you called for extra help?”

Nell shrugged.

No sooner had Charlotte asked than the double doors slid open and half a dozen more Klagan medics and humans rushed into the room.

“The cavalry has arrived,” Charlotte said.

Maklr shook his head. “No steeds are allowed in the center.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh. Human slang. I’m not sure I’ll ever understand.” Maklr shook his head. “Why can’t you say what you mean?”

“Stop being so literal.” Charlotte checked the soldier’s vital signs again. “Maklr, he’s not doing well. He needs immediate help.”

As if understanding her words, the baby cradled in Nell's arms let out a wail.

"Calm the child," Maklr demanded, his attention fixed on the baby's father.

Nell's hand held the back of the baby's head while she rocked back and forth, cooing.

"She's trying." Charlotte shot Nell a glance before turning her attention back to the injured Klagan.

"Try harder."

Nell shivered and pressed the baby against her chest. She kissed its head. "Nothing will hurt you. You're safe, baby."

Yelling from the back of the room where the less seriously injured warriors caught her attention. Some struggled to stand up, while a few others limped toward Maklr, Charlotte, and Nell's current position.

"Nell, their protective instincts are kicking in. None of us can afford an incident that will cause serious injuries. Calm the baby, please," Maklr said.

Nell nodded, took a deep breath, and began to sing.

## Chapter 5

Maklr

The hustle of the ward slowed. Warriors once screaming in anguish quieted. The newly arrived medics paused their assessments of patients to stare at Nell.

Maklr stood stunned, his mouth hung in surprise. Nell. Shy, introverted, selectively



mute Nell, voluntarily shared her voice. Not only was she not silent, but she was singing. Singing?

“Charlotte,” Maklr whispered, “Did you know she sang?”

Charlotte shook her head, mouth agape. “No. News to me. In all the sessions we’ve had, she’s never once mentioned she could sing. Then again, I do most of the talking.”

“Look at the baby. It’s enthralled. Her singing voice is beautiful. It’s soothing to the soldiers and the baby. She’s so strong.”

“I told you,” Charlotte mouthed. “Maklr, someone needs help. Nell’s got things under control. The baby isn’t crying anymore.” She rushed toward another injured warrior.

“Stronger than I gave her credit for,” Maklr muttered to himself. “If she can do this, then the tests have to be right. Why won’t she talk? Maybe Charlotte’s right.”

He watched Nell cradle the infant in her arms and sing, never taking her eyes off the child. Her gaze never wavered as her voice rang out, steady, sure, and clear, with no warbling, soothing to everyone in the ward.

“She’s incredible,” Maklr murmured. His gaze softened, yet intensified the longer he watched Nell sing, as if he tried to capture every nuance of her impromptu performance in his memory.

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Nell stood there, rocking the infant, her voice filling the room with a warmth that seemed to melt away the tragedy that surrounded her.

Lost in the song's melody, her eyes closed. Her long lashes cast shadows on her cheeks. For once, she didn't appear haunted. Usually, she looked vulnerable, yet now she seemed so powerful.

Maklr's chest swelled with a strange feeling he couldn't quite identify. Perhaps it was pride? Admiration? A combination? For her, this was incredible progress.

Everyone who was able watched her, mesmerized by the beauty of her sound. Nell's raw emotions filled the room with hope.

Her eyes fluttered open, meeting Maklr's for a brief, electrifying moment. A flush crept up her neck, staining her cheeks a delicate shade of pink. He offered her a smile of encouragement. As Nell continued to sing, her eyes never left his, and her voice grew stronger with every passing second.

Maklr's heart raced at the sudden connection with Nell before a field medic burst through the doors, severing their connection.

"Maklr," the new medic called from the farthest corner of the room. "Another one." He brought another wounded soldier into the center. "I need your expertise."

Maklr raced over, scanner in hand, to assess the newest arrival. So engrossed in his work, Nell's enchanting singing faded into the background against the onslaught of more wounded entering the facility.

Wave after wave of more injured poured in. Maklr worked methodically, diligent in his care of each patient. He annotated digital charts, noting injuries and any immediate treatment taken. Finally, he slumped against a wall, exhausted.

“Who’s next?” Maklr wiped sweat from his brow.

“We’re done. Everyone’s in.” Charlotte handed Maklr a clean towel. “The others are treating the injured.”

“Where to?” Maklr tossed the now sweat-laden towel into a cleaning receptacle. “Let’s go.”

“Take a break,” Charlotte said.

“Not when there are patients to treat.”

“Maklr, look around. Everyone’s gone. Nell stopped singing a while ago. She and the baby are safe.”

“It’s my duty.” “Enough with the duty. You’ve gone above and beyond. If you keep going and go down from exhaustion, what good will you be to anyone? You’ll be out of commission and unable to help for who knows how long until you recover. No one will fault you if you leave and recharge. Go rest.”

“Sir, you’ve done all you can. We’ll take it from here, boss.” Another medic patted Maklr’s shoulder. “Take a break. You’ve been helping for hours. We know the toll it takes.”

“I know.” Maklr leaned against the wall, yawning. “I’ll be in soon to help, but I think you’re right. I’m going to rest for a few minutes.” “Take your time. You need a break.”

Maklr nodded. “Yes,” he said between yawns.

“Hey, Mak? Want to get up this side of the morning?” Charlotte shook Maklr’s shoulder. “Sleepyhead, it’s time to get up.”

Maklr groaned and cracked his eyes. “Where am I?” he asked, sitting up.

“We moved you into my office.” Charlotte sat on a plush navy blue chair. She rested her back against a cream-colored throw pillow. “How are you feeling? More rested, I hope?”

“A bit. How long did I sleep?” Maklr took his hands and fixed his sleep-tousled hair back into his signature mohawk, scrunched his nose and sighed.

“Almost a full day. Don’t sigh. And before you start with the ‘why didn’t you wake me,’ I wasn’t planning on it because your body needed the rest. If I’m being truthful, you still look drained.” Charlotte made a face.

Maklr stood and stretched. “Are you going somewhere?” He gestured to a duffle bag packed at the end of the couch he’d slept on.

Charlotte shook her head. “No.”

“Did we get a new patient?”

“No.”

“Am I being sent on a mission?” Maklr grimaced.

“Of sorts.”

“Charlie,” Maklr said, exasperated.

“Now, don’t get mad.”

Maklr rubbed his eyes. “What did you do?”

“I talked to the Sovereign.”

“About?” Maklr sat back on the couch. “Not about me, I hope.”

“About you. You’ve been working yourself all hours. It’s taking its toll. You’re on leave until you’re rested.”

“I can’t leave. I have responsibilities.”

Yes, you do, but you can, and you will take leave. You’ve worked yourself into the ground. A quick getaway and a change of scenery will be good for you.” Charlotte shrugged. “Something to recharge your batteries.”

Maklr groaned. “Another weird human expression. Who else is going to do everything that needs to be done around here? Sovereign Giald named me the head of this project. We haven’t fully furnished or planned the center’s new areas. Who else is going to take care of the injured?”

“Well, it’s a done deal. You’re going and that’s final.”

“Who is going to check on the wounded? I’m the head medic. Their health is my

responsibility.”

“Who do you think took care of everyone while you slept? Maklr, you’ve trained everyone here. We know the high standards you set and we’re all capable of performing the same quality of care you do. Besides, you may be in charge of their physical health, but I’m in charge of everyone’s mental health,” Charlotte pushed back. “As such, it’s a done deal. You’re going on a vacation and that’s the Sovereign and my final word. You’re not to return until you’ve fully rested.”

Maklr huffed. “What’s in the bag? Who packed it?”

“Don’t huff. It’s unbecoming.” Charlotte gestured to the packed sack. “See for yourself.”

Maklr unzipped the top of the bag and began pulling out clothes. “These are my clothes! Who went into my residence?”

Charlotte chuckled. “No one. I packed them from here. Did you know how many clothes you have in the center? I think you’ve got an entire wardrobe in your office.” She reached forward and placed her hand on Maklr’s knee. “No one needed to go to your house because you practically live here. Mak, you spend almost all of your waking hours in this center. It’s time to take care of yourself.”

“I do.”

“No. You’re going through the motions. Believe me, I know what it’s like. Please listen, you’re too wound up, you’re on edge, and that’s the time you’ll start to make mistakes. If I’ve learned anything in my life, I know when to take a step back and reassess how to make a positive change.”

Maklr rubbed his temples. “Do you really think I’m pushing myself too far?”

“I do. Be honest with yourself. You don’t have to answer out loud, but do you think you’re providing the same care to all incoming patients now that you did when you were stationed on a ship, or when we brainstormed ideas for this rehab center?”

“You’re doing this for me?”

“I am.” Charlotte repacked the bag. “Come on.” She stood and handed Maklr the bag. “Shuttle’s waiting.”

“Shuttle? I thought...” Maklr trailed off.

Charlotte winked. “I believe you’ll like the pilot.” She walked through the door, leaving Maklr to quicken his pace to keep up.

“Where am I going?”

“I took the liberty of getting you a much needed break, and now you’re asking questions. Can’t it be a surprise?”

“Charlie, you know how I feel about surprises. I like routine. I need a schedule. This is a nightmare.”

“Fine. Only because I know you’ll protest, there’s a resort called Boulderbark Retreat.”

Maklr shook his head. “Never heard of it.”

“It’s not on this continent.”

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“Klaga isn’t that large. There’s only three continents.” Maklr groaned. “Please tell me you’re not sending me to Tapris and all its mountains.”

“No. You’re going to Ashuk.”

“At least it has a lot of trees and is mostly flat. I’ve heard there’s a lot of nature trails.”

“That’s why I picked it. There’s a brochure in your bag that touts different amenities. I uploaded it to your tablet too. Which, by the way, is fully charged. You’re welcome.”

Maklr inclined his head. “What would I do without you?”

“Work yourself into the ground.” “Quite probably.” Maklr squinted. “Is that Zand?” “Your friendly inter-continental pilot at your service.” Zand grabbed Maklr’s military black bag. “I’ll throw it in storage and we’ll be on our way. We’re only waiting on someone else you know.”

“Who?” Curiosity tinged Maklr’s voice.

“Out of all the warriors we’ve served with, who was the last one back from all leave, planetside or on space stations?”

“I’d know that ridiculous hairstyle anywhere. Maklr!” A familiar voice called out. “Philtan?” Maklr turned in time to see an enormous purple warrior rushing toward him. Philtan’s arms wrapped around Maklr in a tight hug.



“Long time, my friend.” Philtan lifted Maklr off the ground. “I heard you’d asked for a transfer to Kлага to be with the humans. At first, I didn’t understand, but word is getting around the fleet of your success. I’m proud of you.”

Maklr grunted. His hands pounded on Philtan’s shoulders. “Breathing is good, my friend.”

“Sorry. I forget my strength,” he said, placing Maklr back on solid land.

Zand sauntered over. “Now that the last passenger has arrived, we can leave. I’d like to drop you off and get back before nightfall.”

Philtan’s white eyebrows wiggled against his dark purple skin. “Why? Hot date tonight?”

Zand smiled. “Unlike you, I don’t kiss and tell.”

Philtan brought his hands to his heart. “You wound me.” He faked a step backward and took a knee, mimicking falling over. His laughter rang out.

For the first time in a long time, Maklr joined in on the merriment. His laughter slowed as he boarded the shuttle. In the back, huddled against the window seat, shaking, the last person he expected.

Nell.

“Are you okay, Nell?” Maklr asked.

Nell nodded, her shoulder length hair bobbing.

“Are you going to the resort on Ashuk as well?”

“Of course she is,” Zand said, climbing into the shuttle. “Where else do you think we’re going? I’m not a taxi service.” He winked in Nell’s direction. “But I wouldn’t mind if all my passengers were as pretty as you.”

Nell frowned, averting her gaze. Her fingers twisted in knots on her lap.

The shuttle’s door shook when Philtan stepped onboard. Nell pushed herself against the wall and brought her knees up to her chest on the seat.

Philtan’s booming voice rocked the passenger area. “Good morning,” he called, oblivious to Nell’s discomfort. “I’m Philtan, but the humans who I hang out with on a daily basis call me Phil.” He extended his hand, shoving it in Nell’s personal space.

Maklr glanced at Nell’s body language and stepped in front of her, pushing Philtan’s hand away. “I’m going with her. This is Nell. She’s shy.”

Philtan’s brow furrowed and he glanced between Nell and his friend. “Got it.”

Maklr settled in the aisle seat allowing Nell to remain near the window. “Do you mind if I stay here so there’s an empty seat between us?” He pointed to the seat against the conveyance’s window. “I don’t want you to unbuckle since you’re obviously settled.”

She pointed to the door and then subtly in Philtan’s direction.

“Are you going to the resort as well?” Maklr asked, trying to divert Nell’s unease and attention from his boisterous friend.

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She nodded, a slight tilt of her head in affirmation. Nell fumbled in her bag, bringing out her tablet; the Boulderbark Retreats logo large on the glowing screen.

“Did Charlotte do this to you, too? If you believe it, she said I needed a break. Somehow she has the Sovereign’s ear, and they both think I need a change of scenery and rest.” Maklr said, keeping his voice low. “I hope you don’t mind me talking for you,” Maklr whispered when Philtan finally lowered his natural volume. “I saw he was making you uncomfortable. He doesn’t mean anything by it. Sometimes, more often than not actually, he doesn’t know his own size, strength or volume. If you didn’t see before, he picked me up and squeezed me so hard he knocked the breath out of me. I had to pat him on the back and tell him to put me down. For his size, Phil is a gentle giant.”

Nell remained silent. “Do you mind if I sit here?” Maklr asked again quietly. He glanced around, but no other seat was available on the shuttle. Nell looked uncomfortable. She bit her lower lip, eyes wide, and nodded.

From the row in front, Philtan suddenly snapped his fingers. “I recognize you!” he exclaimed as Zand and the shuttle’s engines sprang to life, launching them on their way to Ashuk.

Nell’s eyes widened.

“I don’t think you do, Phil,” Maklr said.

“Of course I do. She’s the woman with the incredible voice. You had to have heard it. You know, the one who held the baby. Everyone calmed when you sang. Are you

going to sing again? Is that why you're headed to the resort? I heard there's a stage and sometimes the staff lets people perform there."

"No." Nell glanced at Maklr.

"I don't think so," Maklr said. "She needs the rest just as much as we do."

Philtan nodded. "Oh, it's a prescribed break. I see. So you're not going for business, only pleasure." He winked and pointed at the seat between Nell and Maklr. "No, I bet more pleasure than anything."

"Phil," Maklr pushed a hard warning into his voice.

"Fine. I get it. She's yours. Hands off." Philtan raised his hands in an 'I surrender' motion.

Maklr sighed. "It's not like that, but she is off limits."

"To me?" Philtan asked.

"To everyone."

"Right. Because that makes sense." Philtan winked at Maklr.

"It does. If you'd stop being so obtuse, you'd understand."

Nell gestured toward the empty seat, a slight smile, all the encouragement he needed to scoot closer to her, trying his best not to have his knees bump against hers. He rested his head against the plush cushion on the wall, taking care to lean a bit forward so his horns did not pierce the fabric or cause a dent in the inside hull of the shuttle. His hands fiddled with the civilian clothing he wore, and he found himself

subconsciously reaching for the stethoscope he'd learned to wear around his neck. Finding it not there he sighed.

As Zand piloted the shuttle toward the retreat Maklr's eyes fluttered shut and he fell into a restless nap.

## Chapter 6

### Nell

Nell watched through her lashes as Maklr slept easily on the journey to Ashuk. She admired the ease with which he felt comfortable enough to allow his body to relax and fall asleep. Sleep was something that evaded her. Though she'd gotten better, she yearned for the days where she could trust in her safety as she slept. The Elodians took that from her. One day, she'd get back to her old self. Determined to put the past behind her and continue to heal, Nell forced her lips into a thin line, tamping away the memories. She'd come so far since her arrival on Kлага, but there was more work to be done.

Eventually, the shuttle lowered through the billowing clouds and began its descent to a burnt orange field of trees. Of its own volition, Nell's mouth dropped open, and she gasped at the epic scenery before her. A myriad of lakes, forests, hills and even two massive waterfalls on the continent of Ashuk made the trip worth all her discomfort.

"Beautiful," she whispered. The shuttle jolted, hitting a rare patch of turbulence. Nell stifled a yelp. Half a heartbeat later, Maklr leaned over. "Are you okay? It's just turbulence," he said. "It appears you pressed your face against the window, admiring the view. Did you hurt yourself? I have a regen wand in my bag."

"No, I'm okay."

Maklr inched closer, his body warm behind her. If Nell leaned back, her back would press against Maklr's muscular chest. "Do you mind if I look too?" he asked. Nell shook her head and pointed at the window. "Thank you," he said. "The beauty of this planet never ceases to amaze me. This is your first time off Eoris, right?" Nell nodded. "If you like Ashuk, there's one other major continent on Klaga, Tapris," Maklr said. "That's more mountainous and rugged."

"This is pretty." Nell's voice registered above a whisper.

"It is," Maklr agreed.

"What are you two staring at?" Philtan asked, a wide smile etched on his face.

"Only the most beautiful sight I've ever seen," Maklr said, his gaze fixated on Nell. She flushed crimson at the compliment.

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“I don’t doubt it,” Phil said. “Before I joined the military, I used to camp here with my family all the time. If you ever want a guided tour of the forest, just ask. I know it like I know the back of my hand. That’s another expression I picked up,” he explained to Maklr.

“Figures. It’s been a long time since you’ve been back to Ashuk hasn’t it?”

“Yes, it has,” Philtan confirmed.

“Perhaps just like you’ve become an overgrown lump, so too has the forest. I highly doubt you would recognize the foliage of your youth,” Maklr said with a laugh.

Phil grinned. “You might be right.”

“I usually am,” Maklr said.

Zand landed the shuttle and deployed the exit ramp. “Rest and relaxation awaits,” he said with a sweeping arm gesture and slight bow.

“That’s it. Bow to me,” Philtan said, slinging a massive duffel bag over his shoulder. “Who cares about the twin princes, anyway? You’re right. You should bow to me. I make more of an imposing figure than they do.”

Zand mock saluted before making a very human hand gesture of sticking up his middle finger to Philtan. “Hey, Phil, you’re not the only one who learned some human gestures. Check this one out.”

Maklr chuckled at his friend's banter. He stood a few steps in front of Nell, so she had a clear view of the ramp and Phil's subsequent departure to the resort. "Are you ready?" he asked. "I'll walk with you." Nell blinked rapidly. Maklr cleared his throat. "What I mean is, I know you're capable. It's only an offer you don't have to take me up on, unless you feel safer walking on your own," he said.

Nell placed her bag on her back, shifting its weight over both her shoulders. She gestured to Maklr for him to wait. "With you," she whispered.

"Nell, I have your other bag ready," Zand called.

Together, Nell and Maklr exited the shuttle. With both feet on the clay-like soil, Nell looked up at the trees, putting her hand over her eyes, and squinted at the bright sunlight. She inhaled deeply, enjoying the scent of fresh air, earthy moss. From the trees, a sweet scent wafted her way, reminiscent of pine trees humans liked to use for Christmas celebrations.

Maklr took her bag from Zand. He watched as Nell absorbed the fresh air. Her skin seemed to glow, not only from the natural light but from genuine happiness.

So entranced by the natural scenery around them, they lost track of time standing in the clearing. Their trance broke with the shuttle's engines roaring to life and Zand taking off back to Eoris.

"I'm sorry," Nell whispered to Maklr.

"For what?"

She shrugged. "Making you wait."

"Honestly, I didn't mind. If you're ready, we can follow the path, get ourselves



checked in and I'll walk you to your cabin."

Without saying the word, Nell began to walk, her steps cautious as she followed the wooden path, marked on both sides by smooth gray and brown stone reminiscent of polished marble. A few short minutes later, they entered the main building of the resort.

"Good afternoon," the receptionist said, a welcoming smile on her face. "How can I help you?"

Nell tapped on her tablet before facing it toward the woman behind the counter. "Excellent. Is this your first time on Ashuk?" she asked. Nell nodded. "You'll love it here. There's so much to do. Did you receive the information packet we sent when you first booked your reservation?" At Nell's affirmative nod, the receptionist continued. "Here, while I have your tablet, let me add one with all our different amenities. If you enjoy hiking, we have a few natural pools and waterfalls nearby. They're deep enough where you can swim or you can sit on the edge and dip your feet into the water. There are plenty of places to picnic. Since humans have been coming here more frequently, we now have a thing called coat closure lining. No," she paused, "that's not it. Zipper lining. Zip lining. One of those."

