



Rebels Rising

Author: *Natasha Campbell-Jones*

Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: CAN ONE UNWITTING CYBORG LEAD THEM ALL TO FREEDOM?

The Program has taken too much from me. It's time to return the favour.

The Intergalactic Union is teetering on the brink of destruction. The Program's experiments have unforeseen consequences that are both beneficial and a hindrance to our fight. It's our responsibility to figure out how to turn those consequences in our favour, but we may not have enough time before an even bigger threat makes itself known. Suddenly thrust into a position of power over our growing group of rebels, I struggle under the pressure. But I'm not so breakable, and I don't intend to let them break me now.

With my friends -and maybe more- by my side, can we band together to stop The Program before they start a war?

This is book 3 in a why choose sci-fi romance series where the FMC does not have to choose between her love interests. The series will get darker and spicier with each book while the FMC slowly builds her harem.

Disclaimer: I am a British author and write in British English, so there will be some spelling differences from the American spellings.

Total Pages (Source): 82

PROLOGUE

Henrik

Working as a medical professional in any capacity had always been my dream. I loved helping people. Seeing anyone in any sort of distress was like a physical ache in my chest, my heart working in overdrive as if to pump for us both.

Children, however, had never been my forte. Sure, I would help where needed, but this wasn't medical. This was babysitting. I didn't know the first thing about what children needed beyond keeping their bodies alive and well, yet here I was cleaning up pee, poo and vomit while they screamed us all down. Their shrill voices were louder than should be possible coming from such tiny bodies, and it also didn't help that the station was made entirely out of metal that reverberated sound back on us a million times over. So not only did I have to deal with hundreds of screaming children, but it also sounded as if we were being attacked by an army of them.

Cad released a sound of disgust from where he worked beside me. It was nothing more than a grunt that gave off the impression he was choking down adding his own bodily fluids to the mix right alongside our last meal.

Not that there would have been much of that left. We hadn't eaten in over a day.

One of the toddlers had peed all over his clothing, leaving him damp and smelling of urine. We shared a commiserating look, neither of us the best option for this, but there were limited choices. All the soldiers that had joined us from the battle were tackling the job as well, some obviously more well-versed than others.

Cad and I handed off the children we'd just finished cleaning up when two more were placed in front of us. We both took one whiff of the one in front of him and our heads snapped back at the stench, hands covering all orifices that could scent or taste, because that was what made this truly horrific... we could taste the scents, too.

My stomach gurgled in protest and Cadmus actually gagged.

'Oh, fuck no. Nope. I can't,' he rambled, backing away as far as he could before bumping into the team behind us.

'We need a medic!' someone shouted frantically, dragging my attention away from the gruesome task. Xander was rushing out of the mangled opening of the ship, Adara still clutched to his chest, both looking pale and panicked. 'We need a medic now!'

I jumped to my feet and picked my way through the mass of soldiers, children and bodily fluids, trying not to slip on the mix of blood and urine puddling on the floor as I hurried to them. I was talking before I even reached them.

'What happened?'

'Bromm collapsed,' Addy said, her tears wobbling her voice.

I frowned as I picked up my pace, overtaking them. 'Why?'

'Don't know,' said Xander. 'One tick he was fine and the next he was...'

The way his words trailed off filled me with trepidation. People usually only trailed off like that when something truly terrible had happened, something so horrible they couldn't even speak it out loud.

'Any injuries?' I pushed, needing all the information I could get before I reached him

to avoid wasting time and getting straight to work.

‘No. There’s nothing. He should be fine, but he’s just... not.’ Adara’s words were punctuated with a sob, and my stomach dropped.

‘Where?’

I needn’t have asked as the sight unfolded before my eyes as we turned the last corner, almost tripping over Foryk. He was kneeling on the floor, head clamped tightly between his hands as he rocked back and forth, the sounds of pure grief and terror whimpering from his lips between a single repeated word.

‘Please. Please. Please.’

I almost turned around and went back the way I came, the intensity of his emotion horrifying me to my core. But I didn’t. Bromm needed help, and he needed it now.

When I finally took in the scene beyond Foryk, I very nearly joined him on the floor. If that had been Cadmus, I had no doubt I would’ve been just as much of a wreck.

Bromm was being cradled by Artemis, expertly positioning him so he wouldn’t crush the small boy strapped to her chest. The boy’s eyes were wide open, a stunning green colour that seemed to be taking in all that was happening around him like it was just another day. Perhaps for him, it was. But there was an intelligence there that shouldn’t have been possible for a child his age. It was as if he were cataloguing everything he witnessed and storing it to study later. The way Bromm had turned white despite his blue colouring. His vacant stare as he gazed up at the ceiling, not blinking and dual pupils narrowed to tiny pinpoints. The way his limbs flopped as Artemis shook him, desperately attempting to wake him up, but even from here I could see that he was gone.

There was no rise and fall of his chest to indicate breathing. The lack of colour in his skin proved his heart was no longer pumping. His unresponsiveness was the last clue. His beard lay flat against the lower half of his face, falling like a blanket draped over his chin, neck and shoulders. They were always moving, even if it was just a twitch. Even when he was asleep.

There were no signs of life at all.

‘Help him,’ Artemis pleaded, dragging my attention away from his body to take her in for the first time since I arrived. Tears were streaking down her cheeks like a waterfall, dripping off her jaw and the tip of her nose to puddle on Bromm’s prone form. His shirt was damp with them, the fabric soaking it all up and spreading as a dark spot across his collar and down his chest. There was a wild look in her big brown eyes, reddened and puffy from crying. And the way she crouched over him protectively as if she could single-handedly bring him back to life if she just kept him from harm, there was a level of ferality to it that I had never witnessed before.

But one glance was all I needed to see that there was nothing I could do.

Bromm was dead.

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‘Dammit, Henrik! Help him!’ she shouted at me one more time, and the complete helplessness in her tone was what finally propelled me into action. I doubted my skills were enough to save him, but I could at least try. None of us wanted to lose Bromm. He was our friend, but there was more to consider due to his royal status. The consequences of the death of a royal would be extreme, even a prince as far down the line of succession as him.

‘Lay him flat,’ I ordered, and though she was reluctant to let him go she did as she was told.

I pressed my hands over his heart and pushed, timing the chest compressions in the same practiced way I’d done many times before. I shoved the fact that I was working on someone I cared about to the side, my own emotions clouding my ability to focus. He didn’t need a friend right now, he needed a medical professional.

‘When I say, tilt his head back, pinch his nose closed and blow into his mouth,’ I told her.

She nodded, the movement jerky with her frantic energy. ‘Okay.’

Three. Two. One. ‘Now.’

She breathed deeply into his mouth and his chest rose as the air filled his lungs. My fingers were already at the pulse point on his wrist, but there was no response so I started the process again.

Three. Two. One. ‘Again.’

His chest rose even higher this time, Artemis blowing even more air into him as if that would make his lungs constrict and release on their own.

Still no pulse.

We tried again and again with no luck. Until...

There. An almost imperceptible flutter in his wrist. A flicker of a pulse.

‘I’ve got something!’ I yelled, utterly astonished. I had worked on him just for the sake of saying I’d done everything I could, but I’d not actually expected it to work. ‘I’ve got a pulse!’

‘Oh, thank the stars,’ Artemis whispered, her relief so strong she crumpled on the floor beside her lover, one hand still connected to his face as if she were afraid she’d lose him again if she let go.

But as we were talking I felt his pulse begin to falter again. He wasn’t out of the woods yet.

‘Where’s the infirmary?’ I asked, my tone stronger and more assertive than it had ever been before.

‘I saw it on the way in,’ Colonel Hum’Rit said, and I realised for the first time since seeing Artemis, Bromm and Foryk in difference stages of collapse that there was a small crowd surrounding us. Including Cadmus, whom I hadn’t realised had followed me in.

I also noted the state of the second ship’s hangar door and knew Artemis was needed elsewhere. We still needed to get off Nova Station as quickly as possible.

I started barking out orders, the bigger picture forming in my mind. Everyone would have a part to play in this, and not everyone was going to like their assignment. ‘Cadmus, you carry Bromm. Colonels, raid this ship for medical supplies. Anything you can find, I don’t care what it is, bring it to me. Colonel Hum’Rit, lead the way to the infirmary.’

Cadmus scooped the Griknot prince into his arms, firmly securing him to his body despite the way Bromm flopped about limply at the slightest shift in movement. He took a step onto the other ship with Artemis close behind, but I braced myself to stop her.’

‘Arty, I’m sorry, but you can’t come.’

She rounded on me, a snarl pulling back her lips to reveal straight white teeth I knew would do a lot of damage if I didn’t tread carefully. ‘The fuck I can’t.’

I gentled my tone to keep her from lashing out further. ‘We still need to get off the station.’

I could see the war raging inside her, but she didn’t move after Bromm when Cadmus took him further inside the ship. That was a good sign.

I nodded at her once, attempting to show her my appreciation through my expression. I was fairly sure it didn’t land, but at least I could say I made the effort.

Xander spoke up then, cutting through the tension though he didn’t disperse it. Keeping Artemis in my sights – because let’s face it, she was still the most dangerous predator in the room despite the Kikshrut at her heels – I turned to face the captain as he addressed us. ‘I need to round everyone up and get them on the ship.’

Though his face was still pale and there was a tremor in his muscles, his voice was

strong and steady. He strode off to do just that, leaving me alone with the Kikshrut and a very agitated Arty. I opened my mouth to say something, though I hadn't quite figured out what, but she interrupted me before I could even make a sound.

‘Go. He needs you.’

My jaw slammed shut, my teeth clacking together with the force, but I nodded and moved to follow the others.

Before I could get too far, she grabbed my arm, her grip gentle despite her white knuckles. ‘If anything happens to him...’

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‘I’m not going to let him go that easy, Arty,’ I vowed. ‘I’ll do everything I can to keep him here.’ It wasn’t the exact promise she wanted because I couldn’t give that. I didn’t control life or death, but I could help to prevent it. That was what I could promise.

She studied me for a beat, her deep brown eyes a vast ocean of emotion that tunnelled into me so powerfully it almost eviscerated me on the spot. But then she let go, nodding her head in the direction of her lover.

I didn’t wait to be told again.

CHAPTER 1

Cadmus

The infirmary was close to the hangar bay, which helped to get Bromm there quickly. I laid him down on a soft-looking cot, the sheets folded and ready on the bedside table but the cot itself was unmade. I wasn’t a doctor, but I knew it was to avoid stains from bodily fluids. I’d landed myself in the hospital enough times during my youth, though my injuries were through pure stupidity rather than actual illness. A broken bone here and there was nothing compared to... whatever was going on with Bromm.

I didn’t bother making the bed first, unsure what Henrik was going to do. I didn’t think he would need to perform a surgery, but I didn’t want to waste time if I was wrong.

‘I need to help the other colonels with the supplies. You good here?’ Hum’Rit asked, one foot already out the door.

‘Yeah. I’ve got it from here,’ I said, awkwardly settling in on the small chair beside the cot to wait for Henrik to catch up, my body folding unnaturally to make myself fit.

I didn’t envy him staying behind to deal with Artemis. I knew she had strong feelings for Bromm, but the level of love she displayed in her distraught reaction to almost losing him, it was clearer than ever that those feelings ran deep. She loved him, and she was practically ready to tear off anyone’s head just for daring breathe wrong around him.

I was pretty sure the only thing that saved Henrik was the fact that he was the only one capable to helping Bromm. Even then, it had looked like her internal struggle to let him work on her lover was going to lose.

It was quick thinking for him to give her a job to do to help. I’d never been in love like that before, so I couldn’t imagine how she felt. I’d been infatuated or intrigued, but it never lasted. I wondered if these new feelings developing for her would last at all. Sure, she’d let me get intimate with them earlier, but I saw her anxiety over letting me in even that much. It made more sense once feelings were securely off the table, but...

Watching her react that way over Bromm, I realised no one had ever reacted that way to me before. My father was my only family, my mother’s death making him cold and detached towards everyone, including me. Every time I’d gone too far in my attempts to get his attention and landed myself in the hospital with a cut or a broken bone, he’d merely rolled his eyes, paid the bill, and told me to be more careful. He never stuck around, and I had no real friends who cared enough to either. I’d always been on my own.

But witnessing that love from the woman I'd just helped shatter into one of the most beautiful orgasms I had ever witnessed fall apart over another man, it made me want that. With her? I didn't know. I didn't even know if that was a possibility now that I was aware of the true depth of their feelings for one another. I may have been a homewrecker in the past, but I wasn't about to try to wedge my way between these two. I wasn't completely heartless.

I watched him now, the rise and fall of his chest so slow I wondered if I was just imagining it. It was alarming, and I wondered where the fuck Henrik was. Surely Artemis wouldn't keep him from tending to him.

Where was he?

He turned the corner at that moment, assuaging some of my fears and I sagged in relief. He took one look at Bromm and rushed over, checking his pulse. He relaxed a miniscule amount when he seemed to find one, though the tension in his shoulders refused to fully abate. Bromm still wasn't doing well, and I knew without having to ask that his condition remained critical.

'Do you know what any of the medical equipment is for?' Henrik asked. He wasn't asking for himself, but to test medical knowledge.

'Some,' I admitted. 'Been hospitalised enough times to figure out a few things.'

'Ever been intubated before?'

'Sorry, can't say that I have.'

He hummed thoughtfully, pulling some sort of tube-like device out of a drawer. It was in a metallic wrapper, but he didn't open it yet. Instead, he placed it down on a little table with wheels that I'd missed in my initial perusal of the room and led me

towards the handwashing station.

‘Scrub thoroughly,’ he ordered, taking up a position beside me at the other sink.

I followed his command, nervous about what he was going to ask me to do but willing to do it. For Bromm. For her.

Artemis’s anguished expression flashed through my brain, lodging itself deep and refusing to budge. A part of me that I never even dared to imagine existed thawed at the memory. I never wanted her to feel like that again.

The strength of those feelings was powerful enough to freeze me in my tracks, my hands stilling beneath the stream of water that continued to wash away the grime on my hands.

But I didn’t have time to mull over the internal assault because Henrik started blowing my hands dry with a portable hand-dryer, and then he handed me a pair of rubber gloves. They were the same kind those asshole scientists from The Program wore, white and snappy, difficult to put on over damp skin, and I did my best to tune out the memory of all those kids on metal tables, wired to machines and IVs with stars only knew what being pumped inside them. Or of those four bastards cutting into the boy that Artemis cared so much about.

Or the way she practically exploded them with her kickass abilities.

It was sick, the act itself horrifying to watch, but coming from her it was one of the hottest things I’d ever seen. Not the killing or the gore, but how fucking badass she was.

Once again, Henrik jolted me out of my thoughts, though this time through the sound of tearing followed by the metal wrapper crinkling as he crumpled it to throw in the

bin.

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Focus, Cadmus. You're needed right now. Daydream later.

'I need you to hold his head back and keeping his chin down so I can insert the tube,' he informed me, and I tried to push aside my hesitations over helping with a medical procedure. I wasn't typically a squeamish guy (made evident by my reaction to all the death and gore at Artemis's hand) but the fact that this was Bromm was what made me so tentative. Sure, there was no cutting into his skin and wriggling about his insides, but there was still a device being shoved down his throat. My task didn't allow for much room for error, so I told myself I was confident enough to assist.

When I had him in the right position, Henrik began inserting the tube which he'd lubed up with some sort of gel to help it slide in with less trauma to his oesophagus or lungs. Once inside, he taped it to his face to keep it in place and attached the end to a machine by the cot. A beep sounded, followed by two more and then a whirring sound before Reece's chest rose and fell with an exaggerated, artificial movement.

We both breathed a sigh of relief at having the additional assistance of the intubation. Seeing him on the brink of death without any identifiable cause had shaken me more than I cared to admit, so I kept avoiding the emotions all together. No point in mourning him when he wasn't dead yet, and no point in worrying when he already had so many people fussing over him already.

The trio of combat instructors finally arrived, arms laden with boxes filled to the brim with medical supplies, some so much that they were struggling to keep them contained.

'Where do you want them?' Stanson asked in his gruff, no-nonsense voice.

Henrik waved noncommittally behind him. 'Just find an empty spot over there. I'll go through them once we're off the station.'

They did as instructed, stacking them neatly out of the way before all three joined us at as we stood watching Bromm.

'Is he going to be okay?' Hum'Rit asked beneath the anxiously writhing mass of his beard, which didn't surprise me. Bromm may have only been a cadet here, but he was still a Griknot prince, after all.

'I don't see why he won't be, but I also have no idea why his body stopped functioning in the first place,' admitted Henrik, worry lines creasing between his eyebrows. 'I'll run some tests with the equipment I have available here, but I think it's more a matter of wait and see.'

The thundering of dozens of booted footsteps and the occasional squeak of a rusty wheel sounded just outside the room, quickly followed by body after body rushing past the open door, the carts full of small children dispersed throughout. Many of the children were still wailing but were ignored in the rush. A few soldiers looked inside the infirmary curiously as they passed but moved on when they saw Bromm lying prone on the cot with the breathing device sticking out of his mouth.

Only a few clicks later, Xander joined us with Adara still dangling from his neck, arms and legs clinging to him tight while he kept her aloft with an arm beneath her rear and the other hand splayed across her back. It was large enough to span almost the entire expanse, though there wasn't much to begin with since she was so small, and their size difference was suddenly starker than ever before. It hadn't escaped my notice that she was a dinky little thing, but her personality was so loud large that it made up for it. Now, like this, she looked so frail and fragile.

She glanced over at Bromm, her face pale and pinched with worry and stress. Xander

followed her line of sight, his expression mirroring hers as he took in our downed friend.

‘He’s okay?’ he asked.

‘For now, yes,’ Henrik repeated.

‘Artemis?’ I asked, noting her absence.

‘Here,’ she said, stepping past the crowd of soldiers outside. Notably, the boy was no longer strapped to her chest but riding on the back of the beast as it walked a step behind her as she entered with her hands held carefully in front of her.

Her fleshless hands.

‘Stars above!’ I shouted in alarm, rushing over to her despite not knowing what to do. I stopped before I could reach her, not wanting to harm her further. Henrik was right beside me, his face pulled wide with horror. Adara gagged and Xander looked away, his skin taking on a rather ugly shade of green while the instructors staggered away.

But as we stood there uselessly, her silvery bones began to disappear beneath tendons, muscles, and then skin that knit together over the top. Within a click, she was flexing her completely healed hands and shaking them out like she’d experienced nothing more than pins and needles. I imagined they’d be pretty tender after that, but this was another level.

‘Sorry,’ she said sheepishly, but there was a distance to her apology. She wasn’t even looking at us, her gaze fixed firmly on Bromm. It was as if she didn’t even notice that her hands were nothing but skeletal extensions on her arms mere moments before.

Henrik leaned heavily against me, his breath leaving his chest in a whoosh. He looked

exhausted, his eyes practically closed and his body slumping as if the weight of the world had suddenly crashed onto his shoulders. I wrapped an arm around them to keep him steady.

‘Where are the others?’ I asked now that I was satisfied she was here and safe. I refused to think about why I was more concerned about her than the others.

‘T took... his mother to a room to give them someplace quiet to mourn,’ Foryk said, his large form managing to outdo Xander’s, now the biggest man in the room as he stepped through to join us. Like Artemis, his gaze was firmly set on Bromm.

‘Reece is still in the cart with the kids,’ Dorian said, a step behind Foryk with Urman at his side.