A hint of a smile crossed Nell's face. The receptionist handed Nell a key and actual paper brochures with menus and lists of activities available at the resort. "To get to your cabin, once you leave here, turn right and follow the path down. You're in the last cabin on your right. Enjoy your stay. If you need anything, don't hesitate to reach out."

Nell stepped back, glanced at the door, her brow furrowing. "Would you like to wait for me to check in and I'll walk you to your cabin?" Maklr asked. Nell smiled.

"Here's my information." Maklr passed his tablet to the receptionist.

“Do you need me to go over everything again, or did you hear it when I was talking to your friend?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

The receptionist rummaged in the drawer to the side of her screen. “Here. Just in case you’d like a copy as well,” she said, thrusting papers in his direction. “Here’s your key.”

“Ready?” Maklr offered his arm to Nell, unsurprised when she didn’t take it, instead clutching her bag in both hands. Motion sensitive doors opened into the fresh air. Maklr and Nell walked slowly through them into bright sunlight. “Would you want to go directly to your cabin?” he asked. Nell Shrugged. “How about we take the scenic route?” he suggested. “Let’s take this path.”

They wandered down the boardwalk style path, drinking in the sight of the trees. Small streams dotted with vegetation and flowers of every imaginable color grew along the path. Maklr paused, took his tablet out of the pocket on his cargo pants and recorded a few still images. “Wouldn’t this look beautiful on the wall of the transition center or rehab? I find it soothing.” He replaced the tablet in his pocket. “Charlotte says nature is a great healer.” Nell remained silent.

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Further along the path, they came to a signage marking locations of the cabins. “This is useful,” he said. He glanced at his tablet and then at the sign. “My cabin is this way.” Maklr pointed.

“Mine too,” whispered Nell.

They reached the last cabin, a small wooden building that blended into the picturesque scenery of the area, on the path and Nell placed her key card against the door. She hesitated as the door slid open.

“Do you want to come in with me, and I can check that everything is safe?” Maklr asked, noticing her pause. Nell nodded.

Inside, it opened into a kitchen and dining area. A living room with a two cushioned couch faced an enormous video screen that covered a wall. A fireplace with a stone hearth rested at the far end of the room. Behind the living room through a door, was the lone bedroom with a large bed and half bathroom. Down the hall to the left was a full bathroom with a stone tub, while a room Nell had never seen before opened on the right.

Maklr explained the room was a holographic suite so if the weather turned, any occupants could program it to turn into anything they wanted.

“Do you feel safe being on your own?” Maklr asked.

Nell made the thumbs up signal, walking him to the door.

He waited outside the cabin for half a dozen minutes, hoping she'd come back out, but she didn't. Maklr sighed, brought up the map of cabin listings on his tablet, and turned back, looking for his cabin. He wandered down the path, scanning for the number the receptionist printed on the key card.

Half an hour later, he groaned. "It can't be. There's no way that the receptionist did this by accident. What a load of faal shit," he cursed. Reluctantly, he walked back to the cabin assigned to Nell. He knocked. Nell opened the door, eyes questioning. "Nell, I think they made a mistake." Nell tilted her head. "Can I try something?" he asked. She nodded. "Shut the door for a second, please."

He let the door close with a click before counting to ten. Then he pressed his entry key to the panel against the door. It hissed open. "This can't be right," Maklr murmured. "Let me try again." Maklr's horns elongated. He forced himself to remain calm so as not to scare Nell. He pressed his entry key to the panel again. The door opened a second time. "There must have been a mistake."

"What?" Nell whispered.

"Let me go back and fix it. I'm sure they gave me the wrong key." Maklr tried to keep his voice neutral. "I think the receptionist gave me a duplicate key for your room," he said. "It's got to be a mistake. When I come back, I'll knock to let you know what happened." Used to Nell not responding, he continued. "Would you mind if I left my bag here?" he asked. Nell reached and took his bag, placing it inside the door. "I'll be back shortly," he said. He turned and walked with a purpose toward the main building.

While she waited for Maklr to return, Nell puttered around the small cabin unpacking her two bags. She kept glancing at the bathroom waiting to take a shower until she was sure she was alone and could lock every door possible. Satisfied all her belongings were within easy grasp should she need to escape she had just stepped

into the kitchenette to cook a meal, when someone knocked on the door.

“It’s Maklr,” he called. Nell opened the door.

Nell stared at him, unblinking. “Fixed?”

“Not quite. Nell, this is the last thing I wanted to tell you, but this is the last cabin they have. If you’d let me in, I’ll comm Charlotte and Bavrillz, have them come get me. Zand might have access to a conveyance.”

Frustrated, Maklr fumbled with his tablet, taking a few tries to dial a communication code while Nell sat at the table, waiting. “Charlotte?”

“Mak? Why are you calling? You’re supposed to be on vacation.”

“There’s a bit of a situation.”

“Situation? Is Nell all right?”

“She’s fine. It’s not that.” Maklr explained the resort’s room mix-up. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Stay there?” Charlotte sounded confused.

“Charlie, you don’t understand. I can’t do this to Nell. I can’t stay here with her. She doesn’t feel safe.”

“Well, there’s nothing I can do, Mak. I’m a continent away,” Charlotte said. “I finished rounds and I’m headed out for my own version of rest and relaxation.”

“What about Navil and Ivy?” Nell chewed on her lower lip.

“I’m sorry, they’re visiting Navil’s family.” Charlotte paused.

A deep male voice, ringing with laughter, called her name. “There he is now,” Charlotte said. “I’m on my way,” she called to the unknown male. “Seriously Maklr, things have a way of working out,” she said before hanging up.

Maklr’s hands shook. He sat at the wooden table staring at his communicator. “I know. Let me try Bavrillz.”

Bavrillz’s rich voice filled the dining area. He listened quietly while Maklr explained the situation. “You’re on mandatory leave. I can’t get you out of there.”

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“You’re a commander,” Maklr protested.

“True. But you don’t report to me anymore, not since you resigned from the fleet.”

Maklr groaned in frustration. Nell slid a bowl of soup in front of him. He looked up from the tablet, smiling gratefully. “Thank you,” he said. “Let me try Zand.” Maklr pushed in another code. “Stars, he’s blocked my comm code.” Nell motioned to the soup. “Okay I’ll eat and think. Thank you.”

Once finished, Maklr took the bowl to the sink and washed it. He paced the kitchen. “Who else do I know who can pilot a conveyance? Navil? Philtan?”

“Hey, Phil? It’s Mak.” He frowned at the feminine laughter in the background of the call.

“Sorry, friend. I’m a bit preoccupied. Now is not a good time.” Philtan ended the communication.

Nell punched in a code on her tablet. “Navil, Maklr has a problem.”

“Is that Nell?” Ivy jostled the tablet from her mate. “How are you?”

Maklr answered, telling them his tale. “Unfortunately, we can’t help you,” Navil said. “We’re with my family, and you know what they’re like.”

“Who knows. Maybe it’ll be good for both of you.” Ivy’s voice sounded sympathetic.

“Was this your plan?” Nell asked quietly to Ivy.

“Plan?” Ivy sounded incredulous. “No. Give it a week.”

“No.” Nell shook her head. “I can’t.

“Wait, you want me to stay with Nell in a one bedroom tiny cabin for a week? Absolutely not,” Maklr fumed. He kept his temper under control for Nell’s sake.

“Give it a week, Nell. If you can’t, I’ll personally come and get you, that’s the earliest I can make it out,” Navil said.

“Listen, Nell, I know you can do this. It’s Maklr. He won’t hurt you. You know him.”

Nell sucked in a deep breath, heart pounding. She wiped her clammy hands against her pants. “Okay,” she whispered, hanging up on Ivy and Navil.

Maklr’s eyes widened. “Are you sure? I can sleep outside.”

“No. I’d feel safer with you inside the house.”

“I’m sorry if my anger before upset you. It wasn’t my intention.”

“I know,” Nell whispered. She opened a built-in closet in the wall, pulling out a set of sheets, dropping them on the couch. She removed the cushions to set up a bed.

Maklr shook his head. “What are you doing?” Nell pointed at the sheets. “Are you planning on sleeping on the couch?” She nodded. “No, I’ll take the couch.”

“I’m smaller.”



“No, it is only right. A female’s comfort is paramount,” Maklr said.

“All right,” Nell said, her voice soft. She stood in the doorway to the bedroom. The intricately carved orange wood door shut with a click. “Thank you.”

## Chapter 7

Maklr

“Did you sleep well last night?” Maklr asked when Nell emerged fully dressed from her room the next morning. She shrugged. “Same as every other night?” She nodded. He pasted a grin on his face. “I hope my snoring didn’t keep you awake.”

Nell padded into the kitchen, opening cabinets.

“Looking for anything in particular?” Maklr gestured toward a pan simmering on the stove. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m an early riser. I took the liberty of preparing first meal. Hope you like porridge and fresh fruit.” He placed a bowl at the far end of the table, closer to the door. Nell sat, holding the metal spoon delicately over the bowl. “It’s all safe. I assure you,” he said.

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Nell plucked the Klagan version of a strawberry out of the bowl and dropped it into her mouth. A trickle of red juice dribbled over her lower lip. Her tongue darted out to catch the errant drop. She ate the berries first, letting the porridge cool before placing two heaping spoonfuls into her mouth. She moaned in appreciation. “Thank you. You’re an excellent cook,” she said, her voice low. “I’ve eaten a lot of cold hospital food. Military rations aren’t much better. Either I learned to cook, or went hungry.”

Nell chuckled. She rose to clean both bowls. When she finished, she turned to walk back to the bedroom.

“Did you have plans for today?” Maklr asked. “If not, would you like to go for a walk?” Nell hesitated. “It’s safe. I will let no harm come to you.”

Nell glanced at the floor, then back to Maklr. She pointed to her clothes and then the room.

“I understand. Go change. I’ll finish cleaning the pot before the porridge turns into glue and it is impossible to get out.” Nell stepped forward to take the cooking vessel. “No, go change. It’s no big deal. I made the mess. I’ll clean it.”

Maklr finished cleaning, put on a pair of hiking boots and waited for Nell to emerge from the room. He kept glancing at the tablet, watching time pass, while Nell remained behind closed doors.

Worried because she took longer than he expected, he knocked on her door. She opened it wide, showing a perfectly made bed with a plush purple animal he’d recognize anywhere. “Acaton?” he asked, pointing at the stuffed animal. “For

protection.” Nell nodded. “And you’re worried about them? There are no caton on Ashuk.”

Nell looked back at the room and sighed.

“If you don’t want to come, it’s alright. I understand. After how happy you looked yesterday when we landed, I thought you might like to explore a bit more.”

“I want to,” Nell whispered, her voice shaking. “I don’t want to live my life scared of everything, including my shadow.”

A wide grin broke across Maklr’s face. “Excellent. I packed some sandwiches in case we get hungry.”

Nell gestured at the front door. “Lead on MacDuff.”

Maklr’s forehead scrunched in confusion. “Did you hit your head recently?”

Nell shook her head. “Nevermind. After you, Maklr.”

They walked in silence next to each other down the path, passing more bungalows, each made in a prefabricated style. The cabins were almost identical, but the decorations outside were unique to each. “Gingerbread houses,” Nell mumbled.

“What did you say? I couldn’t quite catch it,” Maklr asked.

“The cabins remind me of gingerbread houses.”

Maklr’s eyes lit up. “Oh! Those cookies with icing and candy we made at the winter celebration.”

Nell slowed to a stop, pausing and stepping back. She pointed at a string of lights hanging from the edge of one of the cabin's drainage pipes at the end of the roof. Maklr followed her finger to the different colored shutters against the windows. Maklr nodded. "I see what you mean. Now it makes sense, especially with the orange-brown color of the wood."

Ahead of them, a couple opened their door. Nell instinctively stepped into Maklr's personal space. He slowed his steps so he didn't trip Nell or step on her shoes. "It's okay. They're far enough away. We're not going to come into contact with them unless you want to," he reassured her.

Taking a different path from the one they walked yesterday, Maklr and Nell saw a sign written in Klagan script. "Do you know what that says?" he asked. "I'm not sure if your translator works with written language or only spoken."

Nell's fingers traced the circular cursive of the word. "No."

"It means waterfall." Nell looked up at Maklr, her eyes shiny with excitement. "Would you like to see it? It's not too far of a walk if you'd want to go." He pointed. "We have to turn here and follow the path. See how worn it is?"

They followed the well-traveled path down a tree lined slope, before coming to a bend. The sound of rushing water and light splashes filled the air. Rounding the corner, a waterfall about three stories high filled their view. Nell rustled in her bag, removed her tablet, and recorded a short video before taking a few still pictures.

"Would you like to go down and dip your feet in the pool?"

Nell bit her lower lip. "Yes."

"Careful, it's rocky. I'll go first and I'll help you. I promise I won't go too far in front

of you. I'll be with you every step of the way." Maklr climbed a foot or two down. He turned, holding his hands out for Nell. She sucked in a breath, placed her hands in his, and stepped down. A fist size stone came loose, setting Nell off balance. "I've got you," Maklr said. He picked her up and carried her the remainder of the way to the outcropping of rocks that formed a pool.

Nell's face broke into a wide smile. Her joy at seeing the waterfall palpable, Maklr grinned. "I'm glad you're happy."

"Is it safe?" Nell asked.

"The water?" Maklr asked. Nell nodded. "Of course. It might be cold to the touch. I don't know, haven't touched it yet." He tilted his head, inspecting her features. "Or do you mean, are there animals in the water that can hurt you? If that's your question, then no. Nothing in there will hurt you."

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Nell tucked a lock of her dark hair behind her ear and bent to dip her fingers in the water. “It feels good on a warm day liketoday.” Nell took off her shoes, placed them on the side, and sat on a large rock, watching the waterfall. She kicked her feet in the water, contentment written on her features. Her stomach growled, a low rumble.

“I’ve got a snack.” Maklr placed a sandwich and a water bottle on the rock between them. He grinned when she didn’t hesitate to take the food.

Maklr wondered what Nell was thinking, but didn’t dare break the serenity on her face. She chewed the sandwich, staring at the waterfall in contented silence.

As the sun rose higher in the sky over the horizon, the weather warmed. Laughter and a mixture of masculine and feminine voices became louder and clearer. Nell’s hands trembled. “It’ll be alright,” Maklr said. “Remember what the receptionist said. This is a popular destination. I’m with you.” Although Nell nodded, the fragile peace that had existed in her eyes before vanished.

“Maklr!” Philtan’s booming voice rang out. “Good to see you again.” Phil ambled down the path, his arms slung over two women’s shoulders. One was a Klagan, her light blue skin contrasting beautifully against a white, human-style bikini. The other woman, wearing an almost identical bikini, appeared human, but she could have been Sudabian. Philtan tilted his head toward the Klagan woman before he stripped his shirt and ran forward over the rocks. He barrelled forward in Nell’s direction. Pebble scattering with his footsteps before he cannon balled into the waterfall’s pool below.

Water splashed everywhere. Nell squeaked, covered her head with her hands and pulled her knees up to her chest.

“Phil, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Maklr raised his voice once his friend’s head emerged from the water.

“Having fun.” Phil tilted his head. “Aren’t you? You’re always so serious, Mak. Lighten up and live a little.” He winked. “Come on, ladies. The water’s warm. I’ll catch you.”

The women entered the pool more gracefully than their companion. They splashed around, flicking water on each other's faces, and laughed maniacally when the human-looking woman grabbed Philtan’s long braid. They worked together and pulled him backwards under the water. “Serves him right for being a jerk to you,” the Klagan female said.

Nell forced a smile onto her face.

“We were just leaving.” Maklr started to pack up, his hope for a peaceful day with Nell shattered.

Nell stood. She bent to wipe the dirt off her knees and calves.

“I know you,” Philtan said, his voice serious for the first time.

“Doubtful,” Maklr said.

“No, I do,” Philtan insisted. “Beyond the singing, I mean.”

“How?”

Phil squinted while studying Nell. “Yes, I do know you. You were on the Harem ship.”

“Harem ship?” Maklr asked.

Tears sprang to Nell’s eyes.

“Yes. You look good. I hope you’re doing well. I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“What are you talking about?” Maklr’s voice deepened. “Stop.”

Oblivious to Nell’s discomfort, Philtan continued. “You were the injured one, with all the bruises. I’m glad you survived,” Philtan said. “Do you know if they ever caught him?”

Nell gasped.

“Who? What are you talking about?” Maklr’s gaze bounced between Nell and Philtan.

“It’s nothing,” Nell whispered.

“Judging by the haunted look in your eyes, I’d say it’s not nothing,” Philtan said. “I don’t know what’s going on between you and Mak but you can trust him.”

Phil reached up to Nell.

She took two small steps backward; her calves scraping against the rock steps. Nell turned and ran back toward the cabin, never looking back.

“What did you do?” Maklr yelled at Philtan. “Nell and I were having a wonderful morning, and you had to ruin it with your blabbering.”

Maklr jumped into the water, balled his fist, and punched Philtan square in the jaw.



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“I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m glad she’s alive. She’s been through a lot. Mak, she was on the ship on my last mission.” Philtan shook his head. “We’ve seen some horrible things in our time. I didn’t think she was alive when we found her.” “I still think you’re a faal’s ass. I’ve got to go to her.” Maklr pulled himself out of the water and raced after Nell.

### Chapter 8

Maklr

“Nell, it’s me,” Maklr called. “I’m opening the door.” Although he wanted to run into the cabin, he restrained so as not to cause her undue stress.

“Where are you?” he called into the empty cabin. “Nell?” Falling back on his military training, Maklr started his search for Nell in the living room. Systematically, Maklr checked the tiny bungalow, opening closets and closing them after making sure Nell wasn’t hidden inside. “Nell, it’s me. Nothing’s going to hurt you.”

He searched the bathroom, moving the shower curtain from one side of the tub to the other. “Where are you?” Maklr narrated each of his actions in case Nell could hear him. “I’m opening the holo-suite,” he called. He opened the suite door and turned on the light. “I’ll be honest, I thought you might be in here. I hoped you’d programmed it to what your home planet looked like, or wherever you have amazing memories,” he said into the air. “Nell? Please come out.”

Only the bedroom remained. A sliver of light invaded the hallway through the almost closed door of the bedroom. “Nell?” Maklr stepped closer to the room. “I’m coming

in.” Maklr knocked twice on the door before pushing it open.

She had made her bed and not returned to sleep. The soft blue plush comforter, which Nell tucked in earlier that morning, covered two pillows. Maklr looked around. “Something’s different.” He ran his hands through his mohawk, rubbing his horns in frustration. “The stuffed animal. Thecatonis missing. Nell, wherever you are, it’s okay. No one will hurt you. I’m going to look under the bed. Please be there.” Maklr knelt down, flipped his tablet open and turned the light feature on. Gingerly, he lifted the edge of the comforter. “Damn it. Where are you?”

He rested back on his knees and waited. “Please give me a sign. I need to know you’re okay.”

The closet door handle moved. The door sprung open. “Nell?” Maklr crawled on his knees to the closet. “I’m going to open the door. My hands are on the handle. I’m going to pull it toward me. If you’re in there, don’t be afraid.”

Inwardly, he groaned, realizing the stupidity of his words. “Sorry, I said it without thinking. Nell, I’m going to turn the light on. I’ll place the tablet on the floor with the light facing upwards. It won’t be too bright for your eyes. Can you please come out?”

In the closet, a duffle bag in front of the door rustled. Nell’s fingers gripped the fabric of the case, pushing it to the side. Shesat with her back resting against the closet wall, her knees to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs, cuddling the plush cat-like creature.

“Philtan’s an idiot,” Maklr said. “He means well, but he can’t read the room.” Nell said nothing, so Maklr continued. “For what it’s worth, I punched him in the mouth. I’m not sure he’s going to learn his lesson and my hand hurts a bit because he’s a giant. A giant faal’s ass. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” Nell chuckled, the corners of her mouth twisting in a half-hearted smile. “And for the record, I wasn’t punching

Phil in the mouth for the first time. He speaks before thinking.”

Maklr sat back. “I’m not going to force you to come out of the closet. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

Nell motioned across her lips.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. Not now anyway. Does Charlie know?” Maklr probed.

Nell shook her head. “No. Not all of it.”

“When you’re ready, I’m here.” He sat down at the foot of her bed, leaving the closet door open. “I’ll stay until you’re ready to come out. I don’t think being alone is best for either of us right now, do you?” Maklr waited for a response that never came. “I’ll take your silence as a no.”