The room was becoming far too cramped with so many bodies, but no one complained. The instructors left to give us more space, their presence no longer needed, and Foryk took the opportunity to settle in on the floor beside the cot. The action seemed to jog Artemis into gear and she positioned herself in the chair I’d vacated at Henrik’s entrance, gripping Bromm’s hand between hers with a tenderness that made my chest ache.

A moment later a ping sounded through the room’s speaker system, and a hologram formed on the far side of the room. A woman’s face appeared, and I startled as I recognised her as our flight instructor, Group Captain Eloria Stanson. From the background, I surmised she was inside a cockpit.

‘Captain,’ she addressed Xander.

He stood up straight ready to respond but the silver-haired Yu’Rom female shook her head. ‘Sorry, Cap, but I was referring to the other captain.’

He frowned and looked at the rest of us in the room, but he was the only captain here.

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‘Captain Artemis,’ she elaborated to our even greater befuddlement. ‘This is her spacecraft, yes?’

‘No one’s ever referred to me with that title before,’ Artemis mused from her seated position. Her hands still gripped Bromm’s, but she’d twisted her body to look at the hologram.

‘Now they have,’ GC Stanson said with a gentle smile that quickly dropped. ‘But this isn’t a personal call. The enemy are breaking down the quarantine shield. We must make haste if we are to leave Nova Station in one piece. I need coordinates to plot our course.’

‘Just get us out of here and we can determine our course when we’re clear of the danger. There are coordinates already in place, but we can’t head there just yet so ignore them for now, but make sure to keep the current coordinates on hand as they’ll be our final destination eventually.’

GC Stanson gave Artemis a curt nod. ‘Understood, Captain.’ Then the hologram dispersed and we found ourselves staring at the blank space where her face once was.

We stood around awkwardly as we each attempted to process everything that had happened. Referring to Artemis as the Captain had clearly thrown Xander for a loop, and it was amusing to watch as he studied her with a barely veiled concoction of emotions ranging from confusion and curiosity to flat out envy.

It should be fun to sit back and kick my feet up for the show as he attempted to wrangle some control of the situation back, and I had no doubt he would. Yet, after

everything we had just been through, I didn't think it would be so easy for him. This was Artemis's ship, she was more knowledgeable of The Program than all of us combined, and she was abundantly more capable than us as well thanks to her enhancements.

I was eager to learn more about them and what she could do, and I wondered if she even knew the extent of her abilities.

A startled gasp drew me from my thoughts and back into the present moment. I was immediately on guard, especially when I noticed the way Foryk had jumped up and was leaning over Bromm, Artemis mirroring his pose.

It was easy to see what had caused their distress, however, because a blue glow was radiating out from beneath them. The same blue glow that I'd seen emanating from Artemis on the station when she'd used her abilities, only this time it wasn't coming from her.

It was coming from Bromm.

CHAPTER 2

Artemis

I checked myself over just to be sure, but the evidence was right in front of me. I wasn't glowing. Bromm was.

'I thought you said The Program didn't test on any of you,' I accused, snapping a squinty-eyed, suspicious glare towards the others in the room.

Cadmus raised his hands with his palms out in the universal sign of surrender but stepped towards me rather than away. 'As far as I know, none of us besides Adara

and Reece were experimented on.'

'He's right,' Foryk said from my side, his voice quavering with unrestrained fear. 'They didn't take us. To our knowledge, they never even touched us.'

I frowned, my eyes returning to where Bromm was shining like a bright blue star on the cot. Unless they were drugged, it didn't make any sense. They had clearly never had the nanites grafted into their bodies, otherwise they would have suffered the same way Reece and Addy had. They could have been injected with them, but they hadn't suffered the side effects. At least as far as I was aware...

'Have any of you experienced anything unusual the past solar?' I asked.

Silence permeated the room as everyone shared curious looks, but it was Foryk who answered. 'Bromm's been having dreams,' he said, his voice cracking on the last word, and I had a feeling I knew what those dreams really were. 'He's also been inexplicably passing out, but that's a more recent development.'

I tutted, unhappy with those answers. They weren't anything I didn't already know.

'There's nothing else? Nothing at all?'

He shook his head no while everyone remained silent.

'But... that doesn't make any sense,' I mumbled, more to myself than anyone else. 'He's not exhibiting any signs of The Program tampering with him. If anything his symptoms are delayed. They could be testing a new serum that takes a while to set in...'

I stopped my musings to level the room with a frown. 'You're sure they never touched him or any of you? You weren't taken during the night?'

‘Artemis,’ Captain Hironimus spoke up, his voice gentle but firm. ‘I’ve been keeping a close eye on everyone. There have been no late-night kidnappings nor any form of experimentation on the cadets or the officers on Nova Station. Whatever is going on with Bromm, it wasn’t anything to do with those bastard scientists.’

I scowled at his attempt at reassurance, his words not connecting with the truth quite literally glowing right in front of me. Bromm was clearly riddled with nanites, there was no arguing that fact. The problem was how The Program managed to infect him with them so discretely that no one even noticed.

I wasn’t able to let my concern over the matter settle over me fully, however, because the ship chose that moment to fire up ready to launch. The entire ship juddered beneath us, rattling whatever medicines were loose inside the stacked boxes. Those standing stumbled with the next ship-wide shudder before scrambling to hold onto whatever was available before the next one hit, and I had to hold Bromm in place as he almost vibrated off the cot. Making a split decision that knacked at my nerves despite the necessity for his safety, I strapped him down and raised the guards to properly secure him in place. Eloria Stanson may have been an experienced pilot, but she was unfamiliar with this particular ship and it showed.

‘Wait!’ the captain shouted, features taut with distress. ‘What about Markus? He’s still on the station!’

I froze while the men in the room exchanged nervous glances, but the only other person in the room who didn’t seem to care was Addy. Our eyes met, a silent understanding passing between us. Neither one of us would miss the large, blonde mutt. That nasty business with Jorna was what cinched it for me. There was simply no way Markus had gone missing while his girlfriend was guarding The Program’s scientists. He was up to something, and I had no doubt he was working with her.

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I didn't want to stick around when he discovered I'd killed her by caving her face in with my fist.

I also realised that neither Addy nor the captain were aware of Jorna's betrayal, or her death. That was likely a story better told at a later date when things had calmed down a bit. As it stood, tensions were high from the battle and our own betrayal of the IU's military. Unfortunately, corruption led to the formation of a rebellion, the oppressed always finding a way to fight back. I was now a part of that rebellion, no longer able to hold back from the fury they had ignited.

And though I wished I could do it all on my own, I was still only one person and couldn't topple an intergalactic threat by myself. Perhaps it made me a bad person, but I hoped these men and women would continue to put their lives on the line to fight with me to end The Program's reign of evil. I was going to need all the help I could get.

Dave Junior nudged at my thigh with his wet nose, and I glanced at him to see what he needed. Bal was still on his back where I'd placed him to keep him safe while I welded the door shut again, except he wasn't sitting nicely. I should have been paying closer attention, but with Bromm the way he was I could admit I was struggling to focus on much else.

Unfortunately, that had only given Bal the freedom to tug and poke at Junior, who was currently glaring at me from his position at my feet. Bal's fingers were jabbing at multiple different eyeballs while the other yanked at his ears, and Junior was very clearly nearing the end of his patience. When I didn't immediately remove Bal from his back, he released a warning growl that was more vibration than vocals but

somehow sounded much more dangerous.

I took the hint.

Bal didn't want to release his hold on Dave Junior straight away, clinging to him and digging his fingers in further to stay put. I didn't entirely blame him. He was only a baby and hadn't encountered a creature like Dave Junior before. Neither had I, for that matter, and I wasn't about to deny him his curiosity. I just needed to find a way to redirect it into a safer, kinder, gentler method of exploration.

The ship rocked again, but this time it was less like heavy turbulence and more like we'd bumped into something. The next moment, Eloria Stanson's holographic face appeared above Bromm's body for a second time, though the stress lines around her eyes and mouth were significantly more pronounced.

'Captain, they've locked down the station's hangar bay. I can't open the doors,' she said, her voice pitched higher in her panic.

I pursed my lips in annoyance. Not at her, but the situation. I should have expected them to make things as difficult for us as possible, and I had up until my attention had been diverted to Bromm.

Bal began to fuss and wriggled around in an attempt to get back to Dave Junior, but I held him firm. I stroked the top of Bal's head, enjoying the softness of his fine blonde hair as I attempted to settle him, and it worked. His head tilted to rest against my shoulder and he nuzzled against my neck, his small breaths puffing against my skin and tickling me.

'I'll handle it,' I told her. 'Just get ready to set off as soon as those doors open.'

'How?' she asked.

We didn't have time for me to elaborate, but I realised I would need to come clean about most (if not all) of my abilities if we were going to work together smoothly from here on out. Especially if they were looking to me for direction.

'I can hack into the system and override their commands, but I should start now before we lose the opportunity to escape before they mobilise their own ships. Get ready to fly, GC Stanson.'

'Yes, Captain,' she agreed, and though the call cut out I could tell she was still unsatisfied with my vague answer, but she would just have to wait for the long one.

'How are you going to do that?' asked Captain Hironimus, and I turned to see that both he and Addy were looking at me with expectant and openly curious expressions.

'I'll explain it later,' I waved them off. 'No time now. Can someone please hold Bal until I'm done?'

I wasn't sure why I found it so odd when Foryk was the one to take him from my grip and cradle him against his broad chest, but it was shocking to see him handle a baby at all let alone so tenderly.

What shocked me even more was how easily Baldr took to him. After gazing up at the oversized Tornu with wide, wonder-filled eyes, he quickly made himself at home against Foryk's chest. He even attempted to hug him back, though his little arms only spanned the length of one of Foryk'spectorals. And when Foryk practically melted beneath Bal's affection, I had to fight to keep my jaw from hitting the floor.

I scrutinised the gruff man with a new perspective, and decided I liked what I found. Bromm had clearly already discovered something less abrasive about him for them to become such close friends, and now that I was seeing it I didn't think I'd be able to stick to viewing only his tough outer shell.

Who knew Foryk was a closet softie?

Another judder rocked through the ship and I physically shook those thoughts from my head. I didn't understand why I was so distracted, especially considering the dire circumstances we were still in, and I had a job to do.

I grabbed Bromm's hand between mine again, needing the connection to ground me. The ship was brimming with all these people relying on me to get them to safety, all these people that had chosen to stand up for what was right even when it went against their orders; that had turned their backs on their military because I'd taken a stand and they believed in my cause. It was overwhelming, and my chest constricted at the mere idea of it all.

Going against The Program had never been my initial plan. All I'd wanted was freedom for myself and Libby and the chance to lead a normal life away from the pain and torment of constant experiments and mind games. Things had gotten so far out of control and I was struggling to wrap my head around it all. It felt like I was being bombarded not only by my own emotions that were far too big to contain, but the expectations from everyone around me. Even now, Libby and all the other women were back in their cave living a simple life in the wilds while I was out here trying to save everyone.

It was too much.

But I could think about all that later. Right now, all I had to do was open the gate.

My eyes closed, almost of their own volition, and I could see the bright blue glow through the thin skin of my eyelids. A tick later and I was inside the web, the thick glowing line I'd landed on pulsing with the energy of untapped information, a physical siren call to follow its trail. It whispered to me, a buzz of untapped knowledge directing me where I needed to be.

I followed.

It hadn't always been so simple and easy to navigate through the web. When I'd first discovered it, I'd been stuck in the same spot for ages. It wasn't until I'd learned how to rifle through the possibilities for passwords and lock codes that I was finally able to move around and explore. Now, it was as easy as breathing. I didn't even need to think about it beyond my goals. It was as if the web responded to my innermost thoughts and desires and directed me exactly where I needed to be.

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I quickly located and hacked into the system containing the controls to the hangar bay, and with barely a thought I overrode the station's coding and implemented my own. A beep sounded in the physical world that let me know that I had succeeded, the sound echoing through the ship to signal the opening of the hangar bay's doors.

I felt the ship's vibrations as it picked up speed, and I knew that despite the enemy's inevitable attempts to chase us we had managed to escape. At least for now.

‘Artemis?’

The deep, sensual, familiar voice had me spinning around so fast I was sure I would have given myself whiplash if not for the nanites. ‘Bromm!’

I rushed forward, eager to reach him. Despite the extended width of this particular line of the web, he still seemed unsteady as he sat in the middle, arms spread wide to catch me. I launched myself onto his lap, tackling him in a hug that I fought hard not to squeeze him through.

He buried his nose in my hair as his beard stroked my cheeks and his arms wrapped around my thinner frame. He had no such qualms over squeezing me and it didn't pass my notice that he was stronger than before. His hug left me breathless.

I couldn't stop the full body sobs as they tore through me, my tears immediately soaking through the collar of his shirt. ‘I th-thought I l-lost you,’ I cried.

His hands stroked through my hair, tangling in the strands before he wound them into his fist to pull me back. He didn't let go. Instead, his eyes bore into mine with an

intensity that scared me. There was fear behind them, and confusion.

‘Artemis, what happened?’

My bottom lip quivered at the memory of him suddenly dropping, the way he changed from perfectly healthy to barely livelier than a corpse in the blink of an eye something I never wanted to relive. ‘You collapsed. You stopped breathing.’

I forced the words out, though they were so reluctant to leave my throat that they were spoken as barely more than a whisper. Even saying them at all dredged up the most intense sensation of devastating desperation and terror.

I encased his face in my hands and pierced him with my most penetrating glare. ‘You can’t leave me, Bromm. Losing you is not an option. You’re not allowed to die.’

His hands rose to cover mine, but he didn’t pull them away. Instead, he pushed them even tighter against his head to the point that I was afraid I would hurt him.

‘I’m not going anywhere any time soon, my love,’ he attempted to assure me, but his next statement undid any progress that comment could have created. ‘But I don’t understand what happened.’

I hesitated before asking my next question. I needed to know the answer, but I didn’t want to. ‘What do you remember?’

‘I told you I was going to look away while you fixed the door. Then I felt woozy and woke up here. It was just like what happened every other time I’ve ended up here, except this time I can’t seem to leave no matter how hard I try. I can’t wake up.’

‘Henrik had to resuscitate you. I think you might be in a coma right now, Bromm. You’re in the infirmary on the ship,’ I informed him. I wanted to be gentle with the

news in case he reacted badly, but there really was no good way to say it.

Surprisingly, his eyes lit up. 'Did we get away?'

My brows dipped low at the way he brushed off his current condition, but decided it was better to let him process the way he needed to and not push it. 'We're in the middle of leaving Nova Station. That's why I'm in here. The doors wouldn't open and I needed to override the coding.'

'So we're not in the clear,' he surmised.

'I doubt we'll ever be in the clear, Bromm, but at least for now we're safe,' I told him, the good news overshadowed by our bleak future. Hopefully, we would win this fight and we would be free to live our lives.

'Can you call my parents for me?' he asked, the sudden switch in topic momentarily stunning me. I blinked.

'What?'

'I'm unconscious, and I'm stuck here. We're on the run from the greatest threat the Intergalactic Union has faced since long before our time, and I can't call them myself. Would you call them for me? Please?'

Even the thought of needing to call his parents on his behalf had panic flaring up inside me. He wasn't that far gone. He wasn't lost to me.

My nostrils flared, irrational anger burning me up from inside and I huffed indignantly. 'You can damn well call them yourself when you wake up,' I snapped.

His own temperament refused to rise to meet mine, instead staying calm and soothing

as he smiled at me a little sadly. The only thing that stopped me from losing my head was the determination and love shining through in his eyes.

‘I will,’ he began, but I could hear the ‘but’ coming. ‘But in the meantime I would really appreciate it if you just checked in with them for me. I just... I want to know they’re okay, and I want them to know that I’m okay too. It would give me some peace of mind.’

I sighed, shoulders slumping as the fight was expelled from me alongside the breath in my lungs. I leaned against him, ensuring my entire front side was pressed up against his, needing the connection.

‘I’ll call them, but I don’t know when I’ll have the chance,’ I conceded.

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He placed a gentle, lingering kiss against my lips. ‘Thank you, my love.’

The sounds of the outside world trickled in louder than usual, and we both pulled apart at the interruption. Bal’s cries cut through the rest and I knew our time here was over. For now.

I leant in for another kiss, this one deeper and more passionate than the last though just as short. Bromm was breathless when I pulled away, and I took a moment to appreciate the heavy-lidded lust in his eyes before bursting our bubble.

‘I have to go now, but I’ll come back as soon as I can, okay?’

His lips tilted up at the corners but didn’t quite reach his eyes. ‘Okay.’

I held his eyes with my own, memorising them to tide me over until I could see them again in person. ‘I love you, Bromm. More than you could possibly know. We’ll figure this out, I promise.’

His answering smile, though still undercut with worry, was a little brighter. ‘I know we will. I love you too, baby. I’ll see you soon.’

And then the ship reformed around me into a chaotic mess that was no how I left it.

CHAPTER 3

Reece

I didn't want to admit it, but I was struggling. My pride so far had prevented me from speaking up because I knew I'd never live it down, but I couldn't get out of the damn laundry cart. There were babies and toddlers crawling all over me, no safe place to put my feet, and I couldn't manoeuvre around the abundance of wriggling, screaming tiny people to get a decent enough hold on the lip to pull myself out.

I bit my cheek. I knew what I had to do. There was nothing else for it.

I raised my hand and waved it to be seen over the lip of the cart and shouted above the chaos. 'A little help here?'

It took a couple of ticks for someone to notice me, but soon enough there were multiple hands clamping down over the top of the cart's walls followed by heads popping up.

One of which I recognised. Great.

'You okay there, buddy?' Dorian asked with a crooked grin. Though there was amusement in his eyes, his smile didn't quite reach them. Instead, stress lined deep grooves at the corners and in between.

'I can't get out,' I admitted with a grumble, gesticulating widely to point out the babies. It was definitely their fault, and I needed them to know it.

Urman's face popped up beside Dorian's, a teasing smirk pulling at his lips beneath his thin beard of tentacles. Both Urman and Henrik had some Griknot in their DNA, but Urman's was more prominent despite the combination with Yu'Rom features. He was as short as me, and just as pale, the biggest difference the sparse tentacles wriggling around on the lower half of his face.

Objectively I knew that Griknots were supposed to be attractive, their features made

for giving the ultimate pleasure. Personally, I preferred my Yu’Rom-Terran mix. Fancier ears. Magnificent hair. No wriggling. Plus, I could shave, and my height had never been something I’d felt self-conscious about. Until now.

‘I don’t know what you think is so amusing since we’re the same size,’ I snarked at him.

His grin only grew wider. ‘Yes, but I’m not the one that’s stuck.’

He had me there.

One of the babies let out a particularly shrill shriek when I accidentally stepped on their fingers – or toes, I couldn’t actually tell – and tiny rows of sharp teeth bit into my ankle. I hissed and shot both men a wide-eyed plea for help. Dorian sniggered but hefted himself further onto the ledge to give himself some leverage while he hauled me up. It was a tricky process to achieve while avoiding crushing all the children, but we managed. I only kicked one of them in the end, and it was only a toe grazing a knee. None of them cried, which I took as a win.

Pity it wasn’t the one who bit me, though.

Once my feet were firmly on the floor, no babies in sight, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was still a little unsteady on my legs, my body weak and frail after all I had been through over the past solar. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything to do about that except strength training to bring back my previous healthy state.

I glanced down at my arms. Where they used to bulge in all the right places, now they were stick-thin and flimsy. I missed my muscles.

When the ship juddered and I stumbled, Dorian caught me before I could fall. I couldn’t look at him, shame over my physical state and the cause behind it had heat

flooding to my cheeks.

‘Come on,’ he said, guiding me away from the masses with Urman following a step behind. ‘Everyone’s on board, the doors are shut, the kids aren’t going anywhere and the ship’s about to take off. Let’s go check on Bromm.’

It was challenging work pushing through the crowd to move anywhere. No one had had the chance to settle in, so they were all congregated in the hallways. They were trying to spread out as much as possible, but with the children in the laundry carts there was still a significant crowd surrounding them as many attempted to nurture them the best they could.

This first part of the trip off of Nova Station would be the most difficult, without a doubt. Not only would they chase us, but no one had anything to do other than wander around aimlessly while they awaited orders.

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It took far too long to reach the infirmary, especially considering it was so close the airlock door that had just sealed shut behind us. Luckily, the doorway wasn't blocked and we were able to enter without any more fuss. I'd earned myself a couple of bruises on the way after getting jostled about by stray elbows and firm shoulders, so I took the opportunity to shake out the aches when there was enough space.

'How is he?' Urman asked Henrik. I would have asked myself, but I was more focused on the two glowing blue forms. I blinked as my brain tried to catch up. I'd seen Artemis glow before, but not Bromm...

She was hunched over his prone body, their glows matching as if from the same source, and her eyes were closed as she gripped his limp hand between hers. Beside them Cadmus had stayed close, his own body slumped forward as he sat against the side of Artemis's chair almost as if he were asleep.

I squinted, wondering if the same blue glow was also emanating from him, but I discarded the errant thought as exhaustion catching up to me and focused on the pair that actually were glowing. It must have been merely a trick of the light, a visual echo from looking straight at the bright blue light from the other two.

Bromm had looked better. He was currently unconscious with a breathing device sticking out of his throat. We'd entered in time to watch Henrik attach wires to specific areas on Bromm's body that made the machines around him beep and flash with information I didn't know how to decipher.

The whole scene was such an odd sight, and I didn't know where to begin to process it all. If I was honest with myself, I was still stuck on Artemis turning out to be a

woman. I was kicking myself for not seeing it before. Now that I knew, it was so obvious looking back. There were so many little things that I'd dismissed as quirky or introverted behaviours that I now realised were attempts to hide her true form.

And this time a solar ago she never would have fucked one man, let alone two, in front of an entire group of people. Arthur Mercer was shy, quiet, and reserved. Artemis was the opposite, and I was having a tough time merging the two versions into one.

Perhaps that was my problem, though. Arthur Mercer was an act. Artemis was the real person, and I needed to get to know her as she was without any preconceived conceptions.

But I missed my friend and I wanted him back, and I couldn't just turn that off. I knew Arty. I didn't know Artemis. But did I want to?

Of course. That was never in question. Not really. I wanted to know her because despite forming a close bond with her alter ego, the best lies always carried a bit of truth. She hadn't pulled the Arty persona out of her ass. Some part of that was the real her. I just needed to figure out which parts.

Already, I knew her self-sacrificing tendencies were genuine. And her strength. She'd tried (unsuccessfully) to hide that part of herself while undercover, but there was no need for her to do so now. I just hoped she could trust me enough to be herself without those damn walls getting in the way again.

If we could move forward without her guard up, that would be great. I mentally pleaded with the universe.

The bigger question was, could we move forward without my guard up? She had deceived us all, after all. How deep did that deception go?

I didn't get the chance to mull those thoughts over because I was interrupted by the guard from before. The one who looked just like Foryk. I was too busy healing from the injuries I'd sustained at the hands of The Program's scientists or being buried under a mountain of children to pay attention to the full scope of their relationship, but I had been able to deduce that they were related. Brothers, I would have wagered.

When the guard spoke, I was proven correct, though I was taken aback by the formal tone he used.

'Foryk, your presence has been requested by Mother. She wishes for both her sons to be present for to uphold our traditions and honour Father.'

Foryk, whom I'd previously ignored in favour of studying the glowing pair, stood up and I noticed he held the blonde boy Artemis had saved in his arms. He passed him to me, and though I accepted the exchange I shot him a look that I hoped expressed my discomfort but he simply ignored me and left the room with his brother.

I looked down at the child in my arms. He was gazing up at me with big green eyes brimming with innocent wonder. Little fingers grappled at my face and tugged on my hair. I knew it was a matted mess and I hoped it was salvageable, but it would probably be even worse after this little guy was done with it.

'Um, hi there,' I said as those tiny digits somehow found their way both into my mouth and up my nostrils at the same time. 'My name is Reece. What's your name?'

'Weese!' he shouted with a smile as he slapped at my cheeks before shmooshing them.

I chuckled. 'Well done! That's my name. Can you tell me yours?'

'Bal!' he said, punctuating his answer with an excited clap. 'I Bal!'

‘Well, Bal. It’s nice to meet you,’ I said, letting him mess with my face again. This time he seemed to take a particular interest in my ears. Specifically their pointed tips.

Suddenly, another tremor rocked the ship, except this one was much larger than the others. Those had been simple stops-and-starts while whomever piloted the ship got used to the controls. This one was more like a physical blow that was strong enough to topple us all over as we scrambled to keep ourselves steady. I had one hand over Bal’s head as I cradled him closer to my chest in an attempt to protect him.

Nova Station had mobilised, it seemed, for only one thing could have caused such a reaction.

We were under attack.

A hologram appeared over Bromm’s cot, and the familiar face of my old flight instructor filled the air. If I remembered correctly, her name was GC Stanson, but I could have been wrong.

‘Captain! Their ships are following us with fatal force. What are your orders?’

I expected Xander to step up and start barking instructions, so I was looked to him expectantly, surprised when he didn’t. It took a moment for me to process that they were all looking towards Artemis, and I realised our conundrum. This was Artemis’s ship which made her the captain.

And she was currently unresponsive.

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‘Captain?’ GC Stanson prompted. ‘I need your orders.’

Xander finally stepped forward then and drew the GC’s attention. ‘Captain Artemis is currently... indisposed. I can speak for her.’ At the pilot’s nod, he continued. ‘Does this ship have weapons?’

‘It does, sir.’

‘Do we have anyone to control those weapons?’

‘Not currently, sir.’

‘Right. I’ll get someone on that ASAP, but you focus your efforts on getting us out of range. Understood?’

‘Understood, sir.’

‘A?’

The second voice startled all of us, and we each jumped and swivelled our heads to find its owner. Another hologram had appeared within the hologram, and the GC was gaping at the woman who had appeared beside her.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded.

The other hologram frowned. ‘Who are you?Where’s Artemis?’

‘She’s in here,’ Addy shouted, waving her arms to grab both holograms’ attention. ‘You must be Libby,’ she continued. ‘Arty’s fine, I promise. And we have Bal!’

She waved me towards her, and I moved to stand beside her and present the small boy but stumbled when another blow rocked the ship. I managed to put Bal down and before I could fall on him, and he immediately crawled to the large beast resting at Artemis’s feet.

I watched with growing unease as tiny fingers poked, probed, tugged and scratched at the large animal, but the creature wasn’t having it. It rose up to loom over the boy with a deep, rumbling growl that resonated throughout the room and vibrated my bones. And then my unease quickly morphed into morbid horror as the beast opened its red tooth-lined maw and lunged.

With a yell, we all moved at once to get between the boy and the beast. I heard shouting from the holograms as well but paid them no heed as I focused all my efforts on scooping up the boy and getting as far away from the incensed animal as possible, all the while the others in the room had formed a barrier with their bodies, stumbling around when the ship was hit again in quick succession.

‘Hold on!’ the GC shouted as she turned her attention back to the ship’s controls. I couldn’t see what she was doing as only her head and shoulders were projected by the hologram, but I could see the way her brows dipped low and her tongue poked out, caught between her teeth. Her shoulders bunched and her head swivelled, and we were all suddenly thrown back as the ship lurched, the magnets creating the artificial gravity fighting to keep up with her erratic manoeuvres as we went momentarily weightless.

I held Bal to me with one arm while the other steadied us as best as I could, but we were being tossed about like salt in a shaker.

Luckily, Bromm was blocked in by the cot's guard rails, so he wasn't being tossed around quite like the rest of us, and I considered strapping Bal down with him to keep him secure throughout the worst of it.

But those thoughts were interrupted by suddenly Artemis leaping to her feet. She held onto the guard rail to steady herself as we were once again tossed about. Cadmus jerked from his previously slumped position at the sudden movement and I froze on that action. Why hadn't he moved when the beast was trying to attack Bal?

'What the hell is going on here?' she snapped, taking in the chaos and snapping me out of my thoughts.

'A?' the second hologram called out.

Artemis twisted towards her voice. 'Libby?'

'Is now not a good time?'

Another hit caused Artemis to almost faceplant before she caught herself on the chair. Fortunately for her, it was bolted to the floor for instances just like this.

'Are you okay?' asked the other woman.

'I'm fine! I'll call you back in a tick, okay?' Artemis yelled over the shouts bursting through from the soldiers and babies in the hallway. The hologram dispersed, blocking off the second one of her friend. Artemis reached out to support Dorian as he lost his balance and tilted precariously.

We stayed put as we waited for the hits to finally cease. I was crouched to cover Bal's body, shielding him with my own in case something fell. The beast was cowering beneath Bromm's cot who was nice and secure on top. Adara, Urman and Henrik

were clinging to the only other chair in the room, and Artemis was practically hugging Dorian in her attempts to keep him upright while Cadmus was wrapped around Artemis, using her as a pillar in a way that seemed like he was also protecting her.

That was a new development, but after what I'd witnessed during their...act of intimacy, I wasn't completely surprised. Just mostly. Cadmus had never struck me as the type to settle down.

Eventually, the blows stopped coming and the ship levelled out again right as the GC's voice crackled over the speaker system. 'That's the worst of it over, folks. The enemy are no longer on our tail.'

Our sighs of relief came too soon, however, because as soon as the GC's voice cut out Bal let out an excited squeal and reached with grabby hands in the beast's direction. The beast that had clearly had enough of the tiny Terran boy because he let out another bone-rattling growl and we all jumped into action.

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‘Dave. Junior.’ Artemis’s voice cut through the tension. Shocking the shit out of me – and the rest of us, if their gawping was any indication – the thing actually backed down.

‘You are in so much trouble, mister,’ she chastised, and he actually cowered back beneath the cot. He attempted to lick her hand, but when she didn’t react beyond resting her hands on her hips he covered his many eyes with his paws and let out a pathetic little whimper.

When Bal let out another squeal, Dave Junior (I would have to ask her why she chose that name out of all the possibilities out there) moved his giant paws away from his eyes just far enough to glare at the little blonde boy.

It was then that I started to question just what we’d gotten ourselves into.

CHAPTER 4

Artemis

The soldiers were a lot easier to get settled than the babies, but that didn’t come as a shock to anyone. It took less than a turn to assign everyone rooms, but we were over capacity so we also had to come up with a sleep shift schedule. I didn’t feel bad about that since it wasn’t an unusual circumstance within the military. I was pretty sure a few people had transformed some closets into their own personal quarters to avoid the sharing, and I felt guilty for not sharing my own room. That guilt only lasted for a moment though. I had my reasons for needing my privacy.

The problem came in figuring out where to put the children. They needed someplace safe where they could roam freely without getting into anything that could be harmful to themselves or the ship. The only room we could really convert into what was essentially an orphanage was the cafeteria. It was the only area large enough to fit everyone inside, and the tables were easy enough to remove to make space for makeshift beds.

Fortunately, there were ample volunteers for babysitting duty so at least I wouldn't have to worry about whether or not they were safe and looked after. Currently, they were working at building a sort of nest out of all the spare blankets and pillows we could find, but it was sparse and not the best. They would be fine, though. It was a sad reality, but these children were all used to sleeping in less than comfortable places. The few bits of padding they did have were more than they'd be used to.

I was keeping Baldr with me though. My schedule was packed full for the foreseeable future, so it at least eased my mind to have the option of childcare available if I needed it with plenty of friends for Bal to play with and keep him occupied.

And I would need it, that much was obvious.

My newly acquired title of Captain was more of a blow than an honour, but I would perform those duties to the best of my abilities. I had zero interest in taking charge, or being responsible for so many people, but alas, I kept finding myself in must that position.

One thing I was the most concerned about was Captain Hironimus's reaction to losing that status. I kept using that title for him because at the end of the day he'd earned it, but without a ship of his own it wasn't exactly true.

I would have gladly handed mine over to him, except I still wasn't entirely comfortable with him. Trust was earned, and while he hadn't actually done anything

to lose any trust my previous assumptions about him had cast a shadow over our relationship that I couldn't completely shake.

After recent revelations, I knew he didn't deserve my distrust so I put on a brave face whenever he was in the room, but I had high hopes that I could move past it enough to pawn off as much of the captain duties on him as I could. Maybe one day I would even trust him enough to hand them over completely, because I really didn't want the job. His knowledge and experience would definitely come in useful in the coming days if he allowed me to use him.

None of that assuaged the sharp sting I felt whenever I saw him and Addy together, however. The love and trust between them was blatantly apparent and it reminded me of where Bromm and I were heading, and it rubbed salt in the wound that they could be so open with each other while Bromm was stuck in a coma. I missed him.

It was also a bittersweet reminder of what I'd thought I'd once had with T, until he'd proven me wrong. I didn't necessarily regret my feelings for him, but I certainly learned the hard way that giving my heart to the first person who showed me kindness wasn't the best choice. And while I had moved on and was building something real with someone else, I still felt that old ache in my chest at the thought of us being under the same roof. He was so close, but nothing would ever be the same between us. There was too much bad blood.

He was something I was actively avoiding. T's presence, his connection to Foryk, the death of his father and that awful encounter with his mother... I was going to ignore all of that until I was forced to acknowledge it and just hoped it wouldn't be for a good long while.

I would have gone to the infirmary, but it was packed full of injured soldiers needing medical assistance which was how I found myself hiding in my room. Well, as much as I could with the lack of a door thanks to Dave Junior. I was having a snuggle with

Bal with Dave Junior curled up asleep in the corner, all of us taking a break from the overstimulation of a full ship when Addy found me. Captain Hironimus was a step behind her, a constant protector. I understood it, having experienced that type of separation before myself.

‘Hey, can we come in?’ she asked, and I moved over on the bed, patting the space beside me in an invitation for her to sit. I didn’t bother offering the same to the captain, already knowing he would refuse in favour of standing. Or looming. He did seem to love to loom.

She practically bounced over to me, jumping up on the bed. Literally. She was too small to just sit so she had to launch herself up.

Bal’s head was resting against my chest, and he turned to squish the other cheek against me instead to get a better look at the newcomer. I should have expected him to be curious about Addy, her bright pink colouring a vast difference from the typically muted, earthy tones of the people he’d so far been exposed to. Besides the Tornus, of course, but they were larger and scarier than the dinky, bubbly woman currently next to me.

I sent a tired grin her way, pleased to see her more like her old self even after everything she’d been through. My exhaustion was a combination of overwhelm and my body’s need for rest and rejuvenation, but I couldn’t stop just yet. There was still too much to do before I could stop, so I tried not to think too much about it.

No point in taunting myself with something I couldn’t have just yet.

‘How are you doing?’ she asked, and I huffed a quick laugh.

‘Isn’t that what I’m supposed to ask you?’

Her smile dimmed a little, but a darting glance towards her tense boyfriend had her forcing it back to its original brightness. I wanted to frown, not liking the way she was pretending in front of the captain, but I held it at bay. It wasn't my place to dictate her behaviour or her decisions, and she must have had her reasons.

Perhaps she'd open up about it when we were alone. If we could manage to get each other alone at all. Both of us were constantly being followed by someone or another.

Bal reached a sleepy hand out to Addy, and she took that as an opportunity to hold onto him and rest her head on my shoulder in the process. Ignoring the captain and his suddenly rigid stance, I wrapped my arm around her waist and tugged her closer to me so she didn't have to crane her neck to rest it against me.

I dropped a kiss on top of Bal's head, enjoying having him in my arms again after so much time spent apart and worrying. I'd given him a thorough check-up when I first entered the bedroom, and it was both a relief and a concern to find the cuts caused by the scientists already healed, not a scar in sight. I didn't want to draw anymore blood from him to confirm what I already knew, but he was riddled with nanites just like me and his mother. The metallic sheen that had glittered amid the dry blood on his skin was confirmation enough.

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The implications of a new generation born with the nanites already in their systems was something I wasn't ready to consider just yet. It was looking more and more likely that The Program had succeeded in creating a brand-new race, but my mind couldn't handle the added stress of what that could mean. For us, for the Intergalactic Union...

It was all too much.

'I just need to get everything sorted so I can get some rest. I'm running on low after all of that,' I confessed, answering her question from before.

'Me too,' she said wearily. 'That's actually why we're here. We should have a meeting with everyone to form a plan of action and then we can rest for a bit.'

My eyebrows finally broke free from my control and dipped down low over my eyes. 'Are you sure you're okay? I know how hard it is to acclimate to the nanites...'

'Nanites?' the captain asked, panic in his tone. 'Babe, what is she talking about? What nanites?'

Addy sent me an accusing look, and I realised she hadn't had that conversation with him yet. He was still unaware of everything she had gone through as one of The Program's subjects.

I widened my eyes innocently as I met her gaze with my own. 'Oops?'

She deflated, turning to address her lover. 'I don't want to have to go over it more

than once, so I was going to explain during the meeting.'

The captain's breathing became choppy and shallow as he attempted to regulate his emotions and control his reaction, but he forced it back down. 'Okay,' he agreed through clenched teeth. 'But don't leave anything out for my sake. I need to know what they did. I can't help you if you keep it from me.'

'I promise, baby cakes,' she gave him an exaggerated wink. 'I'm not keeping it from you, I just didn't want to repeat myself.'

I snorted a laugh in surprise. 'Baby cakes?'

The captain shook his head while a smile attempted to pull at the corners of his lips that he actively fought. 'Don't ask.'

'All right,' I said with a groan, repositioning Bal so he could rest more comfortably on my shoulder as we moved. 'I have a few calls to make as well, so we should get this meeting started and over with as soon as possible.'

I nudged Dave Junior with my foot to wake him, and a single red eye peeped open to glare at me, but I couldn't leave him here alone. He'd tear the whole ship apart to find me when he woke and realised I was missing. Again.

'Come on, bud. We've got places to be. You can nap during the meeting.' I exited the room, knowing he would follow without any added prompting.

'Uh... Do we have to bring him?' the captain asked, eyeing Dave Junior uncertainly.

I shrugged. 'Yup. You already saw what happens when I leave him alone.'

That was all that was needed to shut him up, and the five of us made our way towards

the cockpit. I couldn't think of anywhere else with enough room and privacy for the meeting.

'Why don't the two of you grab the others?' I told them, then hesitated. 'But maybe not Foryk. We can fill him in later, but we should let them grieve uninterrupted.'

I purposefully didn't include T or their mother, and the look Addy and the captain shared proved they caught the slight. Neither of them commented, however, and I was thankful for that. I didn't know how much either of them knew about what went down between me and T, but I didn't want to get into it now. Or ever, to be honest. The past should stay in the past, but the bastard just kept coming back.

Like a persistent rash. Itchy and uncomfortable every time he popped back up.

Or a wart.

Not that I ever got either of those, but they made my point.

Addy gave me a two-fingered salute and jogged off with a 'You got it, boss,' the captain trailing behind her.