He leaned against the bedframe and mattress, careful to give Nell space. “What would you like to talk about?” A shadow moved from the back of the closet; Maklr’s lone clue that Nell was even paying attention. “Was that a shrug?” he asked.

Silence answered.

“You know, I understand why you don’t want to talk. I have an idea, though. What if I talked, and you listened like usual? Instead of talking, you can type your responses. The communicator has an automatic translator, so whatever you write in your language I can translate into Klagan. Does it sound like a good idea?” he asked. Nell reached for the tablet.

Her fingers were steady as she typed out a message and pushed it back to Maklr.

What did you want to tell me about?he read.I don't want to talk about what happened.

"I was thinking about telling you about my life. Would you like to hear some of my story, since I know a lot about yours?" he asked out loud.

Yes.

"I grew up on Eoris right outside of Dorbound, near the sovereign and his three sons. Did you know he had three children? Arkas, Strels and Isir. The twins are the oldest; they're mated to a human female now. Their brother, Arkas, is in the military working with the Elite Force. He's been in for a while and hasn't been back to the planet in revolutions. Anyway, I didn't know the twins well until the military stationed us on the same ship."

Nell scribbled furiously on the tablet.Why did you enter the military? Was it mandatory?

Maklr took a moment to read it. "No. I always had an affinity," he cleared his throat, "more of a desire to help injured people or animals."

Is that why you became a doctor?Nell wrote.

"Kind of. My family had a small farm. One day, I came home from school and there was an injured faal. I stayed outside doing whatever I could to help it. My father was annoyed that I brought the large beast home." Maklr put his hands on his hips, deepened his voice and mimicked his father. "Maklr, we don't have room for that animal, son," he said. "My mother insisted if I was adamant about keeping the faal, I would learn what responsibility meant. Neither she nor my father would help me with it. I stayed up with the injured animal day after day hand feeding it."

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Did it live? Nell wrote.

Maklr smiled. "It did, and I believe you know one of its offspring, Eos."

Navil's faal?

"Eos is the son of the one I raised."

That's amazing, but it still doesn't answer why you went into the military.

Maklr fixed his mohawk. "It's part of the longer answer. The simple answer is, my family didn't have enough money for my schooling. The military provided me not only with training, but all the necessary school. As soon as I was eligible, I signed up."

What was it like traveling in space? Did you see many planets? Nell asked in writing.

"Some. I spent a lot of time aboard my stationed ships patching up injured soldiers. Truth be told, I spent more time on space stations than on different planets. One day, I would like to explore more whenever I'm able." Maklr's eyes pierced Nell's. "Do you ever think about traveling?"

I did once. I think I've seen enough of space. Nell wrote.

Maklr tutted. "I think you've seen the dregs of society and not some of the beautiful places available." He paused. "The resort provided us with the holo-room. If you'd like me to program some places I've been, or if you want, you can show me where

you grew up.” Nell’s eyes widened and Maklr waved his hands back and forth. “Not now. Not tonight. Tonight we talk. Or, I talk, and you listen. What else do you want to know?”

Do you have any siblings?came Nell’s response.

“I did, but it’s just me now. My brother died when he was nine revolutions old.”

You don’t have to tell me about him.

“His name was Olvil. We were inseparable. He was one revolution older than me. We did everything together. One summer, we built an underground tunnel behind our parents house. It had a trap door where we could hide.”

What did you do there?

Maklr laughed. “You won’t believe me.”

I will.

“We read books and scrolls. We were what you humans call Greeks.”

You mean geeks. Greeks are people with a different language.Nell’s handwriting became larger and looser, showing her amusement.

“Yes. That’s the word. Can I ask you a question?” Maklr asked.

It depends. I might not answer.

“How did you learn to sing so well?”

I took lessons. I used to do a lot of singing on Earth. Anytime the radio came on I would sing along. I like everything about music. In school there was a class we could take called chorus. I joined, she wrote.

“You’re very good. I might not have understood all the words to your song, but I felt the meaning and passion you put behind every word. So did everyone there. I meant to thank you earlier. It was such a selfless act.”

You’re welcome. By any chance, do you know if the baby survived?

“The baby’s fine and with his father as far as I know. Charlie knows all the details.”

I would expect nothing less from her. She always knows what’s going on. She meddles in everybody’s business. Nell gestured. I wouldn’t put our situation past her.

Maklr laughed. “She does. Where did you grow up? If that’s a question you’re willing to answer, I mean.”

I grew up on the East Coast of a country called the United States. I lived close to a major city called New York. I know that doesn’t mean anything to you, but it was a heavily populated area, like Dorbound, with so many things to do. The only way you could be bored was if you didn’t explore.

“What things did you do?”

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My parents used to take me into the city to an area where there are, or were, a lot of theaters for plays and musicals. I was fascinated with the pageantry, the dancing, the acting, the songs, everything. When I was a little girl, I hoped one day my name would be in lights on the marquee of one of the theaters. Then for a while, I wanted to be a chef. I focused on cooking anything I could. Collecting recipe books and baking cookies and cakes with my grandmother were my favorite pastimes. I tried to make foods from different cultures for my parents, who were nowhere near as adventurous with food as I was.

“If you ever want to cook together, we can,” Maklr offered. “Or if you would like to cook your own meal, I’ll try it.”

I think I’d like to cook for you,Nell wrote.

“I’d enjoy it. I want to try more human foods. But don’t feel pressure.”

Look on the resort’s information page. Guests can request items delivered to the cabin. They might be able to get us the ingredients.

“Don’t feel pressure on my behalf.”

I’m not.Nell yawned.

“It’s getting late. Are you tired?”

A bit.



“Do you want to come out of the closet now?”

Nell shrugged and then wrote. I don't know.

“To be fair, it's not a comfortable place to sleep. What if I leave the room, you head into the bathroom, freshen up and get ready for bed? If you want, you can call for me. I won't go far.”

Don't go, she wrote. Please stay.

“If that's what you want.”

Nell handed the plush cat onto Maklr and crawled out of the closet. Once in the bedroom, she stood and walked into the bathroom. Maklr turned the bed down, ready for when she got out from freshening up. The bathroom door opened and Nell padded out in bare feet wearing leggings and a long tunic top. She paused, staring at the bed.

“I will not sleep in bed with you. I thought it would be more comfortable. My mother used to turn down the bed for me whenever I was sad and it made me feel better.”

Nell sat on the bed, slipped her legs under the covers and laid back, pulling the sheets over her.

Maklr handed her the plush cat. She clutched it close to her chest.

“I'll be out on the couch if you need me.” Maklr headed toward the door. His hand rested on the knob.

“Stay and talk until I'm asleep?” Nell's voice cut through the silence.

“Of course.” Maklr settled on the floor next to her bed. “What do you want me to talk

about?”

Anything,she wrote.

Maklr talked into the night, never stopping, though his voice grew hoarse. When he stopped, Nell began to twist and turn, moaning in her sleep.

“Nell, wake up. You cried out. Wake up.” His voice shook with concern.

She opened her eyes and reached for the tablet.A nightmare. I’m used to them.

Maklr leaned forward to take her hand in his. Nell flinched. “I’ll never hurt you,” he said.

I know,she wrote.

Maklr’s curiosity got the better of him. “Why don’t you talk much?”

Nell shrugged and typed on the tablet, handing it to Maklr.

He said nothing as he read it. “What do you mean by ‘Nothing to say of any importance’? I understand the ‘Listening saved my life’ part.”

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Nell typed back. I don't want to talk about it.

"Can I ask one more question?"

Nell nodded.

"Will you try to talk to me more?"

"Maybe," she said out loud, a slight smile crossing her face.

### Chapter 9

Nell

A combination of flight streaming in from the window and soft snoring woke Nell the next morning. She sat up in bed, staring at Maklr's sleeping form. His head rested on his bicep, and his back was to the bed, affording Nell as much privacy as possible during the night.

She rolled out of the opposite side of bed and brushed her teeth before making her way into the kitchen. When she arrived at the cabin the previous day, she tossed her tablet on the kitchenette's table. She tapped it, grateful it still held charge. She logged into the resort's page and smiled as she tapped on 'Guest Amenities', placing an order. Her tablet now charging, she smiled at her plan.

In the small chiller, she found the porridge Maklr used for breakfast earlier and more fruit. She set about making the same meal he prepared their first full day at the resort.

“Good morning,” Maklr said. “I’ll be out of your way in a moment.”

“I made breakfast.”

Three words. Maklr turned. “Breakfast?” He held a clean shirt and pants in his hand. “You cooked for me?”

Nell held the pot with the porridge. “Not really.”

Maklr smiled. “I’ll be back in a few minutes to do a taste test.” He disappeared into the bathroom.

Nell heard the shower start, and began cutting the fruit. She couldn’t help but feel a connection to Maklr. He’d only ever been professional towards her, but she was drawn to him. He was a constant feature in her dreams. After her nightmare, she instantly settled knowing he was nearby. He was the only difference.

When Maklr stepped into the kitchen, his white hair hung damp around his bronze horns.

“Breakfast is served.” Nell slid two bowls on the table.

Maklr pushed the tablet closer to her.

“I’m going to try to talk. I decided last night.”

“Why did you change your mind?” Maklr spooned porridge and fruit against the side of the bowl.

“I feel like I’m being crushed by this enormous weight, and it’s preventing me from taking a step forward.” Dark lashes hid Nell’s eyes.

Maklr lowered his arms when his claws lengthened. He winced as they punctured the underside of the table. He forced himself to remain calm lest he frighten her. "From where I stand, you've made the first step toward healing."

Nell nodded. "What are we going to do today?"

Maklr looked out the window. "It's raining. Unless you're up for a walk in the rain, would you show me where you grew up in the holo-suite?"

"I can do that."

"What's that delicious smell?" Maklr's deep voice called from the living room.

"I'm making a version of an empanada," Nell said, raising her voice above her typical level, not looking up from the oil boiling on the stove.

"What's that?" Maklr padded into the kitchen.

"Yikes! When did you get in here? How were you so quiet?" She yelped and jumped back straight into Maklr's body, startled at the sound of his voice directly behind her. Her hands trembled and hit the wooden spoon in the pan of hot oil. Droplets splattered over Nell, the cooking surface and countertop. She threw her injured hand in the air and rushed toward the sink. "Ah, damn. I need cold water."

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“It wasn’t my intention to startle you.” Maklr fiddled with the faucet until cold water ran into the sink. “How bad is it?” he asked, turning off the cooking surface before removing the pan of hot oil.

“It’s nothing that hasn’t happened before.” Nell didn’t bother to look up. Her gaze focused on her oil-splattered hand under the running water. She missed the massive scowl crossing Maklr’s face. “I’ll be right back,” Maklr said. Nell made an non-committal sound. The sound of wood creaking against wood filtered into the kitchen from the hallway. She heard him muttering to himself as he opened drawers and moved contents around. “Found it,” he called. Maklr emerged from the bathroom brandishing a portable regen wand. “It’s not the newest model, but it’s a decent one. Come here, let me run the regen wand over your injury and it’ll be good as new in a few minutes.”

Nell peered at him through strands of her dark hair. “I, um,” she began.

“If you want to use it yourself, you can. Press here and the wand will turn on. Hold it a finger length away from your skin and slowly run the wand back and forth over the injury. It will heal your burn in a matter of minutes.” He placed the regen wand on the counter and stepped back, taking a seat at the table.

Nell’s uninjured hand darted out to grab the wand. She followed his instructions over the burn. A smile flitted across her face.

“How’s the pain?” Maklr asked.

“The pain is gone. I wish I had access to one of these on the harem ship,” she

whispered. Once powered off, Nell raised the regen wand for a closer inspection. “This is amazing technology. I never expected to see one up close, let alone use one.”

“They didn’t have one?” Maklr asked from his seat at the table. Nell shook her head, unable to trust her voice. “What happened when...” Maklr trailed off. “We dealt with it. Some survived. Some didn’t.” Nell shrugged. “That’s life.”

Maklr frowned, his white eyebrows scrunched together. “That’s not how things are supposed to be.”

“It’s the way of the universe.”

“It shouldn’t be.”

“You’re idealistic. It’s noble, but not sustainable. I worked in an Elodian brothel, and then the harem ship.”

“Brothel?” Maklr shoved his fist to the side so Nell didn’t see him clenching it, or the droplets of blood that pooled in his palm from his claws poking into the soft skin.

“Yes.”

“How long were you there before you were rescued?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t let us have clocks or anything. And the calendars, I mean, year system, uh, revolutions,” she clarified at Maklr’s confused expression, “are different here. I can’t be sure how long it’s been since I left Earth. Earlier when we were in the holo-suite, I tried to approximate what it looked like. My memories are hazy.”

“Did you,” Maklr paused, deciding against finishing his question.

“I hated every minute. I complied because I didn’t want to die.”

“I never thought you enjoyed it.”

“Some did.”

“Nell, you never have to justify anything you did for your survival to me. I am proud of you.” She stared at Maklr in disbelief. “You survived when so many others didn’t. You might think I’m idealistic, but I have seen the aftermath.”

“Yeah, well,” Nell trailed off, resting the regen wand on the table. “I’ll finish cooking. I was almost done.”

“Would you like me to finish while you sit and relax?” Maklr asked.

A smile toyed on Nell’s lips. “I enjoy cooking.”

“Should I put this away then?” Maklr held the regen wand.

“I won’t need it again as long as you let me know when you’re walking back into the kitchen.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you. I’m sorry, Nell.”

“It’s okay. I don’t like it when people come up behind me.”

Maklr’s mohawk flopped as he bowed his head. “Apologies. I’ll remember to let you know where I am next time.”

“Thank you.” Nell placed the oil back on the cooking surface. “These should only be a few more minutes.”



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Maklr's weight pushed the chair against the floor, making a sharp scraping noise, his footsteps heavy. "You don't have to stomp," Nell called.

"I don't want to startle you again."

"Mm hm." Nell turned, a half smile on her face. She said nothing, but flipped the flaky pastry in the pan.

Throughout dinner, she remained quiet. Maklr looked like he wanted to ask her more questions, but refrained.

"Thank you for fixing me," she murmured before finishing the last bite of her dinner. "You cooked, I clean?" Maklr stood to take their plates. "Please, let me. I need to."

Maklr stepped back, recognizing her need for control. "Do you accept my apology?"

"Nothing to apologize for. I didn't hear you come into the kitchen." Nell busied herself around the kitchen, washing and drying the plates and wiping down the countertop with meticulous attention to detail.

Maklr relaxed on the couch watching a video on the screen that covered the entire wall.

Nell headed to her room and took a long, hot shower. She scrubbed her hair with her fingernails until her scalp almost bled. Her skin turned red from the pressure she used with the washcloth. She dried and dressed in her comfortable baggy black pajamas and wrapped a towel around her hair. "No turning back now, Nell," she gave herself a

pep talk. “It’s Maklr. He’s safe. You can go back out there and relax like a normal person.” She snorted. “Normal.”

Nell took a tentative step into the room. Maklr’s head swiveled. “Hello.”

“Hi,” Nell said shyly.

“Want to watch the show with me?” Maklr asked.

“I don’t know what it is,” Nell said.

“It’s a show about a woman who finds old things and fixes them so they’re usable again. You’ll be able to pick it up quickly, and I can explain who everyone is if you’d like.” Maklr grinned. “Charlie got me into the show. She said it’s something called reality television.”

“Can I watch with you?”

“Of course. It might be a tight fit with both of us, but we’ll make it work.”

Nell cautiously sat on the couch. Maklr’s forehead scrunched into a half-dozen lines as he regarded Nell and the redness on her arms from the shower. Finally, he said, “I’m a good listener.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. It’s from the shower. I scrubbed a bit too hard.” Nell tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. “You really are a good guy, aren’t you?” she asked. She watched as he flinched at the word good.

“I am no more and no less than whatever you need me to be. On my honor, I will promise that I will never harm you.”

“I know.”

Sitting next to him, she realized how large Maklr was. His shoulders scrunched together, arms folded on his lap. “I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“For what?”

“That can’t possibly be a comfortable position for you. You can move your arms.”

Maklr shook his head. “I can’t. Not without touching you.”

“It’s okay.”

Maklr narrowed his eyes, searching her face. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Nell whispered.

Her body tensed as Maklr unfolded his arms. “I’m going to move my arm behind you.”

“Okay.”

Maklr shifted his position on the couch, resting his forehead against hers. Careful to keep his claws retracted, his hand reached to caress her cheek. “You’re beautiful.” Nell flushed. She opened her mouth to protest, but Maklr rested his thumb over her lips. “No. Don’t deny it. You are beautiful.”

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Nell's eyes fluttered shut, dark lashes fanning across her delicate skin. Maklr tilted her chin, and her lips parted slightly. Unable to resist temptation, he lowered his lips toward her waiting mouth. He groaned in pleasure at the softness of her lips before deepening the kiss. His tongue darted out to lick the seam of her parted lips before delving into her mouth.

Nell lost herself in the pleasure of the kiss. She wrapped one hand around his neck, pulling his body closer to hers while her other hand reached to squeeze his muscular arm. Her heart thudded in her chest. She skimmed her fingers over his bicep and across his muscular chest, resting her palm over his collarbone. Maklr's hand traced the graceful line of her neck, his palm heating her skin. Nell groaned into Maklr's mouth, pulling him closer.

Without warning, Maklr broke away.

Lips swollen from the kiss, a flush covered Nell's cheeks as her eyes flashed open. Her chest heaved as she fought to catch her breath. "Now I know what being kissed senseless means," Nell said. She didn't recognize the sultry voice as her own.

"I'm sorry," Maklr said.

"For what?"

"I shouldn't have kissed you." Regret filled Maklr's voice.

A strangled sob wrenched in Nell's throat. She sprinted into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. As she stared at her reflection in the mirror with silent tears

streaming down her cheeks, Nell chanted, “I am not broken. I am not broken.”

## Chapter 10

Nell

Nell lay on the bed, humming a song she hadn't thought about in years. Not since before the harem ship. Her fingers flew over her tablet, pressing on different apps. She opened a new file, making sure to password protect it. She poured out her feelings into her makeshift diary.

One day, I'll get Maklr to admit that neither of us should feel guilty about the kiss. I think it was a natural progression. His lips were softer than I imagined. I replayed the moment over and over in my mind, wishing it would happen again. No one has ever kissed me like that. He's passionate under a reserved exterior. I wonder what it'd be like to get him to lose control. I know no one can see it, but I'm kicking my feet like a schoolgirl with her first crush.

She ended the diary entry with a flourish. After making sure the file was under two password protected layers, Nell stood up, deciding to play it cool and not mention the kiss to Maklr. She walked into the living room. Maklr sat on the couch, scrolling on his tablet.

“About last night... I'm sorry.” Maklr's head bowed.

“I didn't mind.”

“We shouldn't have.”

“Let's leave it.” Nell changed the topic. “Are you working on anything special?” she asked.

“Ideas for the rehab center.”

“Want to show me?” Nell asked.

Maklr flipped the tablet toward her. His plans were orderly, methodical, just like the man himself. “What do you think?” he asked after a minute.

Nell hesitated.

“You hate it, don’t you?” he said.

“No. It’s,” she paused, searching for the right word, “sterile. Clinical.”

“It is a rehab center.”

“Mind if I make a few suggestions?”

“By all means.”

Nell took his tablet and drew. “Excuse my general shapes. They’re stand-ins only. I’m not an artist, but we can use our imagination. What do you think about bringing more of the outdoors to the center?”

“How so?”

Nell pointed at the center of her sketch. “What if we set up this area like an obstacle course? Not with military precision or accuracy, but with challenges that focus on exercising or strengthening different body parts and muscle groups? Maybe a climbing rope or something to practice upper body strength or an obstacle for crawling?” Nell tied her hair back in a ponytail. “Do many of the warriors you treat have families? I’m thinking of the soldier with the baby. What if there’s a family area

or a playground? It doesn't have to be a large space, just a dedicated one."

"How would that help?" Maklr asked.

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“Parents have to, or should, watch their children, right?”

Maklr nodded. “Should being the key word.”

Nell continued. “So what if the child is playing, and the injured parent pushes them on a swing or holds them as their kid climbs or goes down a slide? Would that be useful? I think it’d be family bonding and therapy disguised as play time. I think it might bring a sense of normalcy to the families as well.”

Maklr scratched his chin. “I think you’re brilliant.”

Nell flushed at his praise. “Do you think it’ll work? I have another idea, but no clue on how to implement it. What about a form of Occupational Therapy?”

“One thing at a time, but I say we try the family area and obstacle course when we get back.”

“Really?”

“How did you figure it out?”

“You asked me once about my arm. I know I only mentioned it in passing.”

“Are you sure you want to tell me?”

“It was on the harem ship, maybe a few weeks before your friend and his squadron found us and rescued me. I was on yet another planet at another auction. The



Elodians sold me for a night to the most grotesque and evil looking alien I'd ever seen. His eyes were cold, and he felt evil." Nell wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't know how else to explain it, other than evil radiating off him. Like a foul stench, worse than rotting food."

A tear slid down her cheek. "He abused me. He threatened me with his words and fists if I didn't obey and submit to him. I fought back a bit, but he restrained me. While he had me tied up, he ordered a luxurious meal and ate it in front of me. My stomach growled, but he didn't feed me. At that point, I wasn't sure when I'd eaten last, and I cried. He bought me for a full night cycle. I wanted it to end quickly. It was my first experience on the harem ship."

"Son of a bitch," Maklr said.

"He was a pig. He gave me a bit of water so I didn't get dehydrated, but he didn't feed me or let me go to the bathroom. While restrained, I, ah, soiled myself. When he saw that I'd messed myself in front of him and while he ate, he flew into a rage. He undid one restraint, but yanked me from the other. That's when my arm broke. I screamed and cried, but he forced me to clean my mess with my clothes."

"What a monster."

"The women on the harem ship didn't have much clothing, and when I was done, he lit my clothes on fire in front of me. He left me covered in my filth before he spit on me for good measure."

"I'm so sorry, Nell."

"It's not your fault. That was the day I stopped talking. When the Elodians came back to claim me the next morning, they were furious."

“As they should have been.”

Nell smiled sadly. “Not with him. With me.”

“Why?”

“Because I was a money-maker for them. Injured, I couldn’t bring in credits. They threw me in a cell in the bowels of their ship, feeding me once a day until my arm healed.”

“Oh, Nell.”

Nell’s face turned stark white, silent tears streaming down her face, and her eyes were terrified.

“That wasn’t the worst,” Nell whispered.

“How could it get worse?” Maklr’s voice was hoarse.

“He followed me. Or the ship I was on. Everywhere I went, he was there. Sometimes he lurked in the shadows. Other times he was right there, visible to everyone.”

“He stalked you.”

Nell stared at the wall, her expression unreadable. “I knew whatever you’d faced was horrific, but not like this. I didn’t mean to send you into a nearly catatonic state.” Maklr crouched closer to her, gently reaching out a hand to wipe away her tears. When he touched her, she flinched violently and let out an agonized shriek. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Nell, I didn’t think,” he apologized immediately and removed his hand. She was shaking. He took a blanket from the couch and placed it around her shoulders, taking great care not to touch her.

Nell reached out to him as he went to sit back down. She quickly typed on the tablet before passing it to him. It wasn't your fault. You deserved to know the truth about why I am the way I am.

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Maklr's eyes softened. "Thank you for telling me; for trusting me enough. I'm sorry you had to experience that violence." He reached out to rub her shoulder, but yanked his hand away. "Do you want me to give you a few minutes? I can walk you to your room."

No. Don't leave me. I've had enough. Do we have tea?" "We do. Do you want the tea here, or in the kitchen?"

A slight change of scenery might do wonders.

"Would you like to sit outside? I'll start a fire in the fire pit and bring some tea."

I'll wait here while you make it. I can see you in the kitchen.

"Ready for the firepit?" Maklr asked a few minutes later.

Maklr let Nell set the pace. They walked outside, mugs in hand. Nell settled on an Adirondack style chair. He sat with her in companionable silence for hours.

Could I think for a bit by myself, please, she typed after Maklr disappeared inside the house to make some lunch. I'm not hungry.

"I'll leave you to it. I'm here if you need."

I know. Thank you.

She remained outside, with Maklr coming out to check on her at regular intervals. He

refilled her mug with tea and corul until the light nestled against the horizon, bathing the land with brilliant shades of color.

“Want to head inside?” Maklr asked. “I turned the bed down for you.”

Nell smiled. I’m getting chilly.

“I’ll put the fire out while you get ready. Do you want me to meet you inside?”

Nell nodded, slipping inside the cabin.

Maklr called to her as he entered the house, narrating his every step. He continued until he found her sitting on the bed, holding the stuffed animal. She wore her baggiest pair of sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt.

Nell typed furiously into the tablet. I’m embarrassed by my reaction. I should be over it by now.

“No, you shouldn’t. It’s a lot of trauma to process. I know you’ve been talking to Charlie. Do your sessions with her help?”

Sometimes. The nightmares stopped for a while.

“How long?”

Since I started therapy. They’d been mostly absent until Philtan’s flippant comment.

Maklr balled his hands into fists. “Do you want me to punch him again?”

No. You’d only hurt yourself.

“How can I help you?”

I don't know. It's like a pressure on me all of the time. I want this weight gone because I can't for the life of me figure out a way to breathe again. Nell slowly raised her head to meet Maklr's gaze.

“You're doing it, Nell, one step at a time. If you think you can't take that step, I'll hold you up. One breath at a time, and when you think you can't breathe anymore, I'll keep breathing for you.”

“Do you mean that?” Nell didn't use the tablet.

“Absolutely.”

She began to write, taking her time, a plan formulating in her head. After a while, she handed Maklr the tablet.

“You want me to do what?” he asked.

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“Can you hold me? Please?” Nell patted the empty side of the bed. “The bed’s big enough for both of us. There’s two pillows, and you’d be more comfortable here than on the couch.”

Her face remained stoic, but internally, she preened. She’d shared her idea. Now, all Maklr had to do was agree to it.

“Nell,” Maklr groaned.

“I’ll sleep under the sheet,” she said.

Maklr sighed. “Would it help?”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

Maklr sat on the edge of the bed, his body stiff. “Are you sure?” he asked again.

“Yes.”

Maklr lay back as close to the edge of the bed as possible, his head on the pillow.

“Goodnight.”

Nell slid under the covers to Maklr’s side. “Hold me?” She hated how pathetic her voice sounded to her ears. “Nell.”

“Please. Don’t make me beg.”

Maklr rolled over facing her.

Nell snuggled against the thin sheet pressing against his chest. She inhaled deeply, comforted by Maklr's unique scent. Her arm snaked over the sheet and under his arm, pulled his body closer to hers, and shut her eyes. "Goodnight."

## Chapter 11

Maklr

"What should we do today?" Nell asked when she exited the bedroom. Instead of shutting the door like she usually did, she left it open. She moved her plush caton into the center of the bed. "Now it can protect both of us."

"I don't know. Do you have any ideas?" Maklr asked. "There's one thing I'd like to try, if you're up for it."

Maklr raised his white eyebrows. "Oh?"

"You'll see. I dreamed of it last night."

Maklr smiled. "About that," he began.

"No. Don't say we shouldn't have. Thank you. You kept the nightmares away, and you inspired my idea for today."

Maklr raised his white eyebrows. "Oh?"

"You'll see," she said. "It's a surprise."

Maklr smiled. "I like that you're trying new things."



Nell smiled. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do. I figured, since I’m here, why not?” She left the cabin and headed down the path. “Come on.”

“This isn’t towards the waterfall or lake area,” Maklr said.

Nell shook her head. “Nope. Not there.” She marched forward, determined to be one of the first at her destination.

They passed a lake with small robotic water conveyances, human-style rowboats and kayaks available to rent.

“Here?” Maklr headed to the little kiosk.

“Keep going.” Nell trudged on.

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“Why aren’t you looking at the map?”

“I memorized the path while you were in the shower this morning,” she said. “I might not be able to read the signs, but I know what the symbols look like. It shouldn’t be too much further.”

Ahead, a small rest area overlooked the valley below. Trees littered the landscape, painting it with burnt orange, browns, yellows, and vibrant reds, different from Earth and from Eoris, but beautiful nonetheless. “I didn’t realize we were gaining in elevation,” Maklr said. “It’s an easy slope.”

“A bit farther.” Nell sped up. “Come on slowpoke. We’re almost there.”

“We’re at the summit,” Maklr said.

“Have you guessed my plan yet?”

Small air shuttles designed for two passengers arrived and departed at regular intervals from a launch pad a short walk from the tourist look-out point.

“I thought we could see the valley,” she said.

Now mid-morning, a long line packed with Klagans, humans and other species Nell couldn’t name, stood waiting for their turn on one of the conveyances. Maklr pointed to the sign. “It says to expect each ride to last about two hours.” He walked behind the last couple in line. “We’ll probably be here waiting for our turn for a while,” he said.

“Maybe we can do that another day,” Nell said.

“Do you want to walk back?”

“Oh, that wasn’t how I planned on getting down.”

Maklr scrunched his face. “I’m not sure I follow. Is this female logic?”

Nell laughed. “Not quite. Come on, follow me.” She headed past the kiosk to a platform. “Today we’re going zip lining.”

“Good morning. I placed a reservation for two for zip lining,” Nell said to the employee at the kiosk.

“Zip lining?” Maklr asked loudly.

“I’ve always wanted to try.”

“Nell, is this a good idea?” he asked. “I’m concerned.”

“I think so. It’s taking my destiny into my own hands.”

The employee handed Nell two bracelets with a code on them. “They’ll scan your bracelet, strap you into the harness, give you a helmet, and send you off. There are places where you will slow down to take in the sights of the valley. Multiple landing platforms at different altitudes if you get nervous or feel motion sick.”

Maklr gulped. “Oh. Nell, are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” They walked to the wooden platform where a young male Klagan employee strapped Maklr into the harness.

“Sir, your hair will be squished with our helmets. You sport an unusual hairstyle,” the employee said.

“I know, and I don’t mind. It keeps my hair out of my way while I’m working. I’ve found it to be the most sanitary.” Maklrsettled the helmet over his mohawk and the employee latched the spacer around his horns.

“How’s the fit?”

“Comfortable,” Maklr responded.

“You’re next,” the employee said to Nell.

“I’ll get myself in, thank you.”

“I have to help.”

Nell stepped into the harness and pulled it up between her legs and around her lower back. The employee reached to buckle it around her waist. Nell jumped back. “No, you can’t.”

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“Miss, I have to. It’s for your safety.”

Nell trembled. “Don’t touch me.”

“It’s my job, I have to.”

“I can do it myself.”

“Unfortunately, regulations state you cannot.”

She jutted her thumb in Maklr’s direction. “I trust him. He can do it.”

The employee glanced between the two. “Unfortunately,” he began.

“Screw the regulations,” Maklr ground out. “I’ll do it. I’ve stripped many soldiers in my time as a medic.”

“You’re a warrior?” the young Klagan asked. “Yes. I served on The Fearless. Now I run the medical center on Eoris.”

“You’re Maklr.” The youth’s voice was reverent. “You saved my brother. Of course if she wants you to strap her in, you can.”

Maklr nodded. “Nell, I’m going to reach for the harness between your knees and make sure you’re in,” Maklr said. He narrated each step as he performed the actions. His knuckles brushed over her breasts as the straps clamped together with a satisfying clink.

“Here’s her helmet. It’s designed for a human.” The employee handed it to Maklr.  
“Make sure it buckles under her chin.”

“Thank you,” Nell whispered.

“Would you tell me why later?” Maklr asked.

“Maybe.”

They stood together on the ledge, harnessed on the line.

“There’s a safety net, so if something should happen to the line, you’ll be safe. It’ll let us know that you need assistance,” the employee said.

Nell’s feet teetered on the edge.

“Are you having second thoughts,” Maklr asked. “We can turn back now, it’s not too late.”

“I want to,” Nell said.

“Would you like me to go first?” Maklr offered.

From behind them, the employee called out, “Sometimes couples choose to go together. You can go at the same time.”

Nell glanced at Maklr. “At the same time?” She held her hand out. “Together.”

Maklr grasped her hand in his. “Together.”

A heartbeat later, they leaped off the platform. Air whooshed over their faces. An

expression of pure joy covered Nell's face. She laughed at the antics of some birds in the air flying into the safety net below. They descended slowly, their hands remaining clasped together. With their free hands, they pointed out unique features of the landscape. Below them, a field of bright blue wildflowers grew on the ground. Small lakes, ponds and a waterfall appeared in their line of sight.

"Look," called Nell. "It's got a beach at the basin."

"Beautiful," Maklr said.

At the final landing Maklr unstrapped first. Before removing Nell's harness he cupped her cheek with his palm. "You did amazing," he said. "I'm so proud of you." His head leaned forward pressing his forehead against hers.

"Excuse me, I have a question." Nell walked up to the second employee.

"How can I help?" the Klagan female asked.

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“On our way down, I noticed the waterfall. It looks like a beach, or a sandy area at the bottom.”

“I know the one you speak of. It’s lovely and only a short walk from here. It has a deep pool. Follow the path to your left. Make sure when you come up on the waterfall, you follow the dirt trail behind it. Most people watch the water and then jump in, especially on a hot day like today.” The employee talked animatedly.

“You can walk behind the waterfall?” Nell asked.

“Yes. Behind it. There’s an opening caused by erosion. If you want, you can remain dry and not go in the water. Once you’re behind it, follow the trail down and you’ll come to the beach.”

“Would you like to go?” Nell asked Maklr. “Why not? It’s good to see you looking forward to something.” He smiled.

They held hands walking down the trail. “It’s lower than the other one.”

“This must be the path.” Maklr ducked behind the waterfall, crouching as he walked so his horns did not scrape the stone. The resort placed a bench in the curvature of the mountain’s wall for visitors and guests to sit and watch the water. Nell and Maklr sat together, staring at the curtain of water falling in front of them. “You look like something’s on your mind,” Maklr said.

“I want to do something crazy.”



“Crazier than zip lining?” Maklr teased.

“Something the old Nell would do.”

Maklr remained silent waiting for Nell to talk. Instead, Nell untied her shoes, stuffed her socks in the toes of the shoes, and tossed them onto the sandy area below.

“This. Now this is crazy.” She grinned, held her hair back and laughed as she ran and jumped off the ledge through the cascading water into the pool below.

“Nell!” Panic filled Maklr’s voice. “What the fuck?” He stared at the surface of the water, willing her to come up for air.

“Come on in,” she called from the pool. “The water’s great.”

“Stars, female! You’re going to be the death of me,” Maklr called back.

Nell laughed, treading water. “Are you coming or not?”

“If you can’t beat her, join her,” Maklr muttered. He threw his boots near where Nell’s shoes landed. “I’m coming,” he called. And he jumped.

He landed with a splash, bubbles rising from the depths. “Satisfied now?” he asked when he surfaced.

Nell’s hair stuck to her face. “Yes,” she said, laughing. She wiped water droplets from her eyelashes.

“Nell,” Maklr murmured, pulling her closer. “What got into you?”

Nell wrapped her arms around Maklr’s neck. “This,” she said. Then, her lips covered

his. She tugged at his hair and licked his lip. "Maklr," she moaned.

A few powerful kicks later, Maklr's feet touched the sandy bottom of the pool. "We're getting out," he said. Nell wrapped her legs around Maklr's waist, and peppered kisses on his neck. "Nell," he groaned.

He carried her onto the beach and lowered her to the warm sand below. Their clothes dripped water, dampening the sand. "We didn't think this through. Sand gets everywhere."

Nell shrugged. "Oh well."

Maklr held her close against his chest and dropped to the ground. He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her, his tongue darting into her mouth. Nell's hands roamed his chest, exploring Maklr's rock hard muscles through the soaked white shirt he wore. She straddled his legs and began to unbutton his shirt. His violet hand covered hers, resting above his heart. "Kisses for now," he said. "Everything else can wait."

"If you insist," she said.

Maklr cupped her cheek. "Oh, I do." He pressed his lips against hers. This time, his tongue teased the seam of her lips. When she parted them, he slid his tongue inside her mouth over hers. The kiss seemed to last forever as they explored each other. Nell gently pushed on Maklr's shoulders, and he lay back on the sand. She leaned over him, her breasts pushing against his chest.

The sun dipped behind a cloud. Nell shivered at the cooling air.

"Did you hear that?" Maklr asked, breaking the kiss.

Nell rested her head against his chest. "Your heartbeat."

“No.” He shook his head.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Now I hear it.” Nell sat up and looked around, a hint of sadness on her face. “We should head back.”

“Probably.” Maklr stared at Nell. “We can always come back. Who knows, you might even get me to jump off the ledge again.”

Nell stood and wiped the sand from her pants. “I’m going to dry my feet first before I put my shoes on. Otherwise, it’s going to hurt walking back.”

“True.” Maklr patted his knee. “Put your foot here. I’ll wipe the sand off.”

Nell obliged, swallowing a chuckle when Maklr’s hand swept the bottom of her foot. “Careful, my feet are ticklish.”

“Good to know,” Maklr teased. He hopped up from the beach, extended his hand. She slipped her hand in his and they headed back toward the cabin.

“Aren’t you going to put shoes on?”

Thunder clapped overhead.

Maklr shook his head. “No. Let’s get back before we both get soaked.”

“Good idea. When we get back, do you want to shower first? I didn’t mean to roll you onto the sand.”

They raced back to the cabin, the door sliding shut behind them as the sky opened up with rain.

“No, I’m fine. You’ve got more sand on you than I do. I’ll stay in the other bathroom so as not to soak the floors.” Maklr headed toward the second bathroom.

“Deal. Give me a few minutes.” She grabbed a plush bathrobe from the closet and dipped into the bathroom, the shower turning on moments later. Nell hurried under the running water, scrubbing the sand off her legs and out of her hair. She wasted no time in drying off.

“Maklr, I’m out,” she called.

A shirtless Maklr opened the bedroom door to find Nell standing at the far wall wearing the bathrobe. Nestled underneath his arm was a change of clothes and two folded towels. “Thanks,” he said. One of the resort’s oversized beach towels hung low across his waist. “Hope you don’t mind, but I dried off a bit. Didn’t want to catch a chill with the wet clothing.”

Nell’s mouth went dry and she shook her head at the sight of Maklr’s broad chest. “No. Not at all,” she said, her voice low. “Go shower,” she said.

“You’re dressed up,” Maklr said as he walked into the living room. “Going someplace special?”

“You look handsome.” Nell gestured at the light pink summer dress she wore. “While you were showering, I took the liberty of making a reservation at the resort’s premier restaurant. Would you care to join me for dinner?”

“Am I appropriately attired?” Maklr asked.

“Let’s find out.” Nell winked.

“We’re going to get soaked again,” Maklr said.

“Not quite.” Nell activated the door. A resort conveyance shuttle waited for them to board. “See?”

“You think of everything.”

“We can order while we ride there, and the meals will come out shortly after our arrival.”

“Exciting. I’ll have to ask Charlotte how she knew of this place.” Maklr chose his meal after Nell.

“Arriving at your destination.” The conveyance chimed twice with a musical note and slowed to a halt. Maklr exited first and lifted Nell out.

She gave her name to the hostess, who sat them in an intimate booth against the far wall. Before long, their server arrived, bringing their chosen meals.

“This was a lovely dinner. Thank you for thinking about it,” Maklr said.

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“You’re welcome. I thought it would be the perfect way to end a wonderful day.” A look of disgust and horror flashed over Nell’s face for a split second before she plastered on her usual neutral look.

“Nell? Is everything all right?”

“No.”

“What?”

Nell motioned with her head in the direction of the largest Klagan. “He’s here. Different women this time.”

“The restaurant’s quiet. He won’t make a scene.”

Nell snorted. “Think again.”

Philtan headed in their direction. “Mind if I sit for a moment?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

Maklr looked at Nell. Her face remained impassive. “For a minute. We were finishing up.”

“I saw.” Philtan turned to Nell. “Nell, I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m sure Maklr’s told you sometimes I speak before I think or act. Or,” he paused,

“do a lot of things. Thinking isn’t my strong suit.”

A slight smile crossed Nell’s face. “I didn’t think you meant anything harmful. I’m just,” she started. “There’s a lot of things I’m still working on.”

“But you’re getting better, right?” Philtan asked, his voice gentle.

“Slowly. I’m braver than I was.”

“But you still don’t like men,” Philtan said.

“I don’t dislike them. More of a distrust.”

“After what that bastard did to you,” Phil said, ending his thought. “And I’m sorry we couldn’t catch him.”

“Who?” Maklr asked.

“The one who followed Nell around on the ship.”

“Conversation ended,” Maklr said. His voice got deeper, almost to a growl.

Nell stood up. “Can we go back now, Maklr?”

“Absolutely.” He took her hand. They left the restaurant, strolling into the night air. “We can wait for the conveyance here.” Maklr tapped on his tablet. “One should arrive shortly. What was Phil going on about?” Maklr asked.