Any stragglers in the hallway gave us a wide berth, eyeing both me and Dave Junior with a mixture of wariness, fear, and awe. It was an odd experience, and I wasn't sure I liked it. I didn't want people to fear me, but I also wasn't used to having so many in my care. My twosome with Libby had become a trio when Bal was born, and even undercover as a cadet there were only four members of my team. Now there were hundreds of lives looking to me for guidance and protection and I had no clue what to do with that.

Freak out about it later, I steeled myself.

GC Stanson and the marksman – both of which had the same pale and delicate features denoting them as purebred Yu'Roms – were the only ones in the cockpit when we arrived, and they both turned to eye us with the same level of wariness as the others. The Group Captain at least hid it better, rearranging her expression into something not exactly welcoming but certainly less warding. The marksman, however, pushed himself as far into the console as possible to get away from us.

I tried not to take it personally, but his eyes darted between me and Dave Junior with equal caution. The only thing that seemed to keep him in his chair was Bal's adorable little face taking in the new surroundings with big, green, innocent eyes.

'Captain,' GC Stanson greeted, her voice gravelly with held back emotions I didn't even try to decipher.

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‘Just call me Artemis,’ I told her with a smile I hoped was as soft as I was trying to make it.

She hesitated, the break in protocol not something she would have been accustomed to, but she met my smile with one of her own. Her body relaxed slightly at the friendliness I was attempting to exude. I’d been trained in many ways to interact with a person to get something from them, but genuine friendliness was not one of them so I was pleased it seemed to be working.

‘Artemis,’ she tested my name on her tongue. ‘If we’re ditching the titles then call me Eloria.’

I beamed at her, my smile wide and lively even when I felt my exhaustion attempting to pull my muscles back down. ‘Eloria. Sorry for the, uh... secrets,’ I finished lamely.

She let out a tinkling laugh that reminded me of tiny bells. It was a beautiful sound, and I found myself gaping at her before slamming my jaw shut. Embarrassment heated my cheeks, but it merely softened the interaction between us even more.

‘Under the circumstances, I can’t really blame you. Though, I don’t understand why you went undercover in the first place,’ she prompted.

‘Stay for the meeting and I’ll explain everything,’ I offered. ‘There are quite a few still left in the dark, and it’s easier if I don’t have to keep repeating myself.’

‘What meeting?’

‘The captain and Adara are gathering... well, the original rebellion, I suppose. We’re going to debrief and plan. You should probably be a part of that, too, since you’re piloting.’ I turned to the marksman, noting the way he was listening intently while attempting to appear like he wasn’t eavesdropping.

‘Who are you?’ I asked him.

He didn’t respond, instead staring with wide eyes and a flapping mouth where no sound came out. Eloria let out another tinkling laugh.

‘That’s Julius. Don’t mind him, he’s just a bit shy,’ she teased him.

It snapped him out of his stupor and he sent a playful glare her way, though he didn’t move any closer, still wary of me and Dave Junior. When the latter moved to the corner to settle in for another nap, it seemed to prove helpful in putting them both at ease.

‘Well, Julius, since you’re the one in charge of our weapons you’re also welcome to stay, but you don’t have to. It’s about to get pretty crowded in here and tensions are still high, and they’ll likely climb even higher before this meeting is over.’

He cleared his throat, unable to make direct eye contact, but he managed to speak which I took as a small victory. ‘I think I’ll make myself scarce,’ he decided. He rose from his seat and edged his way around the room, giving Dave Junior more of a wide berth than me which I considered a definite improvement, and then he disappeared out the door.

I pressed a button on the floor with my toe and a holo-table emerged. I took Julius’s vacated chair and placed Bal forward-facing on my lap.

‘I hope you don’t mind, but I need to contact his mother,’ I said, already leaning

towards the controls to do so.

‘The woman from before?’ she asked.

I nodded. ‘Libby.’

She gestured to where I was already pressing the necessary buttons, a single white eyebrow raised and amusement shining from behind her eyes. ‘Go for it.’

Within a tick, Libby’s face was a hologram above the holo-table and Bal was clapping his hands excitedly.

‘Mama! Mama!’

Libby’s choked sob had my own eyes stinging with unshed tears, and I had to clear the lump that suddenly clogged my throat. ‘Hi, my sweet boy, I missed you!’

I sat back and watched as I let the reunion play out. It wasn’t the reunion we were looking forward to since Libby still wasn’t able to hold her son in her arms, but at least she could see he was safe. He had me, and I wasn’t about to let him go again.

CHAPTER 5

Artemis

The sound of arguing drew my attention, the raised voices putting me on alert. I exchanged a look with Eloria and an unspoken understanding passed between us. Without interrupting Bal and Libby’s rather one-sided conversation, I slid Baldr from my lap and placed him on the chair and Eloria moved closer to keep an eye on him while I investigated the fuss. I caught Libby’s eye as I moved away, and without pausing in her long-winded baby-talk speech she gave me a nod to acknowledge she

was aware of what was happening.

‘We deserve to be a part of this just as much as any of you,’ came a vaguely familiar voice, his tone verging on snobby.

‘The last thing you will ever be doing is joining us while we plan a fucking rebellion, you backstabbing sack of shit,’ Cadmus responded, the venom in his tone almost drawing me up short. I’d heard him angry a few times, but this was more than that. His tone was filled with unadulterated loathing.

I rounded the corner then to find everyone creating a wall to block off access to none other than the Christianson siblings, but while everyone was focused on Tarren my gaze went straight to Katira. She was standing a few paces behind, head bowed and shoulders hunched as she slowly inched away from the tension-filled interaction.

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I'd been wanting to catch her alone anyway, but right now probably wasn't the time.

'Why don't the two of you head back to your room and I'll come find you tomorrow,' I cut in, speaking through a small gap I found between Addy's shoulder and the captain's. 'I have something I want to discuss with you, but Cadmus is right. After what you did to Reece, and Addy by extension, I think it's fair that you keep to yourselves for a bit, don't you?'

I may have been more understanding of their situation because of my theories, but I was still angry at them both for lying about my friend and causing us all so much pain and suffering. The reasons behind their actions may have softened me slightly towards them, but that didn't mean I was going to let them off scot-free.

Tarren, red-faced, chest puffed and huffing, looked as if he were about to argue but his sister placed a delicate, scar-riddled hand on his arm and he visibly deflated. 'Fine,' he spat out through clenched teeth before piercing me with a pointed stare. 'Tomorrow.'

I gave a jerky nod that he accepted before guiding his sister back the way they'd come. His gentleness with her was telling, and a part of me thawed even more. Not completely, he still put someone I cared about at risk, but, if I was right, I could understand his action and the reasons behind them. If I were in his position I probably would have done the same.

'What do you need to talk to them about?' Addy asked, her nose scrunched in a sneer.

'Just let me talk to them first, and I'll come to you when I have the information I

need,' I said, darting my eyes towards the captain in a way that I hoped conveyed my message. She frowned, but understanding soon lit up in her eyes and she agreed.

The captain, however, was not privy to our silent communications and wasn't so understanding.

'What reason do you have to keep this information from us now?' he asked, suspicion clear in his tone. The feeling was mutual.

'I'm not keeping anything from anyone,' I assured him. 'I'm merely refusing to speculate.'

'Speculate what?' he demanded, refusing to budge even an inch.

My response was to give him a deadpan stare that raised a few nervous coughs from the other members of our group.

'Well, come on then. Let's get this meeting over with. I'm tired and want to get some sleep,' I waved for them to follow me as I re-entered the cockpit, pushing past the captain in the process. He attempted to block my way, but he was no match for my strength.

Libby was still there, laughing quietly to herself as Baldr attempted to escape the chair while Eloria struggled to keep him on it. Bal was having the time of his life enjoying the little game, but Eloria looked stressed as if he were going to break if his feet touched the floor.

'Here, let me,' I offered, picking the little escape artist up and placing him back on my lap.

Everyone settled in around the room, some standing while others seating themselves

in various positions. Dorian leaned against the wall with Urman at his side, and on his other side was the captain, though he was scowling at Adara as she picked the arm of my chair rather than him.

‘Hey,’ she smiled at me. ‘Mind if I perch?’

‘Go right ahead,’ I told her. If I caught her starting to lag then I’d give her my seat. Bal could always rest in my arms anyway.

Addy turned to the hologram, her lips stretched wide in a happy smile. ‘Hi, Libby! I’m Addy. It’s nice to finally meet you,’ she greeted with genuine excitement.

‘Ah, hi,’ Libby returned the greeting, suddenly shy. I understood it since Addy would have been the first person she’d met that wasn’t a subject of The Program. Well, she was, but Libby didn’t know that yet. Unfortunately, from the way everyone shifted nervously, her timidity had come across as rude rather than shy.

‘Libs, we’re about to debrief. You can stay if you want, but it will probably be a long one,’ I offered, attempted to divert the attention away from the awkwardness.

‘Oh, um, I should probably get back. It’s still night here and I should probably let you go before the others catch on and demand to see their own kids. You have enough on your plate right now. Thanks for calling, A. And for getting Bal back...’ her words choked off when the emotion got the better of her, and my own eyes watered with tears that were eager to be shed.

‘Of course, Libs,’ was all I said. No words were even necessary. I would have been here to save him with or without her permission, though having it certainly made things between us less bumpy. Fighting with Libby was never fun, and it was an extremely rare occurrence.

‘Love you, A,’ she said, then looked down at the little boy in my arms. ‘Mama loves you, sweet boy! I’ll see you soon.’ She blew a kiss, then the hologram dispersed and the room was left in silence.

No one spoke, the words a struggle to drag out amongst the trauma and exhaustion.

Reece, who had settled cross-legged on the floor by the door, was the first to break the silence. ‘So... was I the last to know that Arty has actually been a girl this entire time, or does someone still have to figure that out?’

The room erupted into an array of chortles and snorts.

‘I knew first!’ Addy piped up eagerly, but her statement was met with opposing reactions. The most negative of which – no surprise there – belonged to the captain.

‘And how is it that you knew her secret the entire time and didn’t bother to let me...usknow?’ he demanded sternly.

The pink woman merely shrugged, a teasing smirk pulling at the corners of her lips. ‘I just felt her up. It’s not my fault I was the only one who managed it.’

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Cadmus cleared his throat, a smug grin on his face. 'I would say that's no longer accurate.'

Disbelieving laughs, born more from shock at his audacity than actual humour, tittered around the room. Reece in particular was torn between laughing and shifting uncomfortably at the reminder of what they'd been forced to witness.

'Yeah... Sorry about that,' I apologised sheepishly. While I wasn't ashamed of my body, these people hadn't deserved to be put in such an awkward position.

'It's not your fault, Arty,' Addy soothed, a small pink hand coming to rest on my shoulder.

'What are you all talking about?' the captain asked. 'What did I miss?'

'Maybe I should start from the beginning?' I suggested, not particularly eager to get into the details of my life but knowing I owed these people at least that much.

'That's probably best,' the captain agreed on everyone's behalf.

My exhaustion doubled at the mere thought of dragging all of my trauma up and throwing it out into the open, but everyone needed to know. They needed to understand who their enemy was, their goals and how they worked, and I was the best person for the job whether I liked it or not.

And so I adjusted a sleepy Baldr in my arms, got comfortable, and started talking.

*

The room was eerily silent when I was finished telling my story.

The reactions varied. Addy was clinging to me, her fingers digging into my arm uncomfortably but she seemed to need it to ground her. Eloria was wide-eyed and her skin had taken on a greenish hue. Henrik had his face in his hands, covering his eyes as if making himself blind would take away what he'd just learned. Urman was stone-faced and still as a statue, a mirror of Captain Hironimus.

The most concerning reactions, however, belonged to the final three. Cadmus and Dorian were angry. Burn the world down kind of angry. Their jaws ticked from grinding their teeth, their muscles were bunched as if ready to strike at the smallest provocation, and their fists were clenched so tightly their knuckles had turned white. A trickle of blood even dribbled from Cadmus's palms, his nails piercing the skin.

And Reece...

He looked haunted.

He was staring at me, but it was like he wasn't really seeing me. I wondered if his own trauma at the mercy of The Program was playing up, his story merging with mine to create a brand-new hellish conglomeration. Whatever he was seeing, whatever he was experiencing inside his own head, I worried he'd get stuck there and struggle to find his way back.

The captain cleared his throat once, then again for good measure before he broke through the tension in the room. 'What the doctor made you do... is there any chance...?'

My lips thinned into a straight line, and I shook my head once with finality. 'I don't

know why he thought someone else's sperm might work, but the nanites destroy all chances of it taking. I'm not pregnant.'

Henrik lifted his head from his hands at the turn in the conversation. 'Would you mind if I performed an examination?' he asked. 'I know you said there's no possibility, but you said it yourself: the nanites are unpredictable. If Demari believes they're responding to you and your emotions, I don't think we can rule it out until we know for certain.'

I inhaled sharply at his reasoning, not because I was afraid to become a lab rat again – I knew that wasn't his intention – but because his words made that tiny flicker of hope that had been all but expunged sputter as it tried to reignite. I gulped audibly but nodded my consent.

His answering smile was sad, but I tried to convey my reassurance with one of my own.

'Actually...' he continued hesitantly, and I waited patiently for him to say what was on his mind. 'Since we do not know what to expect from your nanites and... other implants, I was wondering if I could perhaps do daily check-ups to keep track of any changes?'

I paused, mulling it over. 'That would probably be the smartest course of action. I can agree to that.'

He released a sigh of relief, apparently believing my response would have been negative, and I was happy to prove him wrong. While I may not enjoy being poked and prodded at after so long spent doing just that, I was a rational person and could see the necessity of his request.

'Can we move on now, please?' asked Addy, her voice quivering with barely tamed

emotion.

‘Right,’ the captain said, clapping his hands and rubbing them together as he stood upright away from the wall he’d been leaning on. ‘We can ruminate over what we’ve just learned on our own time, but we should start on a plan. Captain?’

It took me a moment to realise he was talking to me, and I jolted at the realisation. I also couldn’t keep calling him ‘the captain’ if I was the one that currently held that title. It was an odd situation I had trouble wrapping my head around, but I didn’t think I could call him anything else. To me, he’d always been The Captain, and using his given name would just be weird.

I cleared my throat to bide myself time to compose myself, but it wasn’t enough. I wasn’t sure it ever would be, really. ‘The first order of business should be picking a new location. We still need a place to regroup before we head back to the Forbidden Planet.’

The captain (I really couldn’t call him anything else), picked up where I’d left off. ‘Our home planets are out. We can’t afford to put our loved ones at risk by heading there. They’ll be the first place The Program and the IU will look.’

‘So we need someplace off-grid and out of the way,’ Eloria surmised.

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Dorian stepped forward, his posture remarkably less tense now that the discussion had moved on to another topic. 'I think I might know a place.'

I gestured for him to go on.

'I don't think we're going to find any place that ticks all our boxes, but I'm from the Border System. Gerinium, to be more specific.'

'But doesn't the IU have charities set up all over the Border System to help with the underprivileged families that make up its populace?' asked Cadmus, and Dorian winced at the description of his home being regarded in such a negative light. Unfortunately, despite Cadmus's lack of tact, there was truth to his words.

'The IU is currently focused on helping those on Burnos rebuild after the wildfires,' Henrik piped in.

'Gerinium is largely left alone. We don't really have an IU presence anymore, so we're governing ourselves for the most part,' Dorian elaborated.

'So you're suggesting a lawless planet all but forgotten by the IU, even though your family is there and we will be putting them in harm's way?' the captain asked, needing confirmation.

'My family can take care of themselves, but yes,' he finished, though the statement left me with more questions. 'We chose the Forbidden planet originally because it was abandoned and beyond the IU's scope, a planet abandoned by an entire warrior race because it was too dangerous even for them. Now that we know even that's not

an option, I don't see any place better than Gerinium.'

'I agree. I can't think of any other option. I vote we head to Gerinium,' I said, opening up the floor for the others' input.

When no one objected, I turned to Eloria. 'That settles it, then. Make course for Gerinium, GC.'

'Yes, Captain,' she said with a quick salute, then turned around to start pressing buttons on the control panel, bringing up a hologram of the Intergalactic Union to plot our course.

I rose from my seated position, a fast asleep Baldr cradled in one arm while I used the other to stroke soothing circles on his back. 'You can all head out now. I need to make another call.'

'To Libby?' asked Addy.

'No,' I sighed. 'Bromm asked me to contact his parents to let them know he's all right.'

Cadmus frowned. 'But he's not all right. He's unconscious and can't breathe without assistance.'

I wanted to face-palm. I couldn't believe I forgot.

'He's stuck in the web. He met me there when I entered to open the hangar doors on Nova Station. He asked me to contact them then.'

'Wait, what?' Cadmus all but shrieked, the emotional outburst coming from him shocking me more than anything. 'Why didn't you say so sooner?'

I didn't understand the underscore of hurt in his tone and his words, but I was too exhausted to do delve deeper into the reasons behind it. Instead, I sent him an apologetic look I hoped conveyed my regret.

'I intended to. I wasn't trying to keep it from any of you,' I started, then my shoulders slumped as I hung my head, shame at forgetting something so vital heating my cheeks. 'I think I'm too tired to keep my head straight. I'm sorry I didn't mention it sooner.'

'But he's okay?' he pushed, but when I looked up his eyes were guarded.

'Yes. As far as he can be. He doesn't know what's happening so I promised to keep him in the loop until he wakes up.'

'I guess you'll need someone else to warm your bed at night while he's asleep then?' he teased, and tension I hadn't even realised was running through my muscles dropped at his unspoked forgiveness.

I gestured pointedly to Bal and Dave Junior. 'I think I'm all set, thanks.'

'Pity,' he pouted, but then a playful, lopsided smirk just barely pulled at the right corner of his lips and I knew we were okay.

Yawns cascaded throughout the room, one setting off another until we were all stretching our jaws. I wasn't the only one who was about to succumb to exhaustion, and I finally dismissed them with a wave of my hand, turning to the holo-table to finish my last task before I could rest.

'Do you think that's a good idea right now?' Eloria asked, freezing my arm as I reached towards the controls.

‘What?’

She eyed the contact information I’d pulled up with trepidation. ‘You and the prince are in a romantic relationship, correct? Or have I read the situation wrong?’

The space between my brows narrowed as I tried to glean the direction of her questions. ‘We are,’ I spoke slowly.

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‘Then do you think that perhaps it would be better to get some rest to be at your best before you meet your lover’s family for the first time, let alone royalty?’

I inhaled sharply, the implications not having occurred to me before. ‘Oh.’

‘You can call them today if you really wish, I can’t stop you, but I think it would be wise to wait until you’re a little more... refreshed and rejuvenated before making that call.’

I physically deflated, like someone had poked a hole in my being and all the energy inside of me was being sucked out. My hand dropped from the console to rest against Baldr’s back again.

‘You’re right. I’ll do it first thing when I wake.’

She lent me a knowing smile. ‘That’s probably for the best. Now go get some sleep, Captain. You need it.’

I scoffed as I rose from my seat, but it was half-hearted and weak. ‘All right. Good night, Eloria.’

‘Sleep well, Artemis.’

It was as I was leaving that I realised I’d forgotten to include an important point in the meeting. Xander was still unaware of his ex-first lieutenant’s betrayal, or her head at my hand. I wasn’t sure how he would take the news, but I doubted he’d smile and thank me.

But that was a conversation for a different time. It was too late to call him back now, and he deserved some rest before I gave him more bad news. Or maybe Addy would do it for me and I could get away with avoiding that conversation entirely. Somehow, I doubted I'd be that lucky.

I sighed, the weight of this war draining me of the rest of my strength as I collapsed into bed, Baldr curling against my chest while Dave Junior snored happily away in his own bed. My luck may have been running out, but that didn't mean I couldn't appreciate the little moments like this. This, right here, was enough for me to defy all the bullshit and fall into oblivion with a contented smile on my face.

CHAPTER 6

Cadmus

I hadn't spoken up.

I should have, I knew that, but there was so much fear and uncertainty around what had occurred that I was unsure how to proceed. I didn't even really know what had happened, but I knew that it didn't bode well for me.

And my lack of understanding over the matter only added an extra layer of mystery.

I ran over the words Artemis had used when describing the web. It was exactly like what I had seen, and I just knew that I had been in there with her while she had been opening the airlock gates.

But something didn't make sense. If she was in there with Bromm and they spoke with one another, why was I nothing more than a phantom? I had been ghostly presence as I was dragged along an unknown path, and there was no sign of anyone else in there with me despite knowing now that there was.

Nothing made sense anymore.

When we entered the room we'd claimed as our own, Henrik studied the unfamiliar space. This was his first time here, his efforts keeping him trapped in the infirmary up until now, and I knew he wouldn't stick around for long. His place was back where others would need him, and he was only here for a quick nap until he was rested enough to get back to work.

He had fixed up most of the more serious injuries, leaving the less serious ones to be seen to after some rest. There were thankfully no injuries that were life-threatening among the turncoats. Was that even the correct terminology? I didn't know. What I did know was that the Intergalactic Union was crumbling, the military was compromised, and these people were the only ones willing to stand up for what they believed in rather than following orders like mindless cattle.

'Are you okay, Cad?' Henrik asked from beside me and making me startle. I hadn't noticed him approach.

'Uh, yeah. I'm fine.'

'You sure? You look a little... off.'

'Positive,' I lied. 'I just need to sleep the past few days off, that's all.'

My answer seemed to placate him, because he relaxed enough to step away from me towards one of the bunks. 'Yeah, me too. I'm wiped.'

I scowled at the clear exhaustion lining his features and dragging his movements as he pulled off his blood-stained clothes. We were all still in our cadet uniforms, and I wanted out of mine as soon as possible. Thankfully, Artemis had pointed out where we could find more jumpsuits, and there was a handy little machine another one of

the soldiers found in what we'd originally believed to be a closet that created more if we ran out. I had a feeling we would be using that sooner rather than later, especially since I couldn't wait to burn anything related to the military at the earliest available time.

I wasn't against the IU in theory, but after witnessing how easily it had been infiltrated all the way to the top I couldn't stand the thought of being a part of it. I'd enlisted and enrolled at Nova Academy because I wanted my life to mean something more than money and entitlement. I knew I was well-off and kind of a brat, but none of it was really mine, and I was bored. I wanted to pave my own path, do something I could be proud of, and learn from real experiences away from the gilded cage of my father's home.

It hadn't always been this way. When my mother was still alive we'd lived happily on Fernilum, our home high in the tall jungle trees where Father and I could stretch our wings and Mama would watch on in delighted contentment. But then she'd died and everything changed, Father most of all. He'd reclaimed his duties as the majority shareowner of the Entario Station, and we'd moved away from the simplicity of jungle life and into the metallic kingdom of the space station.

I was only a small child then and could barely remember life before, but sometimes I swore I could still hear my mother's laughter ringing through the air, bright and happy, or smell the earthy scents of the jungle wilderness, thick with damp soil and fragrant foliage. But they were nothing more than shadows of a time that no longer existed, the true memories long forgotten as I'd grown older and settled into life amongst the metal, even when some small part of me would always crave that wild freedom of my long-lost childhood.

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I didn't know what had brought on such thoughts, my focus typically on the present. I never liked to look behind me, the pain of the past something I refused to let in. I never looked towards the future, either, my path always laid out in front of me with the expectations of my father. Even joining the military wasn't something that would have gotten me out of whatever he had planned for me, my end goal always his.

Until now, it seemed.

Perhaps that was why my subconscious was drumming up the echoes of the past, because my future no longer made any sense. I had turned my back on everything my father stood for, but in doing so, had I turned towards the path my mother would have been proud of me for following?

There was no way to know for sure, but I liked to think so.

I hadn't thought of her for so long, but there was something about the way she persevered despite the odds, even if she did eventually succumb in the end, which reminded me of Artemis. Maybe that was it. Cancer stole my mother from this world, and Artemis had mentioned something about that too. The Program had healed her of the formidable illness, and she had taken that opportunity and used it to become the woman she was today.

Would my mother have done the same if she'd been gifted a cure?

I wanted to be bitter about it. There was an entire organisation out there that had a solution for so many problems. So many lives could have been saved, and they'd chosen to abuse that power and knowledge by not only by hoarding it to themselves,

but by weaponizing it as well.

I recalled the information Artemis had bestowed upon us about her life within The Program, and I decided I was glad my mother had passed on into the next realm rather than be subjected to the whims of such evil just to survive.

As I settled into my bunk, clothes still on, I realised that was one of the things that drew me to Artemis in the first place. Her resilience, her strength, and her courage to stand up for what she believed in; the way he protected those she loved even to her own detriment because she knew it was the right thing to do. She stood firm and unwavering against the odds that were stacked so heavily against her and it drew me in, beckoned to me like a siren's call.

The real question was, was I interested in answering that call, even if it led to my demise?

The answer was obvious. I was here, after all, throwing everything I could have had away for the chance to be a better person, to do the right thing. It was a new concept for me, but these people surrounding me were more than enough proof that I was on the right path. I had found friendship and loyalty in Henrik I had never experienced before, and I was opening myself up to the concept of building a completely different life for myself. A family.

And there was still so much to discover about the mysterious woman. A cyborg, she'd called herself. All her trials, pain, and suffering had moulded her into the incredible woman I had the immense pleasure of starting to know, and I wanted more. She was like an addiction. I couldn't get her out of my head, and lying here, sleep eluding me, I realised I didn't want to. I wanted to know everything about her, starting with her strange abilities.

But that led me back to my original thoughts. Why was I experiencing an echo of

those abilities? I hadn't been able to control them, that much I knew. If I was correct in my summations, I had merely been dragged along for the ride while she controlled them. But why me? Was this what had happened to Bromm?

My eyes widened in the darkness at the thought. Was I about to succumb to the same fate as the Griknot Prince, unconscious and on death's door in the infirmary?

I really did need to inform someone of what had happened with me if that was the case, but was it truly? It had only happened once, and there wasn't much to speak of. So I'd been sucked into the web alongside her, but it sounded like I hadn't truly been there at all. Not physically, at least, which was a good sign, right?

Right?

The panic that rose at the possibility was tamped down quickly at what else that might mean. If I was experiencing these side-effects for who knew whatever reasons, did it mean I was changing, too? Was I becoming just like Artemis, and now Reece and Adara?

The excitement at the prospect overrode any negativity I felt towards the situation. If that were true –and I fucking hoped it was –then a little pain and suffering was a small price to pay to be a badass just like her.

Cadmus, the Drakfern-Terran Cyborg, Hero of the Intergalactic Union.

Damn, that had a nice ring to it.

The fact of the matter was that I had no clue what was happening to me, but I wasn't going to let myself worry about it. I would come out the other side stronger for it, I had no doubt.

It was those happy thoughts that allowed me to finally relax and let sleep tug me under the cloak of darkness, a smile fixed unwaveringly on my lips.

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I was back.

It wasn't just a fluke, then, I thought to myself as I took in my strange new surroundings. Just because I'd been here once already didn't mean I was still awestruck at what I was seeing.

White lines spread out in a web of intricate designs, Artemis's name for the place an accurate description. The glow that emanated from each line varied, and even in different clusters there was an array of intensity. All of them, however, were muted compared to the one I had found myself perched on.

What caught my attention with an even greater sense of awe was the endless mass of nothingness spread out beyond the web. It gave off the impression of both utter emptiness and bone-crushing pressure all at once, and it was completely disorienting.

And yet...

Disorientation was a sensation, and the last time I had been here there was no sensation whatsoever.

I looked down at myself and realised with a jolt that I actually could. My neck bent, my gaze adjusted course, and there I was. Only I still wasn't totally tangible. Instead, that sense of being a phantom was impressed upon me again with the vagueness of my form. I could see the outline of my body, but details were hazy. And I was transparent, the line beneath me shining through with a muted glow where my body attempted to block it out, only it wasn't fully successful.

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‘Cadmus?’ Bromm’s distinctly sensual voice came from behind me and I swirled in place to look at him.

‘Bromm!’ I beamed, relief filling me at the sight of him standing before me looking strong and alive. But then I tilted my head in confusion. ‘You can see me?’

‘Mostly,’ he said with a frown. ‘How are you here?’

I shrugged, hoping the motion was visible enough for him to catch. ‘I don’t know. How are you here?’ I threw back at him.

He snorted. ‘Touché.’

‘Do you know what’s happening to me?’ I asked, eagerly taking a step towards him. I wobbled, though, my weight now present enough to send me almost toppling over the side of the thin line beneath my ghostly feet. My arms windmilled as I fought to regain my balance, and Bromm rushed to me to help before stepping back again, unable to actually touch me. Thankfully, I found my centre of gravity once more.

‘Shit,’ I huffed, the chill of the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

‘Yeah, you need to be careful here or you’ll fall right over the edge.’

I snorted. ‘Yeah, no shit.’ I looked over the side, vertigo making my eyes swim. ‘What happens if you do?’

His beard shuddered with the rest of him as his eyes darkened. ‘I would assume you

would be... lost.'

The void suddenly seemed even scarier and I pulled my limbs closer to my centre as possible, unwilling to even let them dangle close to that fate. But I hadn't missed Bromm's confidence as he stood before me, unfaltering in his stance.

'How are you doing that?'

His expression took on a wistful note, his beard parting to reveal the smile tugging at his purple lips. 'Artemis showed up one day. The lines grabbed us and sort of... magnetised us to them before merging into one. They won't let me fall.'

My bottom lip poked out as I pouted. 'Why won't it do that for me?' I knew I was whining, but I couldn't help it.

He just chuckled, ignoring my petulant tone. 'I have a feeling it will eventually. It took an entire solar before I connected with Artemis like that. Maybe it will happen for you sooner when she comes back. I assume you've already been here before if you're somewhat opaque now?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, last night. When was your first time?'

'Right after Artemis and I were intimate for the first time,' he admitted, a longing note in his tone that bled into his expression as he gazed into the distance, clearly remembering their time together with a fondness I was suddenly envious of.

Lucky bastard.

'What do you think is causing this?' I asked.

'Artemis,' was his immediate answer.

I puffed out a breath in frustration. ‘Well, duh. Of course it has something to do with her. Buthow?’

His shoulders lifted with a nonchalance I was struggling to match. ‘Beats me. Nothing to be done for it now, anyway.’

‘But... what exactly is happening?’

‘Again, I don’t know, but we seem to be meeting Artemis on her wavelength somehow. Whatever this is, it’s connecting us to her. She’s the common denominator.’

We devolved into silence, and I couldn’t decide if it was awkward or peaceful. Perhaps it didn’t have to be either, or it could be both. Either way, I wasn’t going to be the one to break it. Artemis was a sore subject for me with him, since my feelings for her were growing exponentially with everything breath that passed through my lungs, and he was the man she had chosen to love.

Not that love was what I was after, nor did I even know what it felt like, but it seemed the longer I dwelled on the enigmatic cyborg badass the more whatever these feelings were swelled. I knew that they would crescendo until they were too loud to contain, but I wasn’t ready to rush into that, especially considering my chances of her reciprocating were so low. A single sexual encounter – or even the potential of more – did not equate to a commitment.

But this whole experience had proven one thing to me. I wanted a commitment. That was what I had been chasing, after all, but the type of commitment I realised my entire being was craving was what was shocking me speechless.

‘You can go for it, you know,’ Bromm spoke up softly, and I raised my head from where I had been staring unseeingly at my see-through feet.

‘What?’

He peered at me from beneath half-mast lids, the lust I found there almost knocking me off the line again with its intensity. ‘Artemis. I’m not adverse to sharing. In fact, I quite enjoy it. And she deserves all the love this life can offer after everything she’s been through. If you want that with her, I’m not an obstacle.’

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I frowned, stepping back automatically as if I could physically put space between me and this conversation, suddenly uncomfortable. I may be able to admit to certain things to myself inside my head, but speaking them aloud to another soul was out of the question. No way.

Once those words were out there, there would be no putting them back.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I said, my mask of superiority and indifference falling back into place far more smoothly than I liked.

His expression turned sad at my response, and I was torn. A part of me wanted to take it back and spill everything I was thinking, release all of my uncharted emotions on this man so he could take the weight of their load, but the larger part of me shut it down.

‘I’m serious, Cadmus. When you’re ready, if it’s what you want and as long as you mean it, I would be glad to have you join us.’

I couldn’t speak, my stare boring into him. I hoped my eyes weren’t giving away my emotions, but I had a feeling they were shining through bright and clear for him to see without my permission. His answering smile was soft, knowing, and patient, and I just knew he could see right through me.

Well, metaphorically. Physically, that was currently a given.

No point in denying it when the jig was already up. I may as well just be honest with myself as well as Bromm, though that wouldn’t extend to the woman in question. I

was certainly not ready to put myself out there like that, the idea of rejection twisting my stomach so harshly I actually felt sick. I could act as tough and uncaring as I wanted, but the reality was I was afraid. Always afraid. If I didn't put myself out there, I couldn't get hurt. Not again.

But Bromm wasn't taking my silence for what I had intended it to be. Instead, he was calling me out on my bullshit, and he didn't even have to say a word to call his damn victory.

'So what if I do have feelings for her?' I snapped. I knew I was using anger as a shield, but it was an involuntary response that I was perfectly happy to keep in place.

'I think you'll find she's more open to letting people in than she seems,' he responded evenly.

'The last word I would use to describe Artemis is open,' I snarked.

'She's very open when she wants to be,' he said, a smirk pulling at his cheeks.

'Yeah, I'm sure,' I deadpanned, but the image of her on the floor, legs spread wide as she held Bromm's cum inside her had my cock stirring. It wasn't the most ideal situation, and there were shadows that haunted the memory no thanks to that scientist bastard, Demari, but my cock still stirred at the image she had presented. She was definitely more open in some ways than I had previously seen, but she was no longer hiding behind the mask of a man. Could she be open to more? With me?

'You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, I'm just saying I won't stand in your way if it's what you decide. Though I won't be going anywhere. We're a packaged deal now, you know.'

The silence descended once again, heavy with unspoken words and feelings desperate

to escape. I wasn't in love with her, but the potential to fall was so much greater than I had ever experienced before. It was terrifying. It was exhilarating. It was overwhelming.

'I highly doubt a woman like that would ever look twice at a prick like me,' I confessed, my voice small yet cutting through the quiet like the sharpest of blades.

'I don't think she would have let you touch her in the first place if she wasn't at least attracted to you. She has a soft spot for all of us, but she won't make the first move.' He paused, his face twisting as he mulled over his own words. 'Okay wait, I take that back. She might make the first move sexually, but you'll have to let her know if you want to bring emotions into it. She's not so good with expressing those without a little guidance.'

I chuckled. 'She's something else.'

His grin was blinding and a reassurance I hadn't even known I'd needed. 'Indeed.'

CHAPTER 7

Artemis

Everything was so bright, loud, and busy. I watched from my rooftop perch as people bustled about the city below, no one bothering to look to one another as they went about their business, no one pausing to breathe in the fresh air or take in the stunning view of the sunrise peeking over the mountains, staining the sky pink, purple and orange.

None of those people realised how good they had it. They took their freedoms for granted. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that if they were ever to end up in captivity, surrounded by plain, windowless walls and breathing in stale, recycled air

they would wish they'd paid more attention.

It was one of the reasons I sat up here and people watched. All of those lives and not one of them ever bothered to look up. Not one of them ever bothered to slow down and just simply exist in the moment. It was always onto the next, always moving, never stopping. It was such a travesty, and I couldn't look away.

Oh, how I would have killed to be so ignorant.

It also put some things into perspective for me. If I'd never been taken in by The Program, I never would have appreciated the everyday things everyone seemed to miss. It was like they skimmed past the parts of living that made life exciting. The things that made life worth living in the first place. The wonders of their planet and their people. The way they could enjoy their lives however they saw fit, but they chose this life of mundane boredom that they always seemed to complain about, yet they rushed into it regardless like it was their most precious priority.

I wanted to throttle them.

I wanted to be them.

Movement out of the corner of my eyes had my gaze drifting to the side, the out of place shadows drawing my attention. A man was stepping from a doorway, hair ruffled, lipstick smudges staining his skin around his mouth and his neck, and he was still in the process of buttoning up his shirt. A woman stepped out behind him, leaning over to press a kiss to the corner of his lips. He deepened the kiss, grabbing her around the waist and drawing her closer, their bodies pressed together in a heated moment of passion. When they separated the woman's face was flushed and she gazed up at him under fluttering lashes, a shy but coy smile tilting up her bruised lips.

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When the man grinned at her, teeth on full display and happiness shining through so brightly it was almost blinding, I looked away. My heart clenched with the memory of what could have been, but betrayal stung, it's barbs digging far deeper than ever before. Before I could stop it, a single tear escaped and rolled down my cheek. I didn't bother to wipe it away.

My loneliness was an ever-present demon that latched on and sucked the joy out of me at the most random of moments. I could never guess when it was strike, and I was never quite prepared for the onslaught of agony and longing it caused.

That life wasn't for me. I was doomed to be alone.

But one thing was for certain. Even if I had managed to escape, even if I had done so without Libby by my side like we'd always planned, I would return for her. I would make my way back and free her from that hell. And if I had to give my life to do it, then so be it.

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I glared at the ruins of the building I had been calling home for the past few weeks. I wasn't sure what had set me off this time, but I was kicking myself for my lack of control. My lapses were become more frequent as of late, and I couldn't quite pinpoint the triggers.

And I knew it was more than one, because every time I managed to figure one out, another ten would take its place.

Objectively, I was aware that I was experiencing a form of post-traumatic stress, but there wasn't much to be done for it. It wasn't like I could just waltz into a therapist's office and demand they fix me. I mean, I could, but it would be like shining a beacon on my whereabouts and I'd be back with the people who had left me in this state in the first place. Sure, I intended to return, but not to stay.

This was a delicate mission, but thanks to my blackouts and meltdowns I found I needed to move on more frequently than I would have liked.

I had only been in this location for a measly three weeks. The shortest I had ever been anywhere before I needed to move on. Now, I was going to have to run and hide as far away from here as possible. Likely, I would need to stowaway on a ship and find a new planet to hide on. I was running out of places to lay low.

Frustrated with myself and my lack of control, especially when I prided myself on my control, I pulled at my hair that had grown so long I had taken to wearing it in a single braid down my back to keep the dirt and tangles at bay.

I was going to have to cut it now, anyway. Each time I left I changed another aspect of myself to avoid detection. I didn't want anyone to recognise me if I was caught on surveillance cameras. My hair would be the next part of me I altered.

I moved it over my shoulder, stroking down the long, brown strands as sorrow filled me up until I was ready to burst. When was I going to have the freedom to simply be myself? How many times was I going to need to change a part of me to pretend I was someone else?

Would I change too much that I no longer recognised the woman I had become?