“Everyone loves to dream that they’d be their own hero.” Nell said, avoiding Maklr’s intense stare.

He shook his head, wisps of white hair flying in the early evening breeze. "I'm not sure I understand," he said. "What are you trying to say?"

"I failed. I'm no hero." Nell picked at her nails. "I didn't do anything to prevent what happened to me. And he still lives."

"That's not the way I see it."

"I just," Nell paused, throwing her hands in the air. "I just let things happen and stopped resisting, since it only caused me more pain."

"You did more than most. You survived Nell. Not only did you survive, you're thriving now. The Nell that arrived on Ashuk a few days ago would never have gone zip lining, or jumped into the waterfall's pool. Don't look back. Look how far you've come." Maklr ran his black claws through his signature mohawk. "What you didn't realize, either then, or now, is that you are the hero of your story. Nell, my sweet Nell, you are truly a hero, a survivor of a hellish experience."

## Chapter 12

Nell



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“The rain hasn’t stopped since yesterday. It’s thwarting my plans,” Nell complained the next morning.

“What other adventures did you have in mind for today? More zip lining? Jumping over another waterfall? Deep sea diving?”

Nell shook her head. “That’s not offered here.” She cleared her throat. “At least I didn’t see it on the list.”

“What about jumping out of a shuttle?”

“Stop being goofy. I don’t think that appeals to me.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“I wanted to go back to the beach and have a beach day with a picnic and an actual bathing suit,” Nell said. “Then I realized I don’t own a bathing suit.”

Maklr opened his mouth to speak, but Nell cut him off. “But did you know the resort has a clothing replicator? It’s not quite human fashion, but I know where Philtan’s two companions got their swimsuits,” Nell said.

“Where?”

“On the resorts tab on the tablet. I spent an hour or two browsing when I first woke up.”

“You didn't wake me?”

“No. I still don't sleep much. Besides, you were snoring so peacefully I didn't have to move to get my tablet. I fell asleep with it under my pillow. I enjoy waking up in your arms. Do you want to talk more about plans for the rehab center?” Nell asked, changing the subject.

Maklr ignored her question. “Did you order the bathing suit for yourself?”

“No.”

“Go ahead. Here.” He handed her his tablet. “Order it from my account.”

“I have an idea. Hold on a minute.” He kissed the top of Nell's head.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Order whenever you want. Whatever you think would make you feel good or comfortable.”

“Some of the swimsuits were expensive.”

“I don't care. Have a look, pick what you like. I have plenty of credits. I'll be right back.” He disappeared down the hallway towards the bathroom.

Before picking up his tablet, Nell started a pot of corulon the stove.

“I'm back.”

“Breakfast should be ready in a few minutes.”

“Did you get something you’d like?”

“Yes. I had a few things saved in my favorites. And since I needed an entire wardrobe when I moved to Kлага, my measurements were in the system. The machine is printing them now.”

The clothing replicator dinged, signaling its completion.

“That was fast.”

“It’s a bathing suit. Think about what Philtan’s women were wearing. Not much material needed.”

“I suppose not,” Maklr said. “Would you feel comfortable enough wearing it around me?” he asked. “When we first arrived, I used the machine to print myself a pair of swim shorts.” He gestured to the white shorts on his legs.

Nell smiled. “Hold on a second.” She grabbed the bundle of fabric in one hand from the replicator and headed into the bathroom to change. She emerged half a dozen minutes later in a fluffy brown robe, the resort’s emblem emblazoned on the front panel.

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“If you don’t feel comfortable, I understand,” Maklr said.

“It’s raining. I don’t want to walk to the beach or lake like this.”

Maklr shook his head. “We have something better.” He extended his hand. “I bet you forgot about this. Want to see?” She nodded. He led her down the hallway into the holo suite.

The door slid open. Nell gasped. “It’s the beach from yesterday.”

“I programmed it. You can still have the beach experience. We can hear the water, feel the sun and lie on the sand and have a picnic. The full beach experience. With one notable exception.” Nell looked at him quizzically. “This time the sand won’t get everywhere.”

“This is a beautiful idea. Thank you.” Nell hugged Maklr. “I’ll be right back. I’ll get the corul. Don’t start making sandcastles without me.”

“I won’t. I don’t know what a sandcastle is.”

Nell returned carrying two steaming mugs of corul. She carried them to a spot where Maklr spread two beach towels on the ‘sand.’ He took the mugs while she settled next to him on a towel. They sat, shoulder to shoulder, listening to the waterfall. Occasionally, calls from early morning birds filled the room.

Nell’s finger traced the rim of the steaming corul filled mug.

“Care to share what you’re thinking about?” Maklr asked.

“Maklr, listen.” She raised her head to inspect Maklr’s impassive expression. “I don’t know what you’re feeling because you’re so good at masking your emotions, but over the last weeks and months, getting to know you has been the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” She sighed. “I’m good at hiding what I want, too.”

“You’re just saying that because we’re stuck here, together. It’s...” Maklr paused, “unethical.”

“How do you figure?” “I’m a medic, and you’re vulnerable.”

“Was. I was vulnerable in the past. You and Charlotte helped me deal with my trauma.” Nell shifted her weight on the seat.

Maklr shook his head. A lock of his white hair dropped into his violet eyes. He wrapped the errant strands around his horn. “It’s unethical of me to want you,” he repeated, his voice low.

“You want me?” Nell’s eyes widened.

“Stars help me, I do.” Maklr raked his fingers through his mohawk. “It’s torture knowing you’re in the same room with me, sleeping next to me.”

“Why haven’t you acted on it?”

“I cannot take advantage of you.”

“Charlotte is my therapist, not you. It would be unethical, or immoral, or whatever if you were my therapist. Truth be told, I’m falling in love with you. I think we could be good together if you’d allow yourself to feel.”

“I feel,” Maklr whispered. “I’ve fallen in love with you.”

“But you don’t show it. I need you to show me how you feel.” Maklr opened his mouth to speak. Nell raised her hand, cutting him off. “Wait, I’m not done yet, but I want you to tell me. Tell me how you feel. Talk to me. I never thought I’d talk again, let alone trust anyone. Please trust me, like I trust you. This is me being vulnerable. I’m putting myself out there, taking a chance on happiness.”

“If I say what I’m feeling, I might scare you.” Maklr’s eyes dipped.

Nell leaned into Maklr’s side and took his hands in hers, the pads of her thumbs rubbing his clawed fingers. “I’m falling in love with you.” Her voice came out in a whisper.

“I only know how to love one way, Nell. And it scares me.”

“Why?” Nell looked up through her dark lashes. “Because this is a mad, passionate, extraordinary love, my once in a lifetime love. My soul knows yours. I know you’re meant to be mine. Mykeena. I want to wear the mating bands only you can brand me with. I’m desperate to see you wear my markings, the outward symbol of a true keena bond.”

“To love otherwise would be a waste of our time. I’ve learned that too many things in life are fleeting, and when you find what or who you want, I need to seize it with both hands and hold on for the ride. I want the love you’re offering me.”

Maklr’s thumbs ran across Nell’s hands. “I can promise you I will love you the way you deserve to be loved. And if you ever, for whatever reason, feel that I’m not fulfilling my promise, I will do whatever it takes to prove to you that you have my heart and soul.”

Nell pulled her hand from his and wrapped it around the back of his head, drawing his lips closer to hers. "I want you to lose control. Show me how you want me." Her lips barely touched his.

He groaned and shifted on the towel. Maklr placed his hand on her hip, fingers tracing along her soft curves. "I can't promise to be gentle."

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“You’d never hurt me. I trust you,” Nell whispered.

“I couldn’t hurt you,” Maklr’s voice trembled. “But I will not do anything to you without your express permission.”

Tears filled Nell’s eyes. “I’m ready.”

“Are you?” Maklr freed his hand from Nell’s. “I’m going to move my hand,” he murmured. Nell’s breath hitched as his hand raised. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know,” Nell breathed the words, her eyes locked on his hand.

Maklr raised his hand, inch by inch. “I’m going to touch your hair,” he said, his voice low.

“Okay.” Nell’s voice cracked, and Maklr held his hand back, still in her line of sight.

“Only if you’re sure.” His violet eyes bored into hers, purple hand shaking.

Nell exhaled. She leaned forward, pressing the side of her head against his hand. “Go ahead. I’m okay,” she whispered.

Maklr’s fingers stroked Nell’s hair without taking his eyes off her. “I want you to know I would never hurt you.” His touch remained feather light against her hair, allowing the silky strands to fall between his fingers. His claw snagged on a tiny knot, and Nell’s posture became rigid.



“It’s okay. I’m okay.” Nell pressed her head against his hand. “I know it was an accident. I like your touch.”

Maklr’s lips curled into a slight smile. “As long as you like it. I won’t touch you until you give me the go ahead.”

“Put your hand on my neck,” Nell said.

“No, I can’t,” Maklr protested.

“I need this. I need to know if I can handle it, and you’re the only one I trust.”

Maklr sighed. “Are you sure?”

Nell nodded and pressed Maklr’s hand against her throat. She adjusted his fingers behind her neck, underneath her hair. “I need your thumb under my chin.”

Maklr’s mouth opened. “Nell...” he trailed off.

“I need this,” she whispered. Slowly, his thumb ran up the hollow of her throat. Nell shivered. “Put pressure there.”

“Nell, no. Don’t push yourself.”

“I know you’ll stop if I need you to,” she whispered.

Maklr nodded. “Always.”

“Do it,” she commanded.

Maklr’s horns lengthened, and a low growl wrenched from his throat as his hand

tightened around her neck.

A silent tear slid down Nell's cheek. Her hands fisted at Maklr's sleeve and he dropped his hand immediately, cupping her chin in his hand. He pressed his forehead against hers. "Nell, look at me." Maklr's voice was insistent. "Come back to me." Maklr's thumbs caressed her cheeks. "Nell, look at me. It's me. It's me, Maklr." He didn't take his eyes off her face. "Say my name. Say my name, Nell. Let me know you're still with me." His voice was breathless. "Come back to me. Don't lose yourself in the memories. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Maklr," Nell whispered his name before pressing her lips against his. "You're Maklr." Tears streamed down her face, dampening his hands.

"I'm Maklr," he agreed. "I've got you, Nell. I've got you." He tilted her head toward his, capturing her lips in a gentle kiss while his thumbs wiped away her tears. "I've got you. You're safe."

"Hold me," she whispered.

"You only have to ask." Maklr cradled Nell's shaking body against his. "Cry it out. I'm so proud of you."

Nell wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I'm a wimp. I couldn't do it."

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“Oh, but, sweetheart, you did.” Maklr rested his chin on the top of her head. “And I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

“I panicked.”

“That’s to be expected. You did well.”

“I...,” Nell’s voice trailed off.

“No, none of that. I said I’d stop if you needed to.”

“You did,” Nell sniffled.

“And what happened when you needed me to stop?”

“You stopped.”

“I will never do anything you don’t want, Nell.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I’m broken.” Nell buried her face in Maklr’s chest.

“You’re not broken, Nell.” Maklr rubbed circles on her back. He rumbled low in his chest.

“How can you say that?”

“I see someone who’s overcoming her past with strength and grace.”

“I’m not strong enough,” Nell murmured into his chest.

“That’s what I’m here for. To be your strength when you think you can’t.” Maklr rested his cheek on the top of her head.

“I can’t ask that of you.”

“It’s not asking if I’m giving it to you freely. No conditions. Use me, use my strength when you feel like giving up. Lean on me. I’ll always be here for you,” Maklr said, his voice low. “I’ll be here if you let me.”

“Don’t say something you don’t mean,” Nell whispered.

“Why would I?” Maklr’s white eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

Nell’s shoulders raised in a slight shrug. “Some people do.”

Maklr growled, a low rumble, and Nell shivered. “I will never lie to you. Everything I’ve told you, I mean. I’m angered by what they did to you. It makes me want to track down and kill the male who hurt you.”

Nell swallowed. “Don’t.”

“Would it bring you peace?” Maklr’s thumbs wiped Nell’s cheeks.

“Not if you lower yourself to taking another being’s life. You’re a healer. I won’t let you destroy the life you’ve built for yourself. I’m not worth it.”

“Oh, but you are.” Maklr’s fingers stroked Nell’s cheeks. “I would hunt them down

in the farthest reaches of the galaxy if it would bring you some semblance of peace.”  
An errant lock of white hair flopped in front of his eyes.

“It would destroy you, and now that I’ve found you, I won’t let you go.”

## Chapter 13

Maklr

“Whatgoodismypeace if my hero turns into a villain?”

Maklr’s eyes widened. “A villain?” he sputtered. “You’d think I’m a villain for wanting to avenge you?”

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“I don’t need it. I don’t want your pity.”

“You’re hellbent on revenge and willing to do anything. That kind of tunnel vision often translates into an absolute refusal to view oneself as a villain. I’m not calling you a villain. I’m just saying that once a man crosses that line, there’s no going back.”

“I am no man,” Maklr growled, his horns elongating as he stood. He rose to his full height, bronze horns with lethal tips touching the ceiling in the holo suite, almost ruining the illusion. His fangs dropped and claws lengthened to deadly points. “You forget I am a trained warrior, capable of eliminating any threat to those that are mine. And make no mistake. You are mine.”

“Am I really yours? You want me?”

“You are mine, and I am yours.”

Nell started brushing imaginary sand off her legs. “Prove it.”

The tension in his shoulders hadn’t left, even now, after he claimed she was his. Nell saw the stress in his posture, in the way he held himself, as if a dam would break if he let go. Then he surprised her. “I’m going to do something impulsive. I probably shouldn’t, but you want me to show my emotions. So here I am, showing my emotions.” Maklr raised on his knees. He remained kneeling before her. “Look at me. Do you not see what you do to me? What the thought of being near you does to me? You’re everything I want.”

“What do you want?” Nell asked.

“I want your hands on my body, your lips on mine, but most of all, I want you to be comfortable.”

Nell mimicked Maklr’s stance. “Was it so hard to say?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“I’m mad at myself for being aroused when I’m around you. Everything is difficult. You make me lose my concentration because I’m focused on you and your happiness. I’m angry I didn’t kiss you back the first time, but most of all, I’m furious that with my training and my profession, I could not stop you from being hurt.” His face turned solemn.

Nell brushed Maklr’s hair back between his horns; her fingers lingered on the lethal bronze spikes jutting from his head. “I know if you’d been there, you would have helped me because that’s who you are. Think of all the other people whose lives you’ve helped. Every single one of them is grateful to you.”

“I don’t care about them the way I care about you.”

She wrapped her palm around his horn, stroking gently.

“Nell, be careful.”

Nell leaned forward, still stroking his horn with one hand. Her other hand rubbed his chest. “You know, on most beaches, men take off their shirts. And women don’t tend to wear bathrobes.” She shrugged the robe off. “I was wearing too many clothes.”

The robe pooled around her. She wore a purple bikini the same shade as Maklr's skin color. "Do you like it?"

Maklr leaned back on his heels and sucked in a breath. "There's not much to it. It barely covers your breasts," he stuttered. "I love seeing you in it. And women walk around wearing these in front of unmated males?"

"Some do. Other women don't." Nell winked. "I suppose you are correct. I'm here, wearing it in front of you, an unmated male."

Maklr rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Nell, you are stunning," he said.

"I'm glad you think so, but fair is fair."

Maklr stripped his shirt off and tossed it to the side. "Satisfied? Am I wearing acceptable beach attire?"

Nell licked her lips in appreciation. "I more than like what I see." She leaned forward, her palm resting over his heart, her lips dangerously close to his ear. "Do I make you feel things?" she asked. Her hand trailed lower over his sternum, caressing the planes of hard muscle of his stomach, her fingers dipping into his belly button, teasing before trailing lower over the bulge in his swim trunks. "I see. Well, I don't see, not yet anyway, but I do make you feel things."

Maklr groaned. His eyes rolled back. "Your touch. It sets my body on fire."

"Do you want more?"

A strangled sound came from his throat. "Yes. No. Not if you're uncomfortable. I will never take what you're not willing to give." Nell slid her hand under the waistband of Maklr's swim trunks. He hissed as her cool palm pressed against his



heated erection. “Nell.”

“Let me. I want to.”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with. I won’t stop you. I won’t touch you unless you tell me to.”

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“I’m not ready for that. Not yet.” Nell wrapped her hand around his cock and gave it a stroke. “It’s a tight fit with these shorts on. Up,” she commanded. Maklr obeyed. With her free hand, she and Maklr worked in tandem to lower his swim trunks. Her other hand kept stroking his cock, moving from his base to the deep purple head in a rhythmic motion.

“Oh, Nell,” he cried, his breath coming in short pants.

“What do you want? More of the same? Faster? A tighter grip?”

“Anything,” he cried. “You. Your hands. Whatever you wish to give me, I’ll take.”

She lowered herself so her mouth was in line with his cock, gave one last stroke and sucked him deep into her mouth. Maklr moaned as her tongue licked his length, exploring every inch with curiosity and tenderness. She took her time, savoring the power she felt, as she licked and kissed the tip, swirling her tongue around his sensitive flesh.

Nell’s tongue danced around his shaft, and she brought her hand up to intensify his pleasure, stroking in tandem with her mouth. Her free hand reached to grab Maklr’s ass, and his body shook.

“Nell.” His voice trembled. “Nell.”

She sucked harder and teased his sack, her hands working in sync with her mouth.

He thrust his hips forward and roared his release. Nell swallowed everything he gave

her, releasing his cock with a pop.

She looked up at him, a content expression on her face. To her horror, tears formed in Maklr's eyes.

"What's wrong? Did I do something wrong?" she asked.

Maklr gathered her in his arms. "No my sweet Nell. You did everything right. I've never..." he trailed off. "Thank you."

"Never?"

"You're my first." He stretched out on the towel, body spent. "How can I repay the favor?"

Nell snuggled against his chest. "Hold me, and tell me more about your childhood."

## Chapter 14

Nell

"Whatdoyouthinkwe should do today?" Maklr asked.

"I'm not sure. There's a lot of things in the brochure that we could do, but some of it just doesn't sound appealing."

"Camping?"

Nell shuddered. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that. Do you remember the lake we saw when we were walking up to go zip lining?"

“The one with the boats?”

“If you want to, we could maybe rent a boat, either the automatic ones or a paddle one?”

“Sounds like it could be a lot of fun.”

“I don’t think I was ever on a kayak, and it’s been a very long time since I was on a boat. It should be safe, right?”

“The resort wouldn’t offer it as an activity unless it was.”

“And you’re sure there’s no creatures living in it?” Nell asked.

“Fish, and probably some other smaller animals. But predators? No. What kind of business would have predators in their lakes?”

“True. Maybe I’m being silly and overthinking.”

“No, you’re cautious. Nothing wrong with that.” Maklr washed his mug out. “As far as I’m aware, the only creature capable of causing harm is the stuffed cat on the bed.”

“Then I guess that’s our plan. Let’s do it.”

“I’ll pack a picnic lunch?”

“And I’ll finally change out of my pajamas,” Nell said, laughing. “We spent all morning thinking about what we were going to do. I hope there are some boats available.”

Maklr tapped on his tablet. “It says there’s only four rented today. We should be able to claim one.”

“Great.” Nell changed rapidly, emerging minutes after Maklr placed the last sandwich in a fabric bag.

“I made two sandwiches for you, and there’s a massive canteen of water in the bag. I’ll carry it,” he said as she reached to grab the bag’s handles.

“What else is in there? Gold?” she teased.

“No. Six sandwiches and water. But it’s heavy.”

“Suit yourself.”

On the way, Nell stopped to pick some ripe fruit off the trees that dotted the wooden path. She popped a bright yellow piece into her mouth. “These are the closest thing to strawberries I’ve tasted.”

“Is this a good thing?” Maklr asked.

“I used to love strawberries. I remember they taste divine if you mixed them with chocolate, likecorul.”

Maklr shook his head. “I don’t think I’ve ever tried anything like that. Humans are sure to be inventive with their foods.”

“Hello again! Good afternoon,” the young male Klagan employee said. “I’m working the boats today. Isn’t it exciting? The resort changes up our assignments so we don’t get bored.” His enthusiasm was contagious.

“Sounds fun. Nothing worse than a boring job, right?” Nell said.

“How can I assist you today?”

“We would like to rent a boat,” Maklr explained.

“What kind do you want? You can try the individual one.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been on one.” Nell watched as a woman about her age attempted to climb into a kayak.

“It’s not too difficult once you’re used to it.”