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I blinked my eyes open and stretched my limbs out wide as I returned to consciousness. I was comfortable in this bed, more comfortable than I could remember being in a long time. It was warm and cozy, the mattress soft and pliant beneath my body, yet still firm enough to support me. It was a fantastic bed, I had to admit.

But it was the feeling of being well-rested that made me not want to leave.

A small, warm body squirmed against me, and the reason for my awakening was quickly revealed. Baldr was wriggling to get out of the covers, reaching towards Dave Junior who was glaring at him from his spot on his own bed in the corner of the room. He caught me looking and huffed, his muzzle pushing forward as if in a pout. It was adorable, quite frankly, but the jealousy he seemed to harbour over Baldr sleeping in my bed over him was something we would need to address eventually. It had nothing to do with Bal and everything to do with Junior's sheer size. He simply wouldn't fit.

It was clear Bal was eager and excited to explore and play with the young Kikshrut (it was nice to finally put a name to his species), but it was definitely not reciprocated. I would have to do some more research into Kikshruts to find out more on their social behaviours. I was hoping it was something Junior would grow out of, or at least learn to overcome, but I did have some concerns that they were naturally attention hogs and sharing the limelight would cause tension.

Though when I thought more about it, it was probably just Dave Junior. He wasn't used to my attention being split between him and any other children. After all I'd gleaned from his behavioural patterns, he acted more like a child than an animal, so I would continue to treat him as such and hope he'd mature like a person as he aged.

I picked Bal up, dodging his flailing limbs as he continued his attempts to reach Dave Junior, and walked us into the connected bathroom, placing him on top of the toilet

seat. Once Dave Junior was out of sight, he seemed to forget about him, choosing to perform an incredible feat of acrobatics in order to wedge his foot firmly inside his mouth. I shook my head as drool dribbled down his chin and his leg, closing the door behind me securely so he couldn't escape while my attention was on getting ready.

The shower was just like the ones on The Carina, so I stripped and stepped in to let it coat me with the dirt-eating bubbles and then blast me with air to dry me off. It was quick and efficient, which I was grateful for because when I stepped back out and began to dress, Baldr crawled off the toilet and toddled towards the door. The door that opened to let him out as soon as he placed his saliva-coated hands on the open button.

The button that too high for him to reach...

Everything that happened within the span of the next few ticks took me long enough to process that I didn't immediately jump into action, stunned into a statue.

Bal was glowing the same blue that I emanated whenever I connected to my abilities, and he was levitating in the air to reach the button. The doors slid open at his request to reveal Dave Junior who had been sniffing at the door, waiting for us to come back out. Once he saw the floating, glowing toddler, he started growling in distress and confusion, his immediate response to attack and protect me from the perceived threat.

I finally snapped out of it when Bal was being dragged back down by his foot in Dave Junior's mouth. 'Dave Junior, you drop him this instant!'

Both children turned to look at me, shocked at the unusually sharp, shrill tone of my voice. Slowly, Dave Junior allowed Baldr's foot to slip from his mouth, his sharp, venomous teeth snagging on the bottom of his little jumpsuit leg. Bal, however, was completely unfazed, taking my new tone as a game. He must have sensed that he wasn't in the line of fire, but he was still levitating and steadily floating higher, right

alongside my blood pressure.

‘Bal, come down now, please,’ I tried with a gentler tone, inching forward because I knew that he would dart out of my reach as soon as I got close. It was my own fault really. MineandLibby’s. We’d played games with him just like this while trapped inside The Program’s testing facility, so he hadn’t caught on that I was being serious.

I should have realised it would backfire on me one day.

When his eyes lit up and his face split into a wide, mischievous, gap-toothed grin, I knew I was screwed. All it took was one step forward and he was shooting out the still-damaged door and into the maze of corridors in the belly of the ship.

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I darted after him, calling his name and demanding he come down this instant, but he was too far gone into the fun of the game to notice I wasn't playing.

'Bal!'

He zipped down the hallways over everyone's heads, and my panic rose to even greater heights when I realised what mayhem he could potentially cause with this new ability of his. To himself as well as the ship. As it was, everyone I passed gave me a strange look as I barrelled after the troublesome boy until they followed my line of sight. Some stepped out of the way to give me space to chase him down, but a few kind individuals joined me in the hunt.

Unfortunately, all that succeeded in accomplishing was adding to Bal's excitement when he noticed there were more people joining in the chase.

'What is going on out here?' the captain's exasperated voice travelled from down a subsequent hallway. A moment later he was joining us, curiosity and concern winning out. He let out a bark of laughter, his disbelief evident when he figured out what the fuss was about.

I ignored him in favour of leaping towards where Bal practically crawled on the ceiling straight for one of the air vents, desperation driving my actions. I caught him, dragging him to me in a vicelike grip. It was another tick before I realised I wasn't dropping to the floor again. At first I thought the gravity magnets were malfunctioning until I noticed everyone else's feet firmly planted on the floor.

I was levitating.

Baldr was giggling and clapping his little hands, his excitement over getting caught overruling any common sense a toddler could have.

Oh, who was I kidding. Toddlers had zero sense. And this ship was brimming with hundreds of them with who knew how many varieties of unknown abilities, ready to wreak as much havoc as possible.

‘Um, Artemis?’ Adara’s voice called from below, and I realised that she must have been on the captain’s heels the entire time, her small frame hidden behind his.

‘Yeah?’ I asked, strangely breathless.

‘Can you get down?’

I contemplated the question, closing my eyes as I attempted to control the new ability, but nothing happened. ‘Uh, nope. No, I don’t think so.’

The captain snickered. ‘So... you’re stuck up there?’

I shot him my best death glare, but he remained unfazed. ‘Whatever,’ I mumbled, drifting further down the corridor. When my head bumped repeatedly against the ceiling I pretended as if it was just a normal Tuesday. To be fair, I expected the unexpected at this point and rolling with the punches had become my new norm.

The bubbly giggle that trickled from Addy brought a reluctant grin to my lips, but it was quickly wiped off when Dave Junior came barrelling down the hallway, knocking over anyone in his path. He made a whimpering noise as he rose up onto his hind legs and extending his forelegs in a futile attempt to reach me. He may have been huge but even he wasn’t big enough to reach me properly just yet.

Instead, the captain’s fingers circled around my ankle and he started dragging me and

Bal back up the hallway while I stared in shock at the long, thick fingers currently wrapped around me. This might have been the most casual touch he'd ever given me, and it short-circuited my brain. But then he paused, gazing up at me with a question in his eyes. 'Where to?'

I snorted a laugh, the entire situation beyond me now, and gestured with my free hand in the direction he had already been walking. 'I need to get these two fed, and then I was going to drop in on the infirmary for a bit before heading to the cockpit.'

'That's a lot of places. What, do you expect me to drag you along all day?' he grumbled, but there was a definite note of teasing in there under all that gruff exterior.

'Hopefully not all day, Captain. I fully expect to figure this out before then.'

His strides faltered, and I didn't understand why until he spoke again. 'Just call me Xander. You're the captain now.'

I winced, the awkwardness of the situation seeping deep.

'Ah, right.' I hesitated for a moment, debating whether to have this conversation here or later, but decided it was better to just bite the bullet and get it over with.

'Actually, that was something I wanted to talk to you about.'

His eyes darted up to mine briefly before settling back down onto the path ahead, but Addy shot me a curious look that lingered.

'I'm not exactly...' I paused, searching for the right words, 'equipped to... well, lead. You have experience with this particular role. I wondered if you would perhaps wish to fill the position of my second?'

I couldn't put a finger on why exactly I was so nervous, but I found my cheeks flushing and my heartrate skyrocketing at the request. I was putting myself out there for a man I didn't fully trust, but I was making an effort. If he shot it down, I didn't know how we'd move forward.

The captain... no, Xander, was as taken aback as I was uncomfortable. He halted, his entire body shifting in my direction as he gave me his undivided attention. Even Addy was ignored as she gaped between the two of us with a twinkle in her eye I definitely did not want to decipher.

Xander scrutinised me, studying every muscle twitch and shift in my eyes. At one point, I even thought I caught him staring at the pulse in my neck where my blood was roaring through my veins.

He ended his perusal with a small smile tugging at his mouth and revealing a single dimple indenting his right cheek. 'I would be more than happy to help in any way you see fit, Captain.'

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I winced at the title. 'Just Artemis. Please.'

His lips twitched as if they wanted to spread wider, but he caught the reaction and rearranged his expression into the stern, professional mask I was more used to. If he did so because he thought I would be more comfortable with that version of him then he would have been correct, but I had a feeling it was more for his comfort than mine.

'If it is your wish, I can drop the formalities in private or personal conversations. In front of the soldiers, however, it is best to keep up the formalities to maintain a level of respect between yourself and your subordinates,' he told me. I couldn't fault his logic, so I simply nodded my acquiescence.

'Kitchens first?' he asked, and I nodded again. 'It won't be much. All we seem to have are case-loads of Nutri-Bars,' he sneered.

'The ship was fully stocked with them when I found it, but we needed more for everyone to get by until we can dock and restock,' I admitted.

'I enjoy missions,' he started, but then wrinkled his nose, 'But I must admit that I did not miss living off of those things.'

I shrugged even though he wasn't looking, not knowing how to respond. I'd lived off of worse than Nutri-bars. At least they were filling and provided everything necessary to maintain healthy bodies. Living in The Program, sometimes we hadn't even been given that much.

'Will the kids eat them?' Addy asked, concern lacing her tone.

‘It’s most likely the only food they’ve ever known,’ I confessed. ‘They won’t complain.’

‘That’s really sad,’ she said, her words hitching as emotion clogged her throat.

‘It’s more than what the rest of us got sometimes, so I wouldn’t be too upset,’ I said offhandedly. ‘At least they got the nutrients they needed on a regular basis.’

‘They starved you?’ asked the cap...Xander. I was really going to struggle to get used to calling him that.

‘Frequently.’

‘That’s awful,’ Addy said, her voice wavering with unshed tears.

‘That’s life,’ I responded curtly, cutting the conversation short with my terse tone.

The rest of the walk to the kitchens was silent with both Addy and Xander shooting me and each other not-so-surreptitious glances. Baldr and Dave Junior were the only ones making any noise with Bal trying to reach down and Dave Junior growling up at him in warning. These two were undoubtedly going to be a handful.

When we entered the mess hall on the way to the kitchens, it was clear Baldr and Dave Junior weren’t the only younglings that were going to be difficult to wrangle...

‘Stars above...’ Addy breathed.

‘What. The. Fuck?’ Xander swore, stunned.

‘Oh, stars help us,’ I groaned at the sight unfolding before us.

Previously, thirty volunteers chose to babysit the children, the group splitting in half to take shifts. Currently, all thirty of them were running around after the various groups of children, breaking up fights, pulling some down from the ceiling and attempting to block off the exits for the attempted escapees. Those thirty had increased their numbers, clearly having called for help with the unruly tots.

An array of abilities were on full display, and it was interesting to watch them all. Those born from the animal spliced parents had claws and fangs out, feathers, scales, and fur sprouting from a third of the kids. The children from the DNA altered parents were scattered about, a few of them with tails, some dangling from different objects by feet that were a hell of a lot more flexible than normal, and some simply sitting and watching the chaos with keen eyes.

What caught my attention the most, however, were the children that were levitating much like me and Bal, glowing the same bright blue and causing the most chaos. A few had managed to figure out how to mess about with magnetic fields, pushing others out of the way or even causing themselves to slide back and forth across the smooth metal flooring as their shields bounced off the walls and bounce them back in the other direction. There were even a few blackened scorch marks from where some of them had heated themselves enough to burn the floors.

There was laughter, screams, and cries. There were children on the floor, on the walls, on the ceiling, and dangling from the volunteers. Everywhere I looked there was someone trying and failing to maintain order.

It was a nightmare come to life.

‘What do we do?’ Addy squeaked out, petrified at the scene in front of her.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what to do,’ was Xander’s equally horrified reply.

I shook my ankle free from his grip, which wasn't difficult with his attention stuck firmly on the mess ahead, then drifted into the room, pleased to find my body following my instructions despite my failed attempts to get my feet firmly back on the floor.

'Quiet!' I shouted using my vocal implants to transmit my voice loud enough to be heard over the ruckus. Surprisingly, it worked. Everyone froze and turned to face me, toddlers and adults alike, so I took the opportunity to proceed while I had their attention and their silence.

'Who wants to play a game?' I asked, keeping my voice chipper and excited.

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‘Game! Game! Game!’ the kids chanted eagerly.

‘Quiet!’ I shouted again to be heard over their deafening enthusiasm. As before, though this time there were a few wobbly lips at being told off a second time, they settled down.

‘Good. Now we all have to be quiet to listen to the grownups, please. Raise your hand if you understand.’

At first none of them moved, but then one little hand rose into the air, and then another, and soon enough most of them were sitting with their hands raised while they awaited further instruction.

I was well aware that their reaction was abnormal compared to children who had been raised outside of The Program, but these kids weren’t so lucky. Their parents had done a respectable job of making sure they knew their place in order to keep them safe, and I was proud of them. Though there were still a few rebellious sorts scattered throughout the crowd of tiny bodies, most of them were obedient and that was good news for us all.

‘How is she doing that?’ I heard Addy whisper to Xander behind me.

‘Not a clue,’ he whispered right back. ‘I was about to ask the same.’

I wanted to laugh, but the gravity of what these children must have suffered through to become this way blocked it from getting past the base of my throat. These children needed a firm hand, no doubt, but they also needed love, guidance, and safety. And

above all, they needed their mothers.

Right now, we were all they had, and I wasn't about to fail them.

'You,' I pointed at the closest volunteer. They looked behind them as if expecting to find me talking to someone else, but when they turned back and saw me still focused on them they pointed to themselves with an eyebrow raised in question. 'Yes, you.'

'How can I help?' he asked.

'Do you know any games the children could play?'

'I know a few from when my little ones were at school,' he admitted.

'I'll leave you to it, then.' I told him. 'Just remember, they're used to firm commands and they will obey. Just don't abuse that knowledge, okay?'

For a moment he looked as if he might argue, the implications behind my comment clearly causing some sort of reaction. Eventually, he gave me a single brusque nod. 'Got it.'

When he started barking out orders to the other volunteers and they all began to round up the kids in the centre of the room, I knew the crisis had been averted and it was safe to continue on.

'Stars, Arty. That was incredible,' Addy said once the kitchen doors closed behind us and blocked out the rising noise.

I simply shook my head. 'It was nothing. They deserved better than this.'

When the lovers exchanged a confused look, I knew they didn't comprehend the full

scope of what those kids had been through or how they'd been raised. I hadn't acted any particular way to earn the trust of that many children, nor had they truly trusted me. They were simply following what they'd been taught as a means of survival, and that was the saddest thing I have ever had the displeasure of experiencing firsthand.

I debated giving the pair an explanation to what the children had endured for the entirety of their short lives. As I handed a Nutri-Bar to Bal and placed another on a plate on the floor for Dave Junior, I decided it was better if Addy and Xander retained their ignorance. It really was bliss, after all. Living within The Program was pure darkness, and it didn't matter how much they had interacted with them thus far. They had barely scratched the surface.

CHAPTER 8

Artemis

I no longer needed Xander to drag me along – progress – and I propelled myself down the hallway with Baldr still secured firmly in my arms. Dave Junior was walking beside Addy who was scratching between his ears as they moved, but I could tell that though Xander was attempting to project confidence around the large Kikshrut baby, he was still nervous. Perspiration was accumulating on his brow, a drip leaking down the side of his face that he tried to surreptitiously wipe away. I gave him his privacy, pretending not to see.

When we made it to the infirmary, it was packed. Bromm still took up one of the cots, but the other two were occupied while a crowd had formed a little waiting area outside the door. People with varying degrees of small injuries were propped against the walls or sitting on the floor as they awaited their turn to be seen.

Henrik was flitting about, gathering new packages of gauze or needles for stitches, while Cadmus was surprisingly situated beside Bromm, head bowed as his gaze was

fixed firmly on my Griknot prince.

‘Hey,’ I said. Everyone, medic, patient and visitor alike, turned to face the door, expecting me to enter on the ground. I took a small amount of amusement from their shock when they found me on the ceiling, their jaws dropping comically. I tried to hide the way my pride was wounded at not being able to get back down just yet by donning my signature poker face.

‘What the fuck are you doing up there?’ Cadmus asked with a startled chortle.

‘The ceiling needed some love,’ I deadpanned. ‘How are things in here?’

Henrik waved at me but kept his attention on his patients, the only one who hadn’t batted an eye at my unusual position, leaving Cadmus to respond. ‘Bromm’s fine. Everyone else has cuts and bruises, a few broken bones here and there, but otherwise they’re also fine.’

‘No animals in the infirmary please, Captain,’ Henrik suddenly stated, and I glanced down to where Dave Junior was shoulder-to-shoulder with Adara, a content expression on his face as he accepted even more scratches from her small but deft fingers.

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‘Sorry. You’re right. We’ll leave. I just wanted to do a quick check-in before I head up to the cockpit. You can find me there if you need me,’ I said, then floated right back out as the others trailed after me.

‘Artemis, wait,’ Cadmus called, stepping into the corridor behind us.

I twisted back around to face him, ignoring the way my limbs awkwardly bumped into the walls in the process. ‘What’s up?’

‘Uh...’ he hesitated, twisting his fingers together and seeming uncharacteristically bashful. ‘I need to talk to you about something.’

‘Is it urgent?’ I asked, my impatience to get somewhere secluded to figure out how to reinstate my own gravity causing my words to snap out a little more tersely than I had planned. I winced when he flinched then tried to hide it by rubbing the back of his neck.

‘Well, kind of, but it can wait until you have a spare moment,’ he said, already beginning to back away.

‘Okay,’ I said eager to leave and not so eager to talk with Cadmus. Whatever conversation we needed to have was not going to be a comfortable one after the moment we’d shared inside the facility, but I could grudgingly admit that I was probably better to just get it out of the way so we could move on. The mere thought of what had transpired had me internally squirming with discomfort, but I softened a little when I realised I was being rude. He was behaving unnaturally timid around me and it was throwing me off. ‘I’ll send for you when I’m free and we can chat?’

I didn't mean for it to come out as a question, but something about the way he was behaving was rubbing off on me and I found myself just as shy and awkward as he seemed to be. It was probably just because he was usually so composed and wielded an air of superiority almost like a weapon, but there was no sign of that right now and I didn't know what to do with it.

I hoped the coming conversation was about something other than what had happened between us inside The Program's Nova Station facility, but my gut was telling me that was a wound that would fester until it was treated. I didn't really know what to say about it, nor how to feel, so I'd been pushing it aside and pretending it was nothing. Cadmus's nerves were telling a different story, however, unless I was completely wrong and he wanted to discuss something entirely different that had nothing to do with my hands cupping his two cocks while I fucked another man...

Nope. No time for thoughts like that.

We said our farewells and went our separate ways, me towards the cockpit and him back inside the infirmary, and I shoved the entire interaction into a box to open when I had the time to ruminate on it. I knew I would overthink and jump to conclusions, so I wanted to have the discussion with him first before I put my foot in my mouth.

Who was I kidding? I was already overthinking things.

I wished Libby were here to help me keep my feet firmly planted on the floor – metaphorically and physically – and my head securely in the present, but once I glanced down at Baldr's big green eyes, an exact replica of his mother's, and the effect was just the same. He smiled wide when he realised I was giving him attention then snuggled deeper into my chest as he watched the happenings below.

My feet may not have been on the floor, but this was suddenly the most grounded I'd felt in a long time.

As we swooped lower through the doorway into the cockpit, a sharp trill of high-pitched laughter cut through the air. Eloria was already here, and she apparently found my sudden weightlessness immensely amusing.

‘I don’t know why I expected you to walk in like a normal person, Captain, but it’s clear I need to adjust my expectations,’ she teased.

‘Oh, shush, you,’ was my brilliant response.

Julius the Weapons Expert was here, too, jaw to his chest as he gawped at me.

‘She canfly, too?’ he squeaked out.

‘I think the real question is, can she get down?’ she shot back in an overly dramatized whisper.

‘I’m working on it,’ I mumbled sulkily.

‘She couldn’t move on her own five minutes ago,’ Xander said, his lips tilted up at the corners in a smirk. ‘At least she figured that much out.’

Eloria mirrored his amusement. ‘Indeed.’

‘Good morning, GC Stanson. I hope our course is remaining smooth sailing.’

‘Eloria,’ she said, making him rear back like she’d smacked him clear across the face, his eyes expanding until they looked as if they’d pop right out of his head and I held in a snigger. ‘Our dear captain here prefers to be referred to by her given name, and I’ve never been too keen on titles either. Let us forego the formalities in private, yes?’

‘I...’ he began, then sighed as he sent an exasperated glance in Addy’s direction that

she returned with a smirk. ‘I don’t think I have much of a choice,’ he chuckled.

‘You really don’t,’ Addy teased.

Eloria turned to face me, effectively dismissing the others while Julius continued gaping at us in silence, his jaw working like a suffocating fish. ‘Are you feeling more up to making that call now, Artemis?’

‘I don’t really think now’s the best time. You made a good point yesterday, and I don’t want their first impression of me to be influenced by my inability to keep my feet on the ground.’

She laughed again, the sound high and tinkling and filled me with a lightness I had previously only felt with Liberty. ‘That’s probably a good call. I pulled up their contact details for you this morning and did a little research on royal protocol. You’ll have to jump through hoops to get through to them and it will take a while – royal security and all that – but all you need to do is be here once gravity is back on your side. Though I must warn you that they will more than likely refuse to speak to you personally. They don’t typically permit strangers direct contact with the royal family. You’ll more than likely be told to leave a message for the security team to pass on.’

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I shot her a thin-lipped but grateful smile, unsure if I should feel disappointed or relieved that I probably won't be meeting Bromm's parents today. I was curious, but I was also nervous. I wanted them to like me.

'Thanks Eloria. You're turning out to be a life saver.'

She preened at my praise. 'I'm happy to help.'

'Is now a good time for that chat with Cadmus, then?' Addy asked, and I knew she was just being nosy for gossip. I was glad to see her behaving like her usual self, but I wasn't too eager to allow her into private conversations while they were in progress. I'd happily debrief her afterwards, but I would rather have that conversation alone.

'I'll grab him for a chat now,' I told her, but she cast me a confused look when I handed Baldr to her. She held him tight to keep him from flying away, and Xander snorted his amusement, apparently knowing what I was up to.

'I'll keep her away,' he promised me.

'Dave Junior, too, if you don't mind,' I asked. His face paled but he nodded anyway. Junior was happy enough getting pets from both Eloria and Adara so he I doubted he'd have anything to worry about. I cast a glance towards the oversized animal, noting the way he narrowed his eyes on Xander's back.

Okay, he might need to exercise a little caution, but I wasn't about to tell him that. I was sure he'd be fine.

I nodded my thanks then swiftly exited the room, taking care to avoid bumping my head on the doorframe as I dipped lower to get through.

???

The hallway outside the infirmary was even more crowded than when I'd left it, and I could hear Henrik rushing around inside, barking orders at Cadmus before I even entered the room. I couldn't help a quick glance at Bromm as I floated inside and was pleased to see that he had gained a little bit more of his colouring back. I wondered when he'd be able to breath without assistance again, hating the sight of the intubation and the respirator sticking out of his mouth.

Henrik looked harried, and Cadmus was hastily performing the small assisting tasks our unofficial medic was rapidly throwing at him, but he seemed to be having fun if the smile etched onto his face was any indication.

Sensing Henrik's rising distress as yet another individual entered the room and added their name to the ever-growing list, I decided it was time to take action. 'Need any help?'

'Yes!' Henrik exclaimed, eager for the extra hands. 'Please. Do you know any first aid?'

'I know enough,' I admitted. 'I can clean and dress a wound, but I've never sewn anything in my entire life so I'm not much help there. I am, however, proficient in setting and bracing bones.'

'Can you take vitals?'

'Yes.'

‘Then can you head into the hallway with Cadmus and start crossing off names on the waiting list? Bumps and bruises can leave, but anything beyond your capabilities should stick around for me to see to.’

I gave him a two-fingered salute. ‘You got it, doc.’

Just as Cadmus handed me an armful of supplies, my body descended until I was back on the ground. The nanites must have finally listened to my desire to stop flying through my need to help.

He shot me a wide smile. ‘Good job.’

I grinned back, pleased with myself.

Together we exited the infirmary and headed straight for the front of the line. The first patient was a middle-aged mutt, his features too ambiguous to determine his lineage. He was resting with his head tilted back against the wall as he sat cross-legged on the floor, and his eyes were closed and slightly squinted as he clutched his arm, his pain evident.

‘Sir?’ I called out to him, gently placing my hand on his shoulder so he knew I was addressing him. His eyes peeked open slightly, and they were red rimmed with dark, puffy bags beneath them belying his exhaustion, both mental and physical.

‘I’m going to take your vitals,’ I informed him. ‘While I do that, why don’t you tell me about your injuries so I can determine how best to help you.’

He allowed me to fit a small machine around his forefinger, the tiny device accumulating information such as heartrate, blood pressure, and even pricking the skin to draw some blood to run a quick test for substances and blood sugar levels. It was truly a versatile little thing, and quite useful.

Cadmus moved onto the next patient in line while mine informed me that his wrist was damaged and he had a large gash on his shoulder. It turned out that he'd only sprained the wrist so I wrapped it, but after a closer look at the cut it was clear he needed stitches. I cleaned it the best I could and secured some gauze over the top but told him to stay put until Henrik could stitch him up. I wrote a note next to his name on the waiting list hanging from the door and moved onto the next.

On and on, Cadmus and I worked efficiently and effectively. Most only needed a bit of bandaging, very few needed anything more like pain relief or stitches. One man had a broken arm but didn't want to get caught up in the melee the day before so he had held himself back until things had calmed down, but it was easy enough to set. He went off on his way with some pain pills, but he would be fine.

I chanced a peek at Cadmus who was bent over someone's leg, inspecting a dark bruise. His rear was taking up the majority of my view, and I couldn't help but pause to admire it. Round and pert, he clearly spent a lot of time sculpting those particular muscles. And to think, I just barely missed out on first-hand experience for how those mounds would feel cupped in my hands...

My fingers and palms tingled with the memory of how the other side of him felt through the fabric of his clothes. Thick, heavy, and double the trouble with his two admittedly large cocks. I couldn't help but wonder what they would look like, my only experience with Griknots and Terrans. When we'd scoured through virtual files during the awakening of our sexuality, the only footage Libby and I had discovered had solely starred Griknots. Whilst we were aware of the differing anatomies of the various races, it was mostly theoretical knowledge beyond that.

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My research had stemmed from the feelings T had invoked in me once upon a time, but I wasn't particularly keen for the Tornu sexual experience. It was said to be painful and quite traumatic for most, which was why it was so rare for Tornus to breed outside of their race. Since I had spent my entire life feeling pain, I wanted sex to be pleasurable, not painful, yet I was still curious.

I tried not to think about that too much, however. Nothing was going to happen between me and T, but something had happened between me and Cadmus. Not much, but certainly a lot more than I had allowed before with anyone else besides Bromm.

Well, and Demari, but I didn't count the forceful copulation. That hadn't been fun in any capacity.

'It's a great ass, yes?' my patient whispered to me, bobbing their eyebrows up and down. 'You familiar with it?'

I couldn't stop the blush from burning my cheeks if I'd tried. 'Um... not really, no.'

He winked at me. 'But you've gotten close, hmm? Lucky lass.'

I choked on an uneasy laugh, the sound loud and unattractive and drew the attention of the surrounding soldiers. Including Cadmus.

'You choking, Arty? Need me to perform the Heimlich?' he teased, wiggling his eyebrows comically.

I rolled my eyes. 'Whatever, Cadmus. Focus on your patient.'

‘But how can I focus when I can feel your eyes burning holes in my ass?’ he asked, but it wasn’t exactly mocking. There was no teasing note in his voice. He sounded completely serious.

My cheeks burned even hotter, the heat travelling to the tips of my ears and spreading down my chest. I didn’t want to know how red I had become, so I simply ignored it.

‘What were you doing back here, anyway?’ he asked, his attention split between me and his patient.

I didn’t want to respond in front of so many strangers, especially my current patient who was watching the interaction like we were his own personal soap opera. I placated myself by reminding myself that we didn’t need to have the coming conversation here.

‘I was free. Figured I could pull you for that chat,’ I admitted.

‘And then you got sucked into nurse duty,’ he surmised.

I hummed in response.

‘Did your call get cut short or something?’ he asked, glancing at me through his periphery.

‘It didn’t happen.’

‘Ah. Didn’t want to talk to the in-laws while you were floating?’ There was that teasing quality I’d been waiting for. Shockingly, I had missed it.

I blinked, averting my gaze as my face practically blazed in my discomfort. ‘Pretty much.’

‘Well, you can go now if you want. I think I’ve got things from here,’ he gestured to the few patients still left behind. With the three of us working together, we’d managed to see to most of the wounded in record time.

‘They can wait,’ I said, willing my blush to go down. I wasn’t successful, especially when his head snapped up, purple eyes wide and more innocent and vulnerable than I could ever remember them being.

‘That eager to spend some time with me, Arty?’ he winked, covering up the slip of his mask so fast that I almost believed I’d imagined it.

‘I figured it’s best to just get it over with.’

He made a pained sound at the back of his throat. ‘Ouch. Is it that horrific to spend time with me?’

I frowned. ‘What? No. I never said that.’

‘Oh, stars, this is painful to watch,’ my patient muttered to the man next to him.

‘I’m quite enjoying the show,’ the other man responded, eyes bouncing between me and Cadmus like we were the best entertainment he’d had in a while.

‘You two, hush,’ I snapped half-heartedly and turned to Cadmus. ‘I’ll help you finish up here, and then we can go talk.’

His answering smile was bright, but I didn’t miss the shakiness that he tried to hide. Everyone else seemed to, though, his acting skills more than respectable. I only caught it because I was looking.

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We finished up with the last of the waiting patients quickly, sending them all on their way with bandages and pain relief while Henrik continued working on the ones that needed a little extra help. He didn't need us for that, so Cadmus and I took that as our opportunity to go someplace quiet and secluded to talk.

I was nervous which was an unusual emotion for me to feel. I didn't like it. It made me unsure of myself and I hated any level of self-doubt. I had always considered myself above that. The closest approximation to that feeling I'd ever allowed was paranoia, but that was well-deserved after all I'd been through so I cut myself some slack there. That one was a matter of survival. Nervousness was just silly. A single conversation wasn't going to kill me.

We both stood there in the now-empty hallway, the silence between us growing like a living thing. He raised an eyebrow at me, effectively dispersing the majority of that tension with his pointed amusement even if some of it remained, and I gestured for him to lead the way. I knew of a few places we could go to ensure our privacy, but I was curious to see where he would take me.

He led the way to a small room that was clearly originally intended to be a closet, the cramped space lined with shelves and cupboards. The floor had been turned into a sort of nest, blankets and pillows creating a warm padding above the hard metal. I was aware that there weren't enough bunks for everyone that had joined us – it couldn't be helped – but I was taken aback by their living conditions. I considered for a moment giving up my own room to people who needed it more but quickly dismissed the idea. I had Bal to think about, and Dave Junior would revolt if I moved him from the space he'd claimed for himself. He struggled enough with Bal's constant company as it was.

The spot was secluded and surprisingly intimate as we avoided stepping on the carefully fluffed nest. When the door closed behind us the light from the hallway no longer helped to illuminate the space. The single dim overhead light seemed to cast more shadows than light, and we were pressed so close together by the narrow room that if I breathed any fuller my breasts would brush up against his chest. My breath hitched involuntarily, heat undoubtedly staining my cheeks for the umpteenth time while I waited for my nanites to kick into gear and even out my body's biological response to the man before me. It didn't help that I we were gazing into each other's eyes, the purple in his growing darker the longer the silence persisted. This time, however, it was less of a chasm and more of a magnetism.

Fuck, this guy was a danger to my mental health. And my libido.

When he didn't immediately speak, I cleared my throat. 'So... what was it you wanted to talk about?' I asked, feigning ignorance. I had a very strong feeling I knew where this conversation was headed, and I wanted to postpone it for as long as possible.

Was that cowardly? Perhaps, but I was only a badass when it came to destroying my enemies. Truthfully, I was warm and squishy on the inside, my emotions larger than I cared to outwardly portray. Only Libby, Bromm and Adara were privy to that little secret, however. I wasn't sure I could trust Cadmus with that much of me.

'You know,' Cadmus began, leaning against a shelf with a playful glint in his eyes as he took me in, 'I think you secretly enjoy spending time with me.'

I raised an eyebrow, masking my shock at his audacity with a smirk. 'Oh, really? And what makes you think that?'

'Just a hunch,' he replied, bowing his head so his lips were barely a breath away from mine. 'And maybe because you keep looking at me like you want to devour me.'

I scoffed in utter disbelief. ‘This is the first time we’ve ever been alone in a room together, Cadmus.’

His pupils dilated, almost completely overtaking the purple. ‘That didn’t stop you before.’

‘Whatever do you mean?’ I taunted, tilting my head to the side.

‘Nothing. Nothing at all,’ he said, his tone suddenly serious as the smile fell from his face. ‘That’s actually not what I wanted to talk to you about.’

There was a vulnerability in his eyes that set the alarm bells in my head ringing loud and clear. For all intents and purposes, there shouldn’t be anything else for us to talk about, let alone privately. Was it something with Bromm...?

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, doing my best to mask my rising panic.

‘Why would you think anything’s wrong?’ he asked, his mask suddenly snapping back into place so quickly it almost gave me whiplash. Cadmus was without a doubt the biggest enigma I have ever encountered, but he couldn’t hide everything from me.

I reached out, placing a hand on his arm. ‘You don’t have to hide behind all this bravado, Cadmus. If there’s something going on you can talk to me.’

He sighed, the mask slipping again a little before he decided to take the plunge and remove it entirely. Seeing him without it for the first time was like having the breath knocked right out of me. He was stunning. The depth of emotions in his eyes called to me like a siren song as compassion from the deepest depths of my being rose up, eager to reach for him and soothe his distress.

‘The truth is... there’s something happening to me. And I’m...fuck,’ he cut himself

off, dragging a hand down his face as he tried to find the words he was struggling to get out. ‘I can’t...’

‘What is it?’ I whispered, inching closer despite my best efforts to maintain the distance between us, our breaths mingling. The urge to act as a balm to his troubles was new and slightly terrifying, but I couldn’t seem help myself.

Cadmus hesitated, then took a deep breath. ‘Artemis, I think what’s happening to Bromm is happening to me.’

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding. ‘What?’

He looked into my eyes, the weight of his troubles evident in his gaze. ‘When you entered the web to open the airlock doors on Nova Station, I... followed you in. To that place. The web. I don’t know how, but it was like I was this ghost being dragged along. I couldn’t see anyone else, but last night... Last night I ended up back there. I was a little more corporeal, and I saw Bromm. We spoke.’

I studied his face, seeing the uncertainty etched into his features. ‘Well, fuck,’ I breathed, stunned.

‘Artemis, what’s happening to me? To Bromm, too?’

I shook my head, the answers so far away from me that trying to grasp them was pointless. ‘I don’t know, Cadmus. Everyone’s saying that The Program didn’t taken them or perform any tests. There really should be no- ‘

A sudden thought entered my mind and cut me off. The only common denominator between Cadmus and Bromm was, well...me.

His back straightened as he sensed the change. ‘What? What is it?’

‘I may have a theory,’ I said.

‘And?’

I blew out a breath, unsure how much to say. If I was right, the consequences could be devastating. If I was wrong, we were back to square one. But I also didn’t want to give him an answer until I was sure. He deserved to make that choice for himself, however.

‘Do you want the theory or the answer?’ I asked.

‘Do you have an answer?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Then I want the theory. I don’t want to be kept in the dark, Artemis. Not with this.’

I pursed my lips, but he was right. If my theory was correct then this was all my fault anyway. The least I could do was keep him informed of my thoughts on the matter.

‘I think we should keep this between us. At least for the time being. I don’t want to cause a panic in case I’m wrong,’ I insisted, and he nodded.

‘Okay, I can agree to that, but you’re scaring me so cut to the chase, yeah?’

I took a steadying breath but couldn’t keep eye contact as the words fell out of my mouth. ‘This has only happened to the two of you. The two men I’ve been... intimate

with. Or at least kissed. Demari kept saying that my nanites responded to my emotions and my body... what if they read my reactions and tried to connect us somehow? What if I accidentally transmitted them to the two of you?’

‘What? How?’

‘Same way anything is transmitted. Bodily fluids.’

‘What, like our spit?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, you think you gave us your nanites like one might pass on a disease, because wekissed?’

‘That is my theory, yes.’

He stared at me, his body deflating to fall back against the shelves. Then he averted his eyes, suddenly struggling to look at me. ‘I considered the same thing, but I wasn’t sure.’

I wanted to reach out and touch him again, but I didn’t know how he would react to physical comfort from me right now. ‘We can’t know for certain just yet. We need to wait it out and see what happens. We should tell Henrik so he can monitor you, and we should keep an eye out for anyone else showing similar symptoms. If others start passing out and showing up in the web then we can rule that out, otherwise...’

‘I can’t decide if I’m scared to change or excited to become a badass like you,’ he blurted, shocking a laugh out of me.

‘Only you, Cadmus,’ I teased, the tension breaking as his humour settled around us

like a comforting blanket.

He winked. 'I'm one of a kind, baby.'

I snorted. He sure was.

CHAPTER 9

Adara

I wasn't sure what to make of the scene before me. Xander and I had returned to the cockpit to check on Artemis, only to discover she wasn't there. Instead, we'd found Eloria and Julius discussing the potential advantages and limitations of the abilities Artemis and the children had. Well, any subject from The Program, really, but the focus of their attention was on Artemis and the kids in particular.

That had opened up the floodgates on Xander's curiosity, and he'd immediately jumped in with his own opinions and theories. He may have been a whole hell of a lot of brawn, but what surprised most people was the amount of brain he had going for him, too. Quite frankly, he was a bit of a nerd. Not that I'd ever say that to his face. Or maybe I should. Toying with him was always such fun.

Their enrapt conversation was also how Julius and I had ended up sitting to the side, relegated to watching as Xander and Eloria monopolised the discussion, eventually ignoring the two of us as their interactions became even more heated. Not in a bad way, though. It was more like they were passionate about the topic and were excited to talk about it with someone who matched their level of interest.

Julius and I were more than happy to move aside and let them have at it, but I was beginning to think Xander would have a crush on the ethereal Yu'Rom pilot by the end of this interaction if the way his eyes lit up whenever she countered his theories

with her own was any indication.