Nell held up her hand. “Wait. If there’s a learning curve, I don’t think I need to do it. Our time here is meant to be relaxing, and that,” she said, pointing at a couple on the lake attempting to navigate the oars of their kayaks, “does not look relaxing. With my luck, I’d fall right into the water and I didn’t bring a change of clothes with me today.”

“Fair enough,” the young male said. “Would you like to take the automatic boat? It has a screen display where you can program the exact route you want to take and the duration of your trip. Once you claim a boat, it is yours for a full day and night cycle.”

“Night cycle as well?” Maklr asked.

“Yes. Some of our clients like to watch the stars at night and the moons as they rise over the water. I’ve heard the evening and nighttime boat rides are popular for what humans call dates. According to some of our former clients, they found it extremely romantic,” he winked at Maklr.

“Oh.” A flush crept up Nell’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“You didn’t,” she said.

Maklr looked at Nell. “Should we?”

“It would be a waste to ruin a pleasant afternoon and a picnic. Why not?” she said.

Maklr pressed his finger to the resort’s tablet, renting the boat for the day. He climbed on board first and lifted Nell off the dock onto the deck. “Where should we go first?” he asked, bringing up a map of the lake.

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“What are those dots in blue?” she asked. “They’re moving. I thought you said nothing big lived in the lake.”

“I believe those are other rented boats,” Maklr said, pointing with his extended claw. “Look, this one must be us. The dots on the opposite side of the lake aren’t stationary. They’re moving.”

“Can we plot a course far away from them?”

“Sure.” Maklr and Nell worked together, enhancing the screen.

“Look, the red dots are little pins with notes from the resort and former tourists. What does that say?”

“This one says this is a fantastic spot for seeing exotic birds.” Maklr pointed. “Here’s where someone mentioned an area with natural shade where there’s a spot for the boat to tie up and go ashore and rest out of the sun’s heat.” He snorted. “Wait till you hear this comment. It’s less practical. Someone noted where they saw a flying creature eat a water creature.”

Nell laughed hysterically. “Nature did its thing. A bird ate a fish and someone cared enough to leave a note about it?”

Maklr smiled. “To each their own.”

“I’m not sure I would have thought it important enough to immortalize in the resort’s system.”



Maklr shrugged. “Maybe someone had never seen wildlife in action before? I think we’re done plotting our course.” They spent the entirety of the late afternoon on the boat and into the early evening. “It’s getting darker. Would you like to head back to the cabin?”

“Not right now. I’d like to see the stars if that’s acceptable to you?” Nell asked.

“Of course. Dorbound’s city center has too much light pollution for me sometimes. I’d enjoy seeing them as well.” Maklr guided the boat to the center of the lake. “I think our best viewing would be here.” He dropped the boat’s anchor. “It should be a prime stargazing location with no trees to obstruct our view.”

Nell leaned back on the vinyl seat, drinking in the moonlight and a myriad of stars twinkling over the water. “I’m going to lie on the floor,” she said.

“I think on a boat it’s called a deck, but I could be wrong,” Maklr said. “Here, for your head.” He wrapped the picnic bag around the partially empty canteen. “A pillow of sorts.”

“Thank you. You’re probably right on the name.” She propped her head on the cloth. “Oh, this is much more comfortable than craning my neck. Care to join me?”

Maklr positioned himself next to her.

“Isn’t the sky beautiful?”

“Gorgeous.”

Nell tilted her face. “You’re not even looking at the stars.”

“No, you’re much more beautiful.”

“I’m just me,” Nell whispered.

“And you’re beautiful.”

Nell reached for Maklr’s hand and intertwined their fingers. They rested there, listening to the evening songs of birds and relaxed at the water lapping against the boat. She rolled to the side and took Maklr’s free hand in hers. “I want to kiss you, please,” she said.

“If you wish.”

She pressed her lips against his. This time, she took his hand and placed it over her breast.

“May I?” Maklr asked, breaking away from her.

“I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t want to feel your touch,” she said.

His palm caressed her breast over her shirt. He took care not to apply too much pressure on her nipple, which pebbled as her excitement grew. Nell thrust her chest forward and released his other hand, placing it on her other breast. “Please touch me more,” she said. His fingers played with her nipples, rolling them softly against his calloused fingers. “More,” Nell encouraged.

“May I suck on your breasts?” Nell pulled her shirt over her head, exposing her bikini top to his view. Maklr moved the scrap of cloth to the side. He kissed and licked one nipple. She moved closer and moaned, throwing her head in pleasure at his warm mouth over her sensitive peak. “You’re so responsive.”

Maklr rolled onto his back and pulled Nell on top of him. “Be in charge,” he said. “Everything that happens is your choice.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do.”

“Whatever you want.”

Nell sighed and lowered herself, placing her bare breast over his mouth. He opened his lips, accepting her proffered nipple. Maklr licked and suckled on her. She placed his other hand against her other breast, and he gently kneaded it against his massive palm. He stopped instantly when she pulled back, a look of concern on her face. “Maklr, something weird. I think there’s something wrong with me.”

Maklr dropped his hands to his sides. “What’s the matter? What happened? Show me where it hurts.” He instantly flashed into doctor mode.

“It’s wet. Do you think the boat sprung a leak?”

“I don’t think so.” Maklr tilted his head while listening. “The boat has sensors. We’d know if something happened. Where’s the water coming from?”

“My pants are damp,” Nell said in a voice so low Maklr asked her to repeat.

“Isn’t that normal?”

“I don’t... I don’t understand,” Nell said. “It’s here.” She pointed to the juncture of her thighs.

“Human women get wet when they’re aroused. Has that ever happened to you?”

Nell shook her head. “No. They always used lube.”

“Oh.”

“So I’m not broken?”

Maklr smiled. “Not at all. Completely normal.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m a doctor.”

“In that case, there’s one other thing I should tell you about,” she said. “It aches.”

“Where?”

“Here. There’s pressure.” She pointed to the junction of her thighs.

“Have you ever had an orgasm?” Maklr asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“You’d know if you did.”

Nell leaned back, resting her weight on her hands. “Can I ask a favor?”

“Anything. Always.”

“Is it possible to have an orgasm without having sex?”

“Yes,” he answered matter-of-factly.

Nell quieted, staring at the stars. “Can you help me? I want to have one.”

“If that’s what you want, I will gladly do anything for you.” Maklr’s pants tented, his erection visible in the moonlight. “May I touch you?” he asked. “I’ll tell you everything I’m doing before I do it.”

“Okay,” Nell said, her voice shaky.

“I’m going to put my hand over your pants.” He covered the crotch of her pants in his hand.

“Your touch feels wonderful,” she said.

He began to rub slowly over the fabric, applying light pressure.

“No, I don’t want to deal with fabric. I want to feel you.” She took his hand and his fingers to the waistband of her pants. “Please?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“I’ve never done this before,” he said.

“Me neither.” Nell’s legs pressed together.

“If you’re uncomfortable at any point, I will stop.”

“I know. Go on,” she said.

He placed his hand over her bikini bottom, partially exposed under her pants. He let two of his fingers rest over her sensitive skin, while his middle finger parted her pussy lips. “I’m going to rub your clit now, under the fabric,” he said.

Nell nodded.

His middle finger slid under the thin scrap of fabric, hovering over her sensitive nub. With a feather-light touch, he explored her with his hand, never taking his eyes off her face. When he applied the tiniest amount of pressure, she jumped, squeezing her legs together, pinning his finger against her bundle of nerves. Wetness coated his finger and she parted her thighs. He rubbed small circles around her sensitive button, taking care not to go near her core.

“Maklr,” Nell cried. Her chest heaved. “Is it true that sometimes males place their lips on a female, like a female does when she sucks on a male?”

“Yes, that happens.” Maklr’s hand stilled.

“Can you?”

“Do you want me to?”

“I need more than your finger. I want to feel your mouth on me.”

“If you’re sure,” he said.

“I am.”

He lowered himself so his nose and mouth were right above her bikini bottoms, posing as underwear. Maklr inhaled her scent. “You smell divine,” he said, his voice deep. “I’m going to move the side of your panties to get to your clit,” he said. He tried to reach his tongue against her. “It’s not going as well as I hoped,” he said. “There goes my plan.”

“Please?” Nell asked.

“Lay back. Raise your hips.”

Nell shimmied out of the bottoms. “What do I do now?”

“Spread your legs for me.” Maklr lay on his stomach. He rested her legs over his shoulders. “Guide me,” he said, taking her hands and placed them on his horns. “Show me what you need.”

She gave him a tentative tug forward. “Lick me. Make me feel good,” she said. Maklr’s tongue darted out, waiting for Nell to instruct him. “Please,” she begged.

At first taste, he licked and sucked on her clit like a man starving. He used his tongue to flick circles around her clit and sensitive skin, causing her to moan his name.

“Yes. More. More,” she cried. His tongue dipped close to her core. At first, she clamped her legs, squeezing his head with her thighs. He groaned against her center. She released his horns and tapped his shoulders. “Hands,” she moaned. He raised his hands, and she placed them on her hips. His fingers added slight pressure on her skin. Nell placed her hands back on his horns, grinding his face against her pussy. He thrust his tongue inside her warm channel, lapping up her wetness. Her legs quivered, and he kept the pace, licking, sucking, until her whole body shook and she screamed his name.

He rolled onto his back, bringing her to her knees on top of him. Maklr lifted her off his tongue long enough to tell her to ride his face. Nell moved his hands onto her breasts, his thumb and pointer finger rolling her nipples as he feasted on her soaking cunt. He didn’t stop playing with her until he threw her head back, arms and legs shaking. His hands held her quivering form as she rode out another orgasm.

“Maklr,” she shrieked before collapsing on top of him.

He held her, kissing the top of her head. “Are you all right?”

Nell looked at him through half-lidded eyes. “More than all right.” She snuggled against him. “Thank you.”

They fell asleep, waking with the sun rising overhead.



“Morning,” Maklr said.

“Morning.” Nell looked at Maklr. “So question...” Maklr arched a white eyebrow waiting for her to continue. “Do you think we should pin the location of that in that GPS?” Maklr threw his head back and roared with laughter.

### Chapter 15

Maklr

Nell walked into the kitchen. Her steps were slow, hesitant. “What’s on your mind?” Maklr asked.

“I can’t believe we’re going to have to go back to Dorbound in a few days.”

Maklr nodded. “We have a few more days. Charlie sent me a comm. The work on your family section started yesterday. She was worried when I didn’t message her back.”

Nell groaned and put her head in her hands. “Oh no. I hope she doesn’t think something’s wrong. When did she message?” Nell opened her tablet.

“Last night.”

“Crap. She sent me half a dozen messages, and I didn’t reply to any of them.” She punched a message into the tablet. “Sending her a comm now.”

“We were busy enjoying ourselves.” Maklr winked. “At least I was.”

Nell’s face turned crimson. “Oh.”

Maklr knelt in front of her. “Do you regret it?”

“Not at all.”

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked.

Nell stroked Maklr’s hair. “You did everything right. It’s me. I’m embarrassed.”

“Why?”

“Because...” she waved her hands wildly.

“Because it was your first time with my mouth on your pussy?”

“First time anyone put their mouth there.”

Maklr rumbled low in his throat. His eyes darkened. “Mine. Only my mouth claims your cunt.” His gaze intensified. “Nell, I know you don’t like possessiveness, but you are mine. I feel an indescribable need to protect you. If you wanted someone else to touch you intimately, it’d take all my willpower not to kill them.”

Nell’s eyes opened wide. “I only want you.”

“Good.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t reciprocate. I know what males like.”

Maklr gripped the chair leg. “Not all males are the same. I am yours. Your pleasure and comfort are paramount. Any male worth knowing feels the same way.”

Nell’s eyes filled with tears. “You didn’t get off. And we didn’t have sex.”

“Who said I didn’t?” Maklr rested his cheek on Nell’s knee. “You felt overwhelmed.” Plus, it was dark and my pants were on. Remember what I said. You are mine. I don’t care how long it takes, or if we never get to that point. When you’re ready, I’ll be here, waiting for you.”

“What if it takes years?” Nell asked, her voice small.

Maklr shrugged. “It will take however long it takes until you are comfortable. If that point never comes, then it doesn’t.”

“You’ll want to give up on me.”

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“Never.” He took her hands in his, resting them on her knees. “I will never give up on you Nell. Look how far you’ve come. I have no doubt that one day, you’ll be ready. And as long as you want me, I’ll be there with you.”

“I want to be with you,” Nell whispered. “I’m just not ready.” Her fingers intertwined with his.

“I can wait. I’ve spent most of my life pretending I didn’t need anyone,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because needing someone meant they could leave at any moment.”

“Your brother,” Nell murmured. “And now?” she asked. “You know I’m not going to leave you.”

He looked down at their hands, then slowly squeezed her fingers. “You want honesty and my raw emotions. I’m terrified of losing you. I need you, and I’m not as strong of a person as you are.”

She leaned forward, resting her forehead against his. “That’s not a weakness. And I’m not strong.”

Their breath mingled in the space between them. He reached up, cupping the side of her face. At first, his touch was tentative. She leaned into his caress. When he kissed her, it wasn’t about hunger. He poured his soul into the kiss, filling it with trust and devotion.

Nell's comm beeped, signaling an incoming vid call. They jumped apart, startled by the intrusion. "Oh shit. It's Charlotte. Do I look okay?"

"Aside from your lips being swollen from my kiss, you look fine." Maklr winked. He handed her a mug. "Here."

Nell quickly took a sip of the steaming tea. She held the mug to her lips and answered Charlotte's call.

"Nell! Is everything okay? You didn't answer my messages or calls. How come?"

"I was busy last night."

"Busy?"

"Yes, you sent me to this resort to relax. I was."

"How are things going with Maklr?" Charlotte asked. "He's not interrupting your relaxation, is he?"

"Better than I expected," Nell said.

"He's being a complete gentleman, right?"

"Of course."

"See, I told you there was nothing to worry about with him."

"I know."

"Want the truth?"

“Huh?”

“I’ve worked with him a long time, and he’s never taken an interest in anyone outside of work related relationships. I knew you’d be safe with him.”

Maklr gestured for Nell’s attention. He made a motion as if he were fishing.

“So, Maklr doesn’t like people?”

Charlie sighed. “I don’t know. But he’s harmless.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Nell said. “I think, given the right circumstances, he could be a very passionate man.”

“If you say so.”

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“I do. He put his rather large friend in place when the friend was too loud for me.”

“Philtan?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Phil’s the biggest Klagan I’ve ever seen. He’s adorable, but kind of dense.”

“Maklr yelled at him for making me uncomfortable. And he punched him in the jaw.”

“We’re talking about the same guy, right? The medic who couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag? That Maklr?”

“Hi Charlie,” Maklr said, dragging a chair next to Nell. “Good to know you think so little of my protective abilities. Although I don’t use my training much anymore, I am still a fully qualified warrior. I prefer to use my superpowers for good, not evil.”

Nell grinned. “You are learning about human culture.”

“Don’t worry, Charlie,” Maklr said. “You can rest assured Nell is in expert hands.”

“Very capable hands,” Nell piped up. “If I get a splinter, he can help me with that. If I burn myself cooking, he can fetch a regen wand.”

“If you wanted, I could even put a bandage on a stubbed toe.” Maklr and Nell laughed.

“It’s good to see you happier, both of you,” Charlie said. “I have to go, but I’m glad we caught up. Zand will fly out in a few days to bring you back to Eoris. The additions to the center are well underway and will need a few final touches when you return.”

Nell’s eyes turned serious. “Okay. See you soon.” She ended the call.

As soon as she put the tablet down, Maklr turned to her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Nell,” Maklr said.

“I know we have to go back. Our lives are there, but I’m enjoying myself. For the first time in ages, I feel like I’m living.”

“We have a few more days. We can do whatever you want.”

“Did you have anything in mind?”

“Can we go back to the waterfall? The one with the pool we went to on our first day?”

“Of course. Don’t forget to wear your bathing suit,” Nell said.

“I’m already wearing mine,” he said. “The weather is warm here, and I didn’t bring any pairs of short pants. Actually, Charlotte didn’t pack any for me.”

“I didn’t realize. Good point.” A few minutes later, she emerged from the bedroom covered in the resort’s signature brown robe. “While it may be warm for you, I’m still a bit chilly and I don’t feel like walking to the falls in my bathing suit,” she said.



“Fair.” They walked hand in hand to the first waterfall. Nell kicked off her shoes and sat on the ledge. Maklr stripped his shirt off and hopped into the water. He leaned back, his elbows rested on the stone. “It’s beautiful here,” he said, glancing at the waterfall.

“Are there places like this on Eoris?”

Maklr shook his head, a faraway look in his eyes. “Maybe. To be fair, I haven’t traveled much in the last few revolutions, not since I got off the ships.”

“But you want to travel, right?”

“Maybe. I would love to come back here again,” he said.

“Me too.” Nell unknotted the sash on her robe. She shrugged it off her shoulders. “Catch me,” she said.

Maklr stood in front of her, arms extended. Nell pushed off the ledge into his waiting embrace. He carefully lowered her into the water.

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“The water’s lovely. How come you didn’t tell me earlier?”

“You look peaceful. I didn’t want to disturb you. When we first met it was rare you had a look of serenity on your face. Now, I’m happy to report, it’s much more common.”

“Maklr,” a jovial voice called out.

Nell looked at Maklr. “I know I said I wanted it like the first day, but did he have to be here?”

“I didn’t communicate with him,” Maklr protested. “I’ve been with you the entire time. When would I have had a chance?”

“Hello, Nell,” Philtan greeted her. He had a different woman on his arm.

“I’m Jessie,” she said. “Human or Sudabian?” she asked.

“Human,” Nell answered.

“It’s hard to tell sometimes.”

Phil smiled at Jessie. “It’s why I wanted to clarify a few times with you.”

Nell sidled up to Maklr’s side, finding comfort in his arms. “Are you two together?” Jessie asked, eyes narrowing at them.

“Yes,” Maklr said.

“Cool.” Jessie turned and pulled something out of her bag, inflating it.

“Do you want to have a friendly competition?” Phil asked.

“What kind?” Maklr asked.

“I replicated a beach ball. Jessie told me about a human game where girlfriends sit on top of their boyfriend’s shoulders and they hit the ball back and forth. The first to fall in the water loses.” Philtan looked at them expectantly.

“I don’t know,” Maklr said. “We were just floating and relaxing.”

“Why not? It sounds like fun,” Nell said.

“No hard feelings?” Philtan asked.

Nell extended her hand to Phil. “None.”

Phil bent under the water, submerging himself to his neck. Jessie climbed onto his back, using his horns as handles.

“I’m not as big as Phil. I can’t do that,” Maklr said. He placed Nell up on the ledge and turned his back so Nell could climb on. “Drop your calves over my shoulders.” Nell obliged. Maklr stood, lifting Nell onto his back. He walked to the center of the pool. “How does this game work?” he asked Jessie.

Jessie sat straight and threw the ball toward Nell.

Nell leaned forward and spiked the ball back in Phil’s and Jessie’s direction. Jessie

stretched her arm, hitting it back in Nell and Maklr's direction. Nell nudged Maklr with her knee.

"Let's go. We can beat them," she said, a competitive edge in her voice.

Maklr patted her thigh. "That's my girl." They volleyed the ball back and forth multiple times, laughter filling the air.

Nell leaned forward. Maklr's damp mohawk dripped water between her breasts. She smacked the ball with all her might. It bounced off Jessie's forehead and into the water. She slid to the side, her knee hitting Philtan in the temple. Philtan lost his balance, and they toppled in. They emerged spluttering. "Good game. You win."

Maklr lifted Nell, kissing her solidly.

"Phil," Jessie complained. "I don't like to lose."

"Neither do I," Phil replied. "Should we try again?"

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Nell looked at Maklr. “What do you say? Should we go for the best two out of three?”

“Let’s go,” Maklr said.

“I got you a little gift,” Nell said.

“You didn’t have to get me anything.”

Nell tilted her head. “I know. It just felt like the right thing to do. I wanted to commemorate our time here on Ashuk.” Nell handed him a palm-sized black box tied with a white ribbon. She placed it in his hands. “Go on, open it,” she encouraged. “I hope you like it. It’s a little thank you for helping me create the best memories I’ve had in years, all because of you.”

“Nell, you gave it to me. How could I not love it?” Maklr plucked at the bow on the top. The ribbon slid off. He opened the lid. A silver-colored watch contrasted with the black foam padding inside the box. “A timepiece!”

“I thought it was appropriate. I’ve seen you in action at the center. You get lost in your activities and sometimes forget where you’re supposed to be. It has multiple settings and alarms you can set for different schedules.”

“I can use it for my rounds, or, more importantly, for dates with a certain person,” he said.

Nell flushed. “Charlie?”

“Maybe. I was thinking of a certain somebody else.”

“Really?”

Maklr tilted Nell’s chin up for a kiss. “Thank you.”

“Wear it in good health.”

Maklr looked at her, a confused expression on his face. Nell shook her head and laughed. “That’s one human saying I don’t know how to explain.”

## Chapter 16

Nell

“Howwasyourretreat?”Zand asked two days later after Nell, Maklr and Philtan climbed onto his shuttle and settled into their seats.

“I had a great time,” Phil said, his voice boisterous. “I met a lot of wonderful females.”

“I bet you did,” Zand said.

“I think every time we saw you, you had a different woman with you,” Maklr said.

“At least one,” Phil teased. “Sometimes there were two or three.”

“Good for you,” Nell said under her breath.

Philtan held out his hands. “Who am I to deny a woman their pleasure? Especially if they want it? Sudabians are a passionate bunch. Most are excited to spend the night

with me. They usually want to know if I'm large everywhere. The only right thing to do is oblige, right?" He waggled his eyebrows.

Nell chuckled, used to his antics.

"For the record, I am."

"You are what? Annoying?" Maklr teased. "We knew that."

"Large all over," Phil bragged.

"Whoever gets you is going to have their hands full," Nell said. "Good luck to her."

"In more ways than one." Phil waggled his eyebrows.

Maklr and Zand groaned at the same time. Nell rolled her eyes.

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“Only you, Philtan. Only you,” Zand said.

The three chatted the entire trip back to Dorbound. “It’s good to see a change in everyone,” Zand said. “I’ve noticed that place tends to bring out the best in everyone. Must be the water there. Or something in the air.”

“It was a fantastic place to relax. No one pressured anyone to participate in activities,” Maklr said. “I got some work done. Went ziplining. Had fun.”

“Maklr? You let loose?”

“I did.”

“Somehow, I don’t believe it,” Zand said.

“He did,” Nell said. “He accompanied me because I was scared.”

“Wow. You’re good for him,” Zand said. “In case you’re curious, Maklr, I went to the center yesterday. Things are coming along nicely. It needs a coat of paint or two, and I’m not sure what some of the carpenters and blacksmiths are building, but it looks interesting. It looks like an obstacle course, but not.”

“That was all Nell’s idea.”

“What is it?” Zand asked.

“It’s a playground for children,” Nell said.



“Tell me about the purpose of a playground. Does it teach human children to fight?” Zand asked. “Does it train them for war?”

“No.” Nell nudged Maklr. “I might need your help,” she said. She described the different apparatus, and Maklr tried to explain their purpose.

Zand’s face scrunched in confusion. “I’m still not understanding.”

“I have a general idea what she’s talking about, but since I haven’t seen the playground in person, I can’t visualize it,” Maklr said.

“Well, whatever it is, I’ll be too big for it,” Philtan boasted.

“Very true. Human children are much smaller than me,” Nell said.

“And you’re tiny,” Phil said.

“Anyone’s tiny compared to you.”

Unlike the journey to Ashuk, the trip back to Eoris and Dorbound felt like it had passed in the blink of an eye. Zand landed in the outcropping behind the rehabilitation center.

Charlie waited on the ground, waving her arms in a wide arc. “Nell,” she cried, rushing toward her friend, embracing her tightly.

Nell returned the hug. “Thank you for sending me,” she said. “I had a wonderful time.”

Charlie held her hand. “You look fantastic. Lighter than I’ve ever seen you. Wait until Ivy sees you.”

Nell smiled. “Where are we going first?” she asked.

“Would you like to see the progress at the center?”

“Naturally,” Maklr said, slinging his and Nell’s bag on his back. He glanced at Nell, who was holding her hands folded in front of her body. “I’m sure you want to see your designs, right?”

“Please,” Nell said.

“I brought a land conveyance,” Charlotte said. “We can take that, since you’ve got the bags.”

“I’d like to stretch,” Nell said.

“Philtan, you can take the conveyance,” Charlotte called.

He waved in acknowledgement.

Maklr walked next to Nell and gasped at the transformation the center had undergone while they were away. “Wow,” Nell said.

The trio walked around the center. Charlotte showed Maklr and Nell the new rooms, painted with a quick-dry formula. Shelves lined one wall, full of original, custom-made supplies. Nell pointed out the swing set and climbing frame.

“Oh, that’s what it is,” Maklr said.

“As soon as we get children here, I’ll show you how it works. There’s a bunch of different ways people can use it.”

“Sounds good,” Maklr said.

“Maklr? Is that you?” another medic called. “I didn’t know you were back, but I’m glad. I’ve got a case that needs your expertise.”

Maklr’s shoulders slumped. “I can’t deny aid. I’m sorry, duty calls.”

“No, of course not,” Nell said. “I’ll be back later.”

Maklr handed Nell her bag. “I’ll take it,” Charlotte said.

“I’m not an invalid,” Nell protested.

Maklr stuck out his hand to shake Nell's. She leaned in for a hug.

"Awkward," Charlie teased.

Maklr change his arms, accepting Nell's hug. "I'll see you soon," he said, his voice deep.

"Yes."

As soon as Maklr disappeared into the main area of the rehab center, Charlie turned to Nell. "Okay. Girl, spill the details. What happened on Ashuk?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"I call bullshit."

Nell shook her head. "No, really."

"Uh huh." Charlotte shot her a look of disbelief. Back in the human transition center, Nell headed up to her room. "Where are you going?"

Nell's lips twitched. "I'm going to put my clothes in the refresher. Maybe do a little journaling."

"Before you go, can I see your tablet?" Charlotte asked.

"Sure," Nell handed it to her. "Please tell me you're not sending me away again. I've only been back for a few hours. I only went because you forced me to."

"I knew what was best for you."

“Right.” Nell rolled her eyes. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“I will. I’m just that good,” Charlotte teased. She handed Nell her tablet back.

“What did you do to it?”

“I added a file.”

“Which one?”

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

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“Cryptic much?” Nell walked up the flight of stairs to her room greeting other residents and leaving small treats in front of their rooms from her trip. Her room remained the same as before she left for the resort. She placed her stuffed cat on its place of honor in the center of her bed. “We had a good run, didn’t we?” she said to the stuffed cat. She talked to the plush as she unpacked her clothes and put them in the refresher, the Klagan equivalent of a laundry machine. Then she lay back on the bed, cuddling it to her chest. “I love you and all, but you’re not Maklr.” She sighed.

“Coming down for dinner?” Charlie called later. She knocked on the door. “Can I come in?”

“Sure, and no, not feeling hungry right now.”

“Are you alright? Do you want to talk? We can have a therapy session now?”

Nell shook her head. “I’m good. Thanks.”

“What were you up to?”

“Writing. Documenting my vacation. Your suggestion helps me get my feelings out.”

Charlie nodded. “I’ll make sure there’s a plate of leftovers for you for later.”

“Thank you.”

Charlotte closed the door behind her. Nell turned her attention back to the tablet.

“Open when you’re lonely.” She smirked. “Damn it.”

“I miss Maklr,” she said to the caton. “I got used to having him around.” Nell’s finger hovered over the button. The cat’s face remained impassive, but Nell nevertheless pretended it did. “Exactly. I should press it.”

Inside the file was a code of mixed numbers and letters. “Should I?” Nell asked the ever-silent plush. “Do it? Why not?” she said, pressing the button.

A video screen popped up. “Nell?” Maklr’s voice came through. “Is everything okay?”

“I swear, I didn’t know this was your communication code.”

Maklr shook his head, his shoulders rising and falling with laughter. “Damn it, Charlie. She’s meddling again, isn’t she?”

“She is.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“I know your ‘nothing.’ What is it?” Maklr’s voice filled with concern.

“I can’t sleep. I’ve tried for hours, but all I’ve done is toss and turn. I even hugged the plush.” Nell waved the caton in front of the camera. “But it’s not the same. I got used to sleeping with you, and how safe I felt.”

“Do you want me over there?” he asked. “I can be there in ten minutes.”

“I’ll wait by the door.”

They hung up. Nell raced downstairs, punched in the alarm code for the center, and opened it so Maklr could slip inside when he arrived. “Come in.” She headed toward the stairs.

“No, I shouldn’t,” he said.

“Fine.” She walked over to the couch in the communal living room and sat. “Sit next to me. I think we get that show we watched on Ashuk here.” She handed Maklr the control.

He experimented with the control, searching for the show. Nell leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder, his arm wrapped around her. Nell bent her knees, putting her feet on the other cushion. She sighed contentedly and fell asleep.

## Chapter 17

Nell

Nell walked around the rehabilitation center, her senses on high alert. She jumped at every shadow and every sudden sound. Her heart thudded at every bit of movement out she believed she saw out of the corner of her eye.



“What’s wrong?” Maklr asked.

“Nothing.”

“You seem off.” Maklr sighed. “Don’t take this wrong. I know I’m not always the most tactful person, but you seem like the old Nell, prior to our time away.”

Nell plopped on the two-seater couch in Maklr’s office, propping her legs up over the armrest. “Yes and no,” she said. “Something feels off, but I can’t explain the feeling I have.”

“Can you describe it?” Maklr’s demeanor changed to medic mode in an instant. “Have you talked to Charlotte about it? Maybe it’s not a physical issue, but a mental health one?”

“Do you think maybe I’ve pushed myself too far? Or gone too fast? I mean, I’ve been helping you here every day since we got back.”

Maklr scratched his chin. “Perhaps.”

“Do you think I could be sick?”

“Doubtful, but to be on the safe side, let’s check.” Maklr pulled out an assessing scanner. “One moment. Let me calibrate it for human physiology.” He handed it to Nell.

She passed the wand over her body slowly, concentrating on the area around her

temple and eyes.

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I need glasses. Vision correctors,” she said. “How’d I do, Doc?” She handed him the wand.

Maklr stared at the screen. “Based on these results, you don’t need glasses. Your eyesight is almost perfect. Everything else seems fine.” He put the wand away. “What made you think you needed glasses?”

Nell huffed. “I’ve been seeing shadows everywhere. It could just be my mind playing tricks on me.”

“Shadows? At what time of the day?”

Nell nodded. “Yeah, shadows. All different times. Morning, evening on my way home. Sometimes when I’m here walking in a corridor. But we have a lot of construction going on, and there are building materials all over. When I walk past a pallet of supplies, the shadow disappears.”

“Hmm.” Maklr made a non-committal sound. “Maybe it’s something to worry about. Maybe not. I’m glad you mentioned it.”

“I’m safe here. Nothing’s out to get me, especially not with an entire building full of Klagan warriors around me.”

“What about when you’re not here?”

Nell shrugged. “I don’t go anywhere alone. I’m always with people, even when I walk from here to the transition center or the park.” She kicked her feet. “Security is

tight at the center with all sorts of biometric scanners, checkpoints, and its proximity to the palace with the Royal Guards. No one in their right mind would try to get in.”

“You have a point.”

“When’s your shift over?”

“In an hour or two.” Maklr glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Don’t forget you have a watch on your wrist,” she said.

“My first gift from you. How could I forget?”

“Is it set?” Nell asked. “Well...” Maklr winked. He sighed. “I can’t tease you any longer. It is. After I’m finished for the evening, would you like to stroll in the park? Maybe we could get some of that dessert humans are fond of... creamed ice? No, ice cream.”

“Ice cream? I love ice cream.”

“I really like the white with speckled colored one.”

“What? Vanilla?”

Maklr shrugged. “I don’t know. It has crunchy brown speckles in it.”

“Chocolate chip?”

“That’s it!”

“Have you ever had chocolate on its own?”

“Not that I know of.”

“It tastes like frozen corul.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely!” Nell’s face lit up. “There’s a reason humans call that drink hot chocolate.”

“Sounds delicious. I’ll have to try it,” he said, glancing at his watch. “My break’s over. I have rounds. If you want to stay here and wait, you’re more than welcome.”

Nell tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Thanks for the offer, but I’m going to head to the family area. Our first family patient is scheduled to arrive for therapy today. He’s bringing his mate and child.”

“Celvhon’s appointment is today?”

“Yes. Charlie asked if I could explain how to work some of the more human apparatus to them.”

“Fantastic. I’ll meet you there when I’m done?”

“And we can get ice cream after?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Maklr bent to kiss the top of Nell’s head. They walked to the elevator, took it to the first floor, and went in opposite directions.

“Good evening,” Nell greeted the family. She walked over to shake their hands.

“Was this family center your idea?” the Klagan woman asked. “My name is Hannie. This is my mate Celvhon, and our daughter, Stella.”

“Stella?” “Yes, it’s a human name. She’s named after the human female who helped save my mate’s life,” Hannie explained.

“It’s a beautiful name and a touching tribute.” Nell smiled. “I’m sure the adult Stella felt honored. Aren’t you beautiful, little Stella?” Nell said to the child who couldn’t be over two revolutions old.

“Stella is a bit too young for some things here, but I bet you’d like the swings, right, sweet girl?” Nell guided the family to the swing set. “Do you mind if I demonstrate how to use it?” she asked, seeing the confusion on the Klagan couple’s faces.

“Please,” Hannie said.

“First, we’ll place Stella in the bucket seat and fasten the straps over her shoulders. I’ll show you how to do everything. Don’t panic. Then, we’ll push her together, then I’ll show your wife and the two of you will push Stella, and then you’ll be able to do it on your own.”

A look of determination settled on Celvhon’s face. “What if I hurt her?”

“You won’t.”

“I admire your confidence,” he said.

Nell laughed wryly. “It’s taken me a long time to become this confident. I still have a lot of work to do myself,” she said. “Here, place your hands in this position and give Stella a gentle push like so.” She demonstrated. The little girl raised her arms in the air, giggling and babbling contentedly.

“I think she likes it,” Hannie said.

“Probably. Most human children do. I’ve never met any Klagan children. Stella is my first. I assumed all children would like the concept of a swing.”

“Where do I put my hands again?” Celvhon asked.

“Here.” Nell pointed.

“I can show him,” the little girl’s mother said. “I have an idea. Do you feel comfortable on your own for a few minutes?” Nell asked.

“Yes,” Hannie answered.

Nell rushed into the supply room. She rummaged around, looking for a small can of white paint. When she found it hidden behind the much larger cans, she grabbed it by the handle and raised it up in triumph. “Thanks Maklr, for wanting things in clinical white,” she said to the sky. Nell walked through the corridor toward the family therapy area. Halfway to the young couple, the hair on the back of her neck and arms stood on edge.

She hustled toward Celvhon who was pushing his daughter in the swing using his knuckles.

“Are you all right, Nell?” he asked. “You look more pale than you did before,” he said.

“I’m fine. I was just startled by something.”

Celvhon growled. His horns lengthened and his claws extended. “Is there a threat?” he asked. “My daughter is here.”

“No, not at all. I’ve been jumpy lately, that’s all. It was just a shadow.”

Celvhon gave her a look that she interpreted as he didn’t believe her, but he dropped the topic. “What’s with the paint?”

“It’s to help you remember where to put your hands.” Nell opened the lid, dipped her hands in the paint and pressed them against the swing seat. “The paint will be dry

almost instantly. Maklr, the chief medic, made sure to order this specific brand because of its ability to dry. Sometimes, I'm grateful for his impatience." She grinned.

"Impatience or efficiency?" Maklr said, strolling into the family therapy area. He wore his civilian clothing of black pants and a loose black vest cut solo and showed off his sculpted pectoral muscles. "How is our patient doing?"

"I've been pushing Stella in the swing."

Nell smirked. "Not the way I taught you."

Celvhon huffed. "Fine, I'll do it your way." He placed his hands on the now dry paint and gave a light push. Stella screamed in excitement. "This is actually fun," he said.

Another medic, one Nell didn't recognize, walked over. "Leaving early tonight, Maklr?" he asked. "I am. I finished my rounds earlier than expected."

"That's good," Nell said.

"Oh?" the second medic questioned.

Nell looked at Maklr and winked. "Yes, someone owes me ice cream."

They headed toward the exit. Hannie called out. "Before you go, I have a quick question for you, Maklr." Nell waited by the door. Maklr trotted over to answer her question. "See you soon. You're making good progress," Maklr called once back at Nell's side.

"Thank you," the family replied. Stella, still babbling, waved her fists in the air.



“Time for ice cream?” Maklr reached for Nell’s hand. “Let’s go to the park and get a cone.”

“I’m not super hungry. We can share a cone.”

“If that’s what you want.” He paid for the treat, and they headed to a bench overlooking the city. Nell licked one side. “Hits the spot,” she said.

“Weird humans. I know that’s just a phrase.” Maklr licked the other side at the same time as Nell. Their tongues met, mouths forming into a kiss.

“It’s getting late,” Nell said. “I should get back, but I don’t want tonight to end. It’s been perfect.”

Maklr nodded in agreement. “As much as I agree, I should get you back home.”

Nell clung to Maklr’s arm, heading out of the park toward the transition center. “Maybe it’s autumn in the air and the cooler weather causing me to see things that aren’t there.”

Maklr stopped under a street light near Dorbound’s most popular club, Club Vortex. He leaned in, pressing his lips against her ear. To any passers-by, they’d appear to be a couple enjoying an evening out, taking a breather from the pulsing music of the nightclub. “You’re right. Something’s off.”

“I am?”

“I’ll get you home, but I’m staying with you tonight.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“Okay,” Nell said, her voice small. She jumped as a boisterous, drunken couple

stumbled out of the club directly into their path.

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“Watch where you’re going,” Maklr called. “Nell, do you mind if I carry you? I can make it to the center faster,” he said.

“Please.”

He scooped Nell in his arms, his stride sure, quick. Maklr didn’t stop until he made it inside the center, grateful every guard on duty knew him and didn’t force him to let Nell go. Once inside the center, he marched to the communal living area and put Nell down.

Nell started for the stairs. She was halfway up when she realized Maklr was no longer next to her. “Why are you standing there?” she asked.

“The guest rooms are on this floor. I should have asked first, but are they in use?”

“I know, but my room’s upstairs.” Nell walked back down the stairs to Maklr.

“Are they in use?”

“The guest rooms?”

“Yes.”

“Who cares?” She took both his hands in hers and stood on her toes to press a chaste kiss to his lips. “I’d sleep better knowing you’re with me like we did at the resort,” she said.

“If you’re sure.”

“Well, either you stay in my room with me, or I stay in the guest room with you. To be honest, my room is a bit more comfortable.”

## Chapter 18

Nell

Nell led Maklir to her room. “It’s kind of plain,” she said.

“Decorations don’t matter,” he said. “Are you happy with it?”

“It’s comfortable. Safe. Predictable.” She opened the door. “Come on in.”

Nell sat on the bed, close to the pillow. “I’m sorry it’s small,” she said.

“It’s yours. This room is your safe area, a safe space. I’m intruding into your sanctuary.” Maklir stayed near the door.

“Aren’t you going to shut it?” she asked. “There are other people living here.”

His eyes widened. “Are you not allowed to bring guests into your rooms? Is there a rule against that? I’m sure there must be, especially at night.”

Nell laughed softly. “No, nothing of the sort. You’re such a rule follower.”

“Life is better with rules,” Maklir said, sitting on the floor.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I can sleep on the floor and hold your hand all night,” Maklr said.

Nell shook her head. “I thought you would hold me?”

“In bed?” He eyed the bed cautiously. “It’ll be a tight fit.”

“If you sleep against the window, I can lay in front of you and you can hold me all night.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

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Maklr sat on the edge of the bed to take off his boots. He placed them quietly on the floor near the foot of the bed. He motioned towards his shirt. “This will wrinkle if I sleep in it. Do you mind if I take it off?”

“Go ahead. What about your pants?”

“My pants won’t wrinkle.”

“If you want to take them off, you can,” Nell said.

She walked to her small closet and procured a hanger. “Here.” She hung his shirt next to her clothing. “Can you move the plush please?”

Maklr placed the plush on the window sill and Nell pulled down the covers. Maklr crawled on the bed, pressed his back against the wall and lay with his left arm under her pillow. He patted his chest with his right arm. “Take your time.”

Nell walked to the door, twisted the lock into place. She dimmed the lights and stood before him. Her eyes glimmered. In one smooth motion, she pulled the tunic top over her head and she shimmied out of her pants. She stood before him wearing only a sports bra and a pair of panties.

Maklr’s mouth dropped open. “Nell,” he gasped.

She sat on the bed, slid down facing Maklr and pulled covers up before pressing her body against his. Her head rested on the pillow, their foreheads practically touching. Maklr kept his arm glued to his side, unwilling to move it without her permission.

Nell reached over and slid her hand onto his side. She ran her fingers over his stomach and up his chest. “Kiss me,” she murmured.

“Nell,” Maklr sighed.

“I love you, Maklr.”

“How I longed to hear those words. I love you too, Nell.” His lips met hers in a soft kiss.

Her hands roamed his body, caressing his skin. She moaned into his mouth as his hand moved over her shoulder underneath her bra strap and he palmed her breast. “Nell,” he breathed. He kissed her neck, her earlobes, and the sensitive spot just below her collarbone, feeling her shiver with pleasure at his touch. His hands moved slowly, caressing her skin as if memorizing every inch of her body. Nell’s breathing grew deeper, her eyes closed as she melted into his embrace. “My Nell.”

Nell parted her legs, resting her left knee over Maklr’s hip. “Touch me,” she said, her voice breathy.

“Are you ready?”

Nell nodded. She pulled the bra over her head and slid her panties down as far as she could reach. Nell’s body tensed as he trailed his fingertips along the contours of her hips, her waist, and the soft swell of her breasts.

She rolled onto her back. Maklr leaned up on his elbow. Nell had shut her eyes and twisted her head to the side, her eyelashes closed tight.

Suddenly. Maklr’s weight lifted off the bed. “I can’t. I won’t do this to you. You’re not comfortable.”

“I want this. I want you,” Nell protested.

“How can I make it more comfortable for you?”

Nell’s heart pounded. “What if,” she paused. “What if I’m on top and you didn’t touch me?”

“I can do that,” he said.

Nell climbed off the bed, allowing Maklr to take her spot. He placed his hands above his head, crossed at the wrist.

“Can I...” she trailed off.

“Nell, you can do anything you want to me,” he said.

“Can I tie your wrists?”

Maklr nodded. “Anything for your comfort.”

Nell took a ribbon off her small dresser, wrapped it around his wrists, and tied it in a loose bow. “I know it’s not really going to hold you back.”

“It’s symbolic. I will never hurt you. Use me. I’m yours to command,” he said. “You need to feel safe. Cherished. Desired. I want you completely at ease.”

Nell nodded. “I can do this.”



“You can,” Maklr encouraged.

She pulled off his pants, his erection springing forth.

“Can I suck you?” she asked.

“I am yours.”

Nell’s hands played with him, teasing him to his full length. She sucked him deep in her throat, rubbing his delicate sac. Her tongue swirled around the head, her cheeks hollowing out with the friction. “Nell,” Maklr said, his voice gruff. “I won’t last.”

She climbed up his body, placing her legs on either side of his head, and lowered her pussy to his mouth. “Make sure I’m wet enough, please,” she begged. Before she lowered herself down, she turned the plush cat around to look out the window. “There’s no need for him to see this,” she said.

Nell lowered herself over Maklr’s lips, his tongue darting out to lick from her center to her clit. He hummed his agreement. He flicked circles over her sensitive skin, and she threw her head back and moaned softly. “Yes, like that.”

At the edge of an orgasm, she rose to her knees and scooted backward down his body, straddling Maklr’s hips. Their eyes locked in silent understanding. Her lip trembled, exposing her vulnerability and trust.

“You’re nervous. Don’t do it if you’re not ready,” he said.

“And excited. And curious.” She raised up and untied his wrists. “Guide me?”

He reached up to hold her, lowering her into place as she positioned herself above him. “You control everything. You set the pace. Nell, you’re in charge of your own pleasure.” He whispered the words into her ear, his breath warm on her skin.

She hesitated a moment, then reached to kiss him, as she lowered herself over his erection.

“Slow. Take it slow,” Maklr crooned into her ear.

She shook with anticipation, impaling herself on his thick cock. “Good girl, Nell. Stop if you want to.”

Nell shook her head, lowering her body farther. His cock fully impaled her, causing her to stop. “Full.”

“You took all of me,” Maklr said, kissing her again. His hands roamed her back, tracing the line of her spine as he encouraged her with whispered praise. “You are beautiful.”

Nell leaned forward, rocking her hips back and forth against Maklr’s cock. Her hair cascaded around her face like a curtain and kissed him deeply. Her body trembled, her hips moving at a steady pace. She groaned, “Maklr.”

His hands slid to her hips to support her in finding the perfect angle as she took him deep inside her slick channel. The only sounds in the room were heavy breaths and Nell’s sighs of pleasure. Everything else ceased to exist, leaving only the two of them lost in the sacred moment.

“Maklr,” Nell panted, “I think,” she gasped for breath. He whispered encouragement

to her, urging her on.

“I love you, Nell. I love you,” he whispered. “You are mine, and I am yours.”

Nell ground against him, desire in her eyes. She leaned back slightly, placed her hand on his chest for balance, and took control over her orgasm.

Her pussy spasmed around his cock, milking him as she came with a cry. Maklr reached for her to capture her scream with his mouth. He gripped her hips and pumped two more times into her body, sharing his own release.

They collapsed back on the bed, a tangle of limbs. Nell’s chest heaved. “Mine,” she said, resting her head on his chest, her lashes fluttering shut.

## Chapter 19

Maklr

Thenextmorning,Nellstood in the kitchen cooking a massive meal over the largest burner on the stove.

“Good morning,” Charlie called. “You’re up early.”

“I am,” Nell agreed. She hummed a melody as she chopped vegetables for breakfast. Nell smashed the eggshell into small pieces and placed them into the basket used for compost. The omelette cooked, sizzling over the heat.

Charlotte poured herself a mug of tea. “Smells delicious.”

“See, I can cook,” Nell said, pulling two plates out of the cabinet.

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“No, thank you. I already ate,” Charlotte said.

“Oh, um,” Nell hesitated. “It wasn’t for you.”

“Good morning.” Maklr walked downstairs, his shirt from the previous night, wrinkle free.

Charlotte’s mouth dropped open. “I see,” she said.

Maklr sat at the table. “It’s not what you think, Charlie,” he started to say.

Charlotte wiggled her eyebrows. “If you say so.”

Nell cleared her throat. “Actually, it is exactly what you think.” Nell put her hand up in a stop motion. “Before you ask, no, I’m not giving details. Not now, not in therapy.”

Charlotte glanced at Maklr’s wrists.

“No bonding marks. She’s not ready. She may never be.”

“I didn’t believe I would be well enough for certain things. I need a bit more time. Maklr is patient with me.”

“And if Nell decides she’s never ready, that’s her choice. I will love her forever, with or without the marks.”

“Love?” Charlotte said.

“Love,” confirmed Nell. She placed the omelette in front of Maklr. The three sat at the farmhouse style table in an uncomfortable silence while Nell and Maklr ate.

“Listen,” Charlotte began. “I never would have pushed you two to stay together if I thought...”

“No. I’m grateful. It’s exactly what I didn’t know I needed,” Nell said. “The mix up at the resort was an unintentional overbooking, but I believe it was a happy accident.”

Maklr reached to hold Nell’s hand. “I prefer to think of it as fate intervening on our behalf.”

“Fate works too,” Nell nodded.

After breakfast, when more humans had descended the stairs to begin their day, shock at Maklr’s early presence in the center filled the room.

Maklr let Nell take the lead on how she handled discussing their relationship. “It’s nobody’s business but ours,” Nell said. “Either we tell them, or the rumor mill will start up and it’ll spiral out of control.”

Eventually, Nell took Maklr’s hand in front of all the residents. “Yes. Quit the rumors. Maklr and I are together.”

“Together, together?” someone in the back corner asked.

“Yes.” Nell confirmed. “Now, who wants to walk with us to the center to see the playground in action? We’re supposed to have five families try it out today.”

Half a dozen human residents, Charlotte, Maklr and Nell, headed to the center. Maklr and Nell brought up the rear of the rag-tag group.

Nell remained jumpy, leaning into Maklr for comfort. “I can’t explain it. It’s a weird sensation.”

“Remember the moment my comm dinged this morning, and woke us up?”

Nell had been laying sprawled over his chest, her leg between his.

“How could I forget?”

“Well, two things. Phil knows about us. He saw your head on my chest, and he wants to help. You two are comfortable with each other, right?”

Nell nodded. “Yes.”

“I brought him into the loop with the weird shadows.” Maklr took her hand. “We’re meeting him in a few minutes at the center to discuss your protection.”

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“I’m fine.”

“Please?” Maklr begged. “It’s not like you’ve got a bodyguard. It’s only for a few days to figure out whatever this is.”

“All right. If you insist, I’ll talk to him.”

“I do. He’s the best tactician I know.”

“There he is,” she said, keeping her voice low. Humans and Klagans mingled in the center. Younglings’ laughter filled the room. “Look at the kids enjoying themselves,” Nell said.

“Hey Nell. Maklr. We’ll keep this like a friendly chat, not business. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

Nell recounted the sense of being watched and about shadows moving where there weren’t any before.

Phil drummed his fingers against the side table. “This sounds familiar, like something I’ve come across before.” He shook his head. “I can’t place it.”

“Neither can I,” said Maklr. “I feel like I’m missing a key clue.”

“I’ll have a think. I’m sure I’ll eventually place it.” He abruptly changed the topic. “Are you two going to the festival tonight? Charlie’s going, and naturally, I am.”

“Wow, what a switch.” Nell smirked. “Who’s your date?”

Phil scanned the room. “I’ll have to find somebody single.” He winked. “Unless I could pull you away from Mak.”

“Not a chance in Hell,” she said.

“Didn’t think so, but it was worth a shot.” He threw his hands up in the air.

“Your charm doesn’t work on me,” Nell said.

“Too bad,” Phil laughed.

“All the better for me,” Maklr said.

“We should meet up later. I’ve got to scout for single females.”

“Deal.” Maklr shook Phil’s hand.

“Comm me ?before you get there and you’ll find out who my date is.” Phil waved, disappearing into the crowd.

“I guess we’re going to the festival,” Nell said. “I’ve never been to one.”

“I went a few times when I was younger, but I bet it’s changed since then.”

“Will we be safe?”

“Of course. How’s about we put that out of our heads for now, and talk about it later? Can you show me how this thing you called a jungle gym, which looks neither like a jungle nor a gym, works?”



Nell grabbed his hand. “Come on.” She began to climb up the wooden and metal apparatus, placing her feet on the angled bars, stopping when she got to the top. “Sometimes you can drop into the center if you’re playing a game of tag, which is running around and trying to catch someone. Or it’s a nice hangout to see how far up you can get without getting dizzy.”

Maklr joined her at the top. “This is fun. I can see how it would be good exercise for someone with injuries to play with their children. You’re a brilliant woman.”

“I know, but I like it when you tell me anyway,” she teased. She turned her face toward Maklr. “Should we let them all know?”

“I think they do anyway, but why not?” He cupped her chin in his hand, kissing her soundly in front of the crowd. Cheers erupted below.

“I don’t think they wanted a show,” Nell said.

At the front of the crowd, cheering the loudest, stood Phil and Charlotte. Charlotte beamed like a proud parent.

“Now they all know.”

Maklr climbed down first. He waited as Nell descended the obstacle, his hand ready to catch her should she fall.

“You two put on quite a show,” Charlotte said.

“Well, it was going to come out, anyway.”

“I’m so proud of you.” Charlotte hugged her friend. “You’ve come so far.”

“It’s all because of you and Maklr.”

“Mostly me,” Maklr teased.

“You two wouldn’t be together if I didn’t force you both to go on vacation.” Charlotte tilted her head.

“Technically, it’s the resort’s fault for overbooking,” Nell said, a wide smile on her face.

“Semantics,” Charlotte said with a laugh.

They walked around assisting families, instructing them how to use the new obstacles before a majority of the group headed to the festival in downtown Dorbound.

Maklr walked to a stand and got a piece of luklak.

“Yum! The chocolate covered bacon stuff,” Nell said. “I love this. It’s not a combination I’d ever have thought of, a flavor sensation, but it’s delicious.”

“If you say so.” Maklr’s watch beeped.

“You set an alarm.”

“I did. Let’s find Phil and whoever his date is.”

“If he got one.”

“It’s Phil. Do you think he’s without a female?”

“Hey Nell!” Jessie called.

“Jessie, right?” The other woman nodded. “I didn’t realize you were coming to Eoris. We could have taken the same shuttle back.”

“I live over here.”

“But not at the center.”

“No. I live in the palace. I work as a maid there.”

“What’s it like?” Nell asked.

“It’s nice. There’s about a dozen of us,” she said. “Are you here with anyone?”

“Maklr. What about you?”

“Philtan.”

“Is it getting serious?” Nell asked.

“No. He’s a fun time but I don’t think he really wants to settle down. And to be fair, I don’t.”

Nell shrugged. “I don’t think so, but you never know with him.”

“Where are the guys?” Jessie asked.

“There they are.” Nell pointed. “Can’t miss Phil.”

“Definitely not.”

“He’s a good landmark.”

Nell shuddered.

“Cold?” Jessie asked.

“Nah. I thought I saw something. I think it’s time for me to get my eyes checked. Let’s go to the guys.”

The four wandered to a vendor’s stall looking at homemade breads and handicrafts. Street lights flared to life as the sun set behind the horizon. “I’m going to show off my strength,” Phil bragged. “Want to see?” he asked Jessie.

“Of course,” she laughed and placed her hand on his arm.

Nell sidled up to Maklr. “They’re cute together, don’t you think?”

Maklr shrugged. “If you like that sort.”

“Only a special woman can tame Phil, if it’s possible to tame him.”

“With the right female, I think so.” Nell froze in place. “What do you see? Do you see something?”

“In the corner behind the tent,” Nell whispered.

Phil pulled her closer. “We’ll be with you soon, Mak.” he called. Mak made a hand gesture toward Phil. “He loves me, really.”

“Uh huh,” Nell said. “What now?” she hissed.

“Walk slowly toward the tent. Pretend like nothing’s wrong. I’ve got you. I won’t let anything hurt you.” He lowered his forehead to hers. A blur raced from behind the tent. “Fuck,” Maklr bellowed, pushing Nell out of the way.

A split second later, Maklr pulled a blaster from the waistband of his pants, hidden under his vest, and shot through the blur. It crumpled in a heap at his feet.

“I got him Phil,” Maklr called. “It’s the same bastard.”

Nell walked over to Maklr, tears streaming down her face. “What did you do?”

## Chapter 20

Nell

“Maklr!Whatthefuck do you think you’re doing?” she screamed. She ran over to him, the blaster in his hand still smoking from the shot. “I told you it’s not worth it. You’ll never be the same.”

“I did what I had to do.”

“Don’t you remember what I said about vengeance? Please, no. Tell me you didn’t.” She hugged Maklr close. “You won’t ever be the same. I didn’t want this for you. I’m not worth it.”

He shifted and pushed Nell away. “Nell, you don’t understand,” he said.

“What do you mean, I don’t understand? Normal people don’t go around avenging people,” she yelled.

“No. It’s what soldiers do,” he said, his tone flat.

“Maklr, you are a medic.”

“Trained as a soldier. Never forget it.”

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“Yes, they trained you, but you’re not a heartless killer.”

“Is that what you see soldiers as? Killing machines?” he asked, his voice incredulous.

Nell sighed. “No, obviously there’s more to being a soldier than killing. And I know the good the Klagan military does. My point is, it corrupts you, and the deaths are on your hands.” She raised her palms. “It’s here, their blood remains stained on your forever. Believe me, I know.”

Maklr looked at her. “What do you mean?”

Tears streamed down Nell’s face. “I’m guilty. I did it once, and I have to live with it.”

“Did what?”

“The Elodians gave us pills to keep us compliant. Well, I crushed some of them and kept them hidden until I needed them. It was my back-up plan. I dumped the crushed pills into one of the particularly mean Elodian’s drinks. I watched him collapse on the floor. And that’s when I ran away. It was the night the warriors boarded the ship I was being held captive on. That... that’s when I ran to safety, when he was dead on the floor.”

Maklr shrugged his shoulders. “You did what you had to do.”

“I took a life. I’m guilty.”

“You didn’t. The thing lived.”



“How do you know? You weren’t there.”

“It’s time to end this charade.” Philtan strolled out from behind a wall.

“Mak,” Maklr called.

“Why are you calling your own name to Philtan? What the fuck is going on? Somebody better tell me.” Nell put her hands on her hips.

Phil walked closer to Nell. She looked between the men, confusion etched on her face. “Why didn’t you shoot him. Do you know what this is going to do to a healer? Why did you come?” she said to Philtan, before turning her attention to Maklr. “Why did you call your own name?”

“It was a trick, Nell.” Philtan shook his head.

“A trick? Don’t play games with me.”

“Look at his wrist,” Philtan said.

Nell glanced at Maklr’s wrists. “We don’t have mating marks. Not yet. What am I looking for?”

“I thought you were more observant.” Phil’s finger caressed her cheek.

“No!” Nell jerked away, stepping back closer to Maklr. “I’m not touching you. You think you’re adorable, but you’re not. I love Maklr and he’s going to need it more than ever.”

Phil bent to kiss her. “It’s a good thing I’m Maklr.” He reached for Nell’s hand. “Press here,” he said.

She did. The holographic image of Philtan fluttered and disappeared, revealing Maklr.

“What. The. Fuck?”

Maklr stood where the image of Philtan once was. “Didn’t you notice I wasn’t wearing the watch you gave me on Ashuk?”

Nell glanced at the second Maklr. Her eyes narrowed. “So, you’re Phil.”

“That’s right.” Phil pressed a hidden button behind his ear.

“Does this mean Maklr never shot the guy with a blaster?”

“No, he didn’t. I did. Maklr’s conscience is clear, and so is yours.”

“Huh?” Nell asked.

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“That’s how I knew you didn’t kill the Elodian. Because I did. I did it after you came out of that room, groggy and stumbling. It followed you down the corridor. I shot it right between the eyes, then I cut off his head. Rest easy. That thing’s death is on me, and I don’t mind one bit.”

“But this one,” the real Maklr jerked his chin toward the alien who lay on the ground, “he’s not dead.”

“No?”

“Mak wouldn’t let me kill him. Something about justice and some such nonsense.”

“He’s not dead?” Nell asked.

“No. I shot him, but the blaster I used was set to stun and incapacitate. I mean, he won’t be waking up for a while. When he does come to, he’ll have a motherfucker of a headache.”

“Good. And you’re sure he’s unconscious?”

Both men nodded. “Out cold,” Maklr said. “I checked before I walked over.”

Nell grabbed Maklr’s hand. They walked over to the downed alien. She shook with rage and started kicking him. “This is for everything you’ve done to me. Fuck you.” Kick. Her foot connected with the alien’s ribs. “This is for everyone you ever hurt.” Kick.

Philtan stopped her. “Here, I’ll make it easier for you.” He kicked the unconscious form onto his back. “Go to town. He won’t know it until he wakes up. I’ll stand on his arms for peace of mind.”

“Phil,” Maklr groaned.

He raised his hands up. “What? She needs it. And don’t tell me you didn’t kick him already. I see traces of your shoe print.”

Phil pressed his boots over the downed alien’s biceps, pinning him to the ground. Maklr spread the alien’s legs into a V. Nell kicked over and over until tears streamed down her face. She chanted names Maklr never heard.

“That’s enough,” Maklr said, pulling Nell away.

“I’m not done yet.”

“You are,” he said. “You haven’t killed him, but you could if you keep going.”

“Is it really over?” she asked, her voice small.

Phil bent and placed arm and leg restraints on the alien. “It is. He’ll be sent to a prison planet.”

“Maklr, tell me you’re not going to heal him. He left me to heal on my own, after he left me for dead.”

Maklr turned away, tossing the re-gen wand toward Phil. “If you use it, press the button in green.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

“Is he going to use it?”

Maklr shrugged. "It's called plausible deniability. We can assume Philtan will use it. What we don't know won't hurt us. We can assume he will, since he is an honorable male." Maklr kissed Nell's forehead. "Let's go home."

"Home?" Nell asked.

"I figured I'd ask you to move in with me since you probably don't want to be sneaking me around the center anymore."

Nell nodded. "Let's go home."

Maklr walked up the steps to his house and entered. Nell waited on the porch.

"Hey, Mak?" Nell called.

"Yes?" he said, looking up from his tablet. "Phil's taking him to the justice complex now."

"Good, but that wasn't my question."

"No?"

Nell winked. "Wanna play doctor? I think we both need a set of mating marks."