He was barking up the wrong tree if that were the case, though. Everyone who knew anything about Eloria Stanson knew that she was solely into women. He didn't stand a chance, but I wasn't about to tell him. In fact, I was going to enjoy watching all of it unfold.

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Was that evil of me? Perhaps, but we all had to get our kicks somewhere.

I was hoping that he would take the rejection lightly and allow the experience to open him up to the possibility of letting someone else into our relationship. Obviously not Eloria, but I had a certain cyborg in mind.

This could be good. This could be very good.

Xander and Eloria continued their intellectual sparring with an enthusiasm that bordered on the absurd, but I watched on in amusement as Xander's interest quickly morphed into something softer and more flirtatious. It was subtle, and I wasn't sure anyone else in the room caught onto it, but I noticed the way he leaned forward a little more as if edging closer to her. I saw the way his eyes flashed with intrigue whenever she retorted, especially when her statements challenged his. I even noted how he shot her that little smirk that was usually only reserved for me.

Ha! Called it.

Eloria, however, remained oblivious and completely unfazed without a hint of reciprocation. While I was enjoying the back and forth between the two and the potential it could open up for him when he finally realised he could have his cake and eat it, too, it was also kind of sad. She would never see him in that light, and another part of me, separate from my mischievousness, rose up, ready to protect him from his own feelings if need be. The last thing I wanted was for him to feel any sort of pain at the inevitable rejection, but at the same time I knew it was best to just let things play out naturally. He hated meddling.

If things went too far, if his feelings for her grew too potent, then I would nip it in the bud, I vowed. For now, I would sit back and relax as he did his thing.

The door slid open then, halting the flow of the conversation as Artemis stepped through, her expression one of determination. Everyone's backs went ramrod straight as we waited patiently for her to speak. Seeing that, however, only worked to ramp up the tension coiling her muscles, and she walked stiffly to the chair she had seemingly claimed as her own. The rest of us had given it a wide berth for her.

'Good to see your feet back on the ground, Artemis,' Eloria smirked, effectively ending the oppressive silence and the awkwardness that had come with it. 'You ready to make that call now?'

'Yes. I just want to get it out of the way,' Arty said on a sigh. I couldn't necessarily understand the reasons behind her reluctance from personal experience, but I at the very least understood how daunting it could be that she was meeting her lover's parents for the first time. On top of that, I was fairly sure this would be her first time speaking with royalty. I had no clue if she even knew the proper etiquette and customs, but as Eloria brought up the hologram to connect the call I realised it was a bit too late for that now.

I caught Xander's eye and tilted my head to indicate we should leave. He seemed reluctant to, his gaze catching first on Eloria until he acknowledged that their conversation was now over, and then on Artemis who was already in the process of connecting to the Griknot's royal security in order to – hopefully – get transferred directly to the king and queen.

I didn't want to stick around for that conversation. I was no longer welcome on Grik after my family had excommunicated me, the shame of my sexuality – or lack thereof, to be more specific – was a blight not only on them but on the Griknot race as a whole. The last thing I wanted was to have to face the damn leaders of the very

people who found me lacking.

Not today, fates. Or ever, thank you very much.

Unfortunately, Artemis was patched through quicker than I thought possible. The holographic images of two green-hued Griknots in Royal Guard garb flickered into view. Their faces were stoic and severe as they inundated Artemis with questions, and I tugged on Xanders hand, desperate to leave.

He allowed me to lead him from the cockpit, keeping our fingers intertwined as we made our way through the narrow corridors and finally into the room we had claimed for ourselves. It was a closet, really, but everywhere else would have included roommates and rotations and we'd wanted our privacy. Instead of a bed, we'd piled blankets and pillows into a makeshift nest on the floor. It wasn't the most comfortable, but both Xander and I had slept in worse places. What was important was that we were together, and that was enough. I could have slept peacefully on the cold hard floor if I had him by my side.

Plus, he made for an excellent mattress and his body was like a furnace, so I would have been comfortable and warm regardless. It was his comfort I was the most concerned about here.

Memories assaulted me from when I was strapped down to that damn metal table, and without conscious thought I began scratching at a phantom itch on my arm, directly over where a faint silver scar still remained from when the scientists had cut into me on that metal table when he turned to face me in the cramped room, a small smile tilting up the corners of his lips. It quickly fell, however, when he noticed the action and what I imagined was a suddenly sombre expression twisting my features. I felt the way my muscles pinched, pulling my lips down alongside my brows.

‘What is it?’ he demanded. ‘What’s wrong, my love?’

‘We haven’t talked about what happened to me yet,’ I blurted, almost regretting the words as they left my mouth before realising this conversation was very much needed. Both of us needed a nudge to open up about that particular topic, the gruesome details needing release even if we would rather bury our heads in the ground and pretend it never happened. It was currently an angry cloud hanging above us, dark and looming despite our efforts to ignore it. Watching Artemis push through all of the bullshit to do what needed to be done shone a light on our cowardice, and the last thing either of us were was cowardly.

It was time to put our brave faces on and stand tall against the mounting darkness.

He remained silent, patiently waiting for me to speak and tell this story however I saw fit. He didn’t reach out to me either, already knowing I wouldn’t be able to get through it if he showed me any sign of sympathy. If he touched me, we both knew I’d just break down into a trembling mess of snot and tears and intelligible mumblings. I needed to speak my truth and stand by it on my own.

I’d just let myself be a trembling mess as soon as it was done.

‘What happened to me and Reece...’ I started, my throat closing as my mouth went dry. I took a moment to wet my lips and open throat back up to let the words out. ‘The torture we went through at the hands of The Program... I’m not sure how much you want to know.’

‘Tell me whatever you’re comfortable telling me, my love,’ he assured me, and I sent him a wobbly smile.

‘They knocked us out, and when we woke up things weren’t so bad at first. All they did was send in some nurses to check our vitals and monitor us. But then the scientists would come. They went for Reece first, but they made me...’ I cleared my throat, the words stuck there and refusing to budge, but I forced them out. ‘They made me

watch. We were shackled to metal tables, bound and unable to move. I couldn't help him. I'd never felt so helpless...

'Addy,' he breathed on a choked whisper, muscles bunching as he held himself back from scooping me into his arms.

I held up a hand between us to stop him, and he settled back against the shelves. He didn't relax though, not matter how hard he tried to imitated calm.

'They cut into him. No anaesthesia. No numbing or pain relief. They just started tearing into him right down to the bone. Then they took a syringe filled with this silver liquid and injected it straight into his marrow. He screamed. Stars, Xan, the way hescreamed... And they didn't even flinch. I begged for them to stop, but they didn't even glance in my direction. Not until they were done with him. Then they did the same to me, forcing him to watch while he bled out on the table and I...'

I paused to breathe, my inhalations deep and grounding as I attempted to push the emotions connected to these fresh memories to the side. I just needed to tell it, and then I could get let it all back in again.

My nails scratched stinging grooves down my arms, adding red lines parallel to the silver ones as the memories assaulted me. The way the pain took a few beats to register in my brain. The sharp sting of the scalpels slicing into my flesh, splitting apart skin and muscle alike. The stabbing of the needle as it was jabbed into my bones. The burn.

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Xander's face darkened as I recounted the harrowing details, his hands balling into fists at his sides. When I got to the part where Artemis and the guys ended up trapped inside with us, his eyes blazed with fury.

'You're leaving something out,' he accused, his voice quiet but slicing through the space between us like the sharpest of blades despite his gentle tone. 'Between the time they came to rescue you and the battle outside the facility.'

'A few things happened, Xan,' I hedged. 'But those aren't my stories to tell.'

'Bullshit,' he spat, and I held myself still to stop from flinching. I knew his anger wasn't directed at me. 'You were forced to witness it. Whatever happened, you were a part of it, too. It is your story to tell, Addy.'

I sighed, the breath leaving my lips on a slow, shaky exhale. 'It's really not.' He opened his mouth to protest but I raised a hand to cut him off. 'Yes, I witnessed it. That couldn't be avoided. But it didn't happen to me. That's between Artemis and Bromm.'

His brows dipped in confusion while his eyes flashed with frustration. 'What happened to them?'

My lips pursed in frustration, both at the situation and his persistence. He always liked to have all the information, even when it came with consequences. I wasn't about to go behind their backs and gossip about what happened, though.

'Seriously, it's not my place to say. You weren't there...'

‘I know I wasn’t, my love. That’s why I’m asking. How can I help if I don’t have all the information?’ he pushed, not unkindly.

‘If you’re that determined to find out then ask Arty yourself,’ I told him.

He frowned, unhappy with that solution. ‘I can’t just go up to Artemis and ask her about it,’ he argued.

I lifted a single eyebrow in response. ‘Why not?’

‘You might be friends with her, my love, but I’m not. She doesn’t owe me that.’

I scoffed, waving his comment away. ‘Arty’s not like that. She’d tell you if you asked. I’m more concerned about your reaction to what she has to say. It wasn’t... pleasant, and I’m not sure she fully grasped the severity of what was done to her. To Bromm, too.’

He physically deflated at the wave of my hand. ‘Okay, I’ll drop it for now. If you say you’re okay... what matters to me is you, my love.’

Finally, I allowed myself to collapse into his warm embrace, using his strength since my own was so depleted. I didn’t cry, however. For some reason, the only emotion I could dredge up was numbness. It was too little too for that particular emotion, it’s cool embrace abandoning me when I had actually needed it, and I was irritated that my mind wasn’t allowing me to process the way I’d expected. Instead, I let my body fall into his as he lowered us onto the nest of blankets and pillows on the floor, the only part of my body that tensed were my hands as I fisted them in his shirt.

‘I’ve got you now, my love. I’ll never let you go again. You’re safe now,’ he whispered, his lips brushing against the top of my head as he spoke.

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The sound of rustling roused me from my sleep, though it took me a tick to wrap my head around where it was coming from. My head was on an actual pillow and I was clutching at the blankets as if to replace the large, warm body that had recently vacated the space.

I blinked groggily up at Xander in time to catch him zipping up one of the jumpsuits that had been passed out when we'd first boarded the ship. Stretching my limbs out as far as they could go, I arched my back and let out a little squeal as my muscles loosened from where they'd had a stranglehold on the blankets.

'Hey,' I said, my voice scratchy from sleep. 'Where ya goin'?'

He bent down with a small smile playing on his lips to press them to my forehead in a sweet kiss. The smile didn't reach his eyes, even if his love for me still shone through, and I was immediately on alert. I jolted upright, ready to throw on my own jumpsuit to stand with him against whatever it was that had come our way this time.

His hands came to rest on my shoulders and he gently pushed me back down into the nest, his eyes crinkling with concern. 'Nothing's wrong, my love. The captain called me to the cockpit for a meeting. It shouldn't take too long,' he told me, and I relaxed back into the pillows.

'Oh, okay. You should really start calling her Artemis, though. I don't think she's that comfortable with titles,' I lightly informed him.

'Tough shit. She has the title and all the responsibility that comes with it. Even if she's struggling with that, she needs to accept it sooner rather than later,' he said firmly, but it wasn't entirely unkind. He was right, but I wasn't sure how Artemis would react to it. She was damn good at rolling with the punches, but we'd all

witnessed what happened when she was overwhelmed, and a broken punching bag was probably the least of our worries when it came to her losing control from overwhelm. I didn't want her to go off like a bomb again because of something as small as a moniker, so I told him as much.

'You have a point, my love, but it doesn't change the fact that this is the situation she's now in. But,' he said, shooting me a pointed look when I opened my mouth to argue, 'I'll do my best to assist her so she doesn't get overloaded. Would that ease your worries?'

I grinned up at him. 'It would.'

He straightened back up to his full height and adjusted the sleeves at his wrists so they were neatly folded rather than hanging over his hands. It was a pleasant surprise that the ship had even stocked the jumpsuits in his size, let alone ones so large that rolling was necessary at all, but no one was about to take our luck for granted.

'I'm heading out. Will you still be here when I get back or are you going to find something else to do, my love?' he asked, stepping towards the door but pausing before opening it.

I mulled over the question for a tick but there was really only one thing I wanted to do today. It was something I'd been feeling the urge to do ever since we'd been separated and now seemed like the perfect chance.

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‘I might go see Reece for a bit. He hasn’t come out of his room yet, I don’t think. I want to check on him.’

He froze at the mention of Reece’s name, guilt twisting his features before he had the chance to contain the reaction. ‘Are you sure?’

I nodded decisively. ‘I’m sure. He shouldn’t be alone right now.’

‘Okay, then.’ He flicked off some invisible dust from his shoulder as he recomposed himself, then opened the door. ‘I’ll see you soon. Love you.’

‘Love you too.’

The door snicked shut behind him, and I was left alone to get dressed.

I wound my way through the corridors as I tried to remember where Reece had chosen to stay, and eventually found myself facing a door I was almost sure was his. I rose my fist to knock but paused before my knuckles could make contact, trepidation panging through me. The last time we’d been alone in a room together we’d been strapped naked to cold metal tables and tortured mercilessly, the very core of our bodies altered by scientists for their own personal, evil plots. But I pushed that all aside. If he needed a friend, I would be there for him. His torture had been a more personal attack and he’d endured much more and much longer than I had.

I knocked firmly.

No answer.

I waited for a few moments then knocked again, louder this time. Still nothing. My heartrate quickened as my mind immediately conjured up worst-case scenarios, but I shoved them away. Perhaps he had left the room and was exploring the ship. Maybe he'd found a job to occupy himself until we reached our destination. He could have simply decided to find the gym and get in a workout, or he'd headed to the kitchens to grab himself a bite to eat. No answer didn't necessarily mean something was wrong.

Still, my gut twisted with intuition, my instincts screaming at me that something was wrong. I tested the handle and found it unlocked, peeking my head inside warily.

The room was dim, the only light illuminating the space coming from the open doorway as I peered inside, but I could still see enough to catch sight of Reece sitting at the edge of the bed. He was staring blankly at the wall and he looked almost... empty. I called out to him as I stepped further into the room, but he barely acknowledged my presence. The only reason I knew he wasn't completely catatonic was the barely visible twitch in his jaw as I moved closer.

'Reece?' I tried again. Still no response. My chest tightened with concern as I sat next to him and placed a gentle hand on his arm. 'Reece, are you okay?'

He remained silent, his gaze blank as if he were lost in some sort of trance. I waved my hand in front of his eyes, but he didn't even blink.

A wave of helplessness washed over me, reminiscent of how I'd felt in that room as I was bound, his screams echoing in my ears like ghosts.

When he remained stuck in whatever memory had caught him firmly in its clutches, I whispered into the room, 'It's going to be all right.' I said it for myself just as much as him, and took his hand in mine, my grip tight.

Some part of me knew I needed to get Henrik, or someone who could help, but I found myself holding vigil beside him. I couldn't leave him like this. I just hoped my presence could somehow reach him.

CHAPTER 10

Reece

The pressure was heavy against me, the walls pressing in so close that I could barely breathe. I'd stopped trying to keep them from crushing me ages ago, but I'd lost track of time so I couldn't say how long ago that was. I was simply letting the darkness compress me, stuck in the repetitive rut of the walls' movements as they pulsed and convulsed around me.

Suddenly, a faint light cut through the darkness, but it was weak, like it was attempting to shine through a thickly opaque fog. A muffled voice accompanied the light, but it sounded as if they were shouting from an immense distance. I could hear them, but there were no discernible words. I wanted to move towards them, but I was stuck in place, my body held in place by the undulating walls.

The light went away and I got the sense that the other entity was suddenly keeping me company, both too far for me to reach but still right there, the warmth from their presence working to wash away some of the cold that had permeated deep into my bones. It wasn't much, but it felt nice. The pressure from the walls lightened a little, the fog no longer so oppressive.

Sensation slowly worked its way back into my limbs, one small tingle at a time. Eventually, and I couldn't say how long it took, but the tingling turned into painful pins and needles stabbing at my weakened muscles. Not that I had much of even those these days. A solar spent in solitary confinement inside a tiny room with hardly any space to fart let alone work out had reduced my previous stockiness to practically

nothing.

I blinked sharply at the reminder of my old cell, the walls currently pressing in on me dissolving as I remembered that I was no longer there. I was free, and I had the space to bring my muscle mass back to where it used to be. If I so chose. I wasn't sure if it was worth it if I were only going to end up back there anyway.

'Reece?' a soft voice called from beside me, the sound so cutting against the quiet that I jolted with a wince as it blared through the silence of the room. The room on the ship we'd taken to escape Nova Station, I suddenly recalled.

The unfamiliar surroundings rematerialized around me as the walls suddenly snapped back into place, far away from me. They weren't crushing me. They weren't even moving.

'Reece? Sweetie, can you hear me?'

The voice was familiar; the higher pitch of a woman with the sensual cadence distinctive of a Griknot female. There was only one Griknot female I was particularly familiar with.

'Addy?'

My voice was croaky, my throat dry, and I coughed as soon as air pushed through to speak.

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‘Stay here, don’t move. I’ll get you some water.’

The warmth that was on my arm disappeared as she retreated to the other side of the room where a tiny kitchenette held an even tinier refrigerator. She retrieved a bottle sloshing with clear liquid then returned, handing it over as I weakly lifted my arm to accept it. It took a lot more energy than I’d anticipated to lift it to my lips, but I drank deeply, panting when I finally lowered the now empty bottle.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and though my voice was small I didn’t fall into a coughing fit like the last time I’d tried to speak. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d had something to drink, which would explain my current state. It had been days before Artemis and the others had arrived, I knew that much. No wonder breathing felt like nails scratching down my oesophagus and scraping the lining of my lungs.

‘How are you feeling?’ she asked, settling back in beside me on the bed. I had been sitting on the side with my legs over the edge, which explained why my ass was numb.

‘I’m... okay,’ I said slowly, rolling the words over in my mouth to see how they felt. It wasn’t exactly a lie, but I didn’t think it was the truth either. It was more like I was in some sort of emotional limbo, grateful to be free but a part of me was left behind in my cell and the facility.

Adara frowned, clearly not believing me. Perhaps she was right not to. I wasn’t sure I believed myself either, but I knew I had to believe that, at the very least, I would be okay eventually. Even if that wasn’t today.

‘Are you sure?’ she pushed warily.

I sent her a small, melancholy smile. ‘I’m okay right now. How about I let you know if that changes?’

Her hand came to rest on top of my arm, her warmth seeping into me again and soothing something I hadn’t realised I needed until that moment. ‘I just wanted to come and check on you. You’ve been noticeably absent since we left Nova Station. I was worried.’

I placed my free hand over hers, squeezing gently. ‘I appreciate the concern, Adara. Thank you for caring.’

‘Of course. I’m here for you. If you want to talk... I know that not a lot of people here would understand what you’ve been through, but I do. At least some of it.’

‘I think... I’d like that. Just not right now,’ I admitted.

‘I can respect that.’

She started to remove her hand but I caught it before she could get very far, a sudden panic cresting inside my chest. ‘Where are you going?’

She paused, eyeing me carefully. ‘I was just going to head out. You said... I thought you’d want some peace.’

‘Stay.’

The word was tinged with an array of emotions, none of which I was willing to delve deeper into at this point in time. She seemed to understand enough, however, and retook her position beside me, hand still clutched in mine.

‘Okay. I’ll stay.’

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I woke to the sensation of fingers running through my hair. They scratched gently at my scalp, and I satisfied growl built in my chest. I was rewarded with a girlish giggle before the fingers were removed from my hair, the bed dipping as the owner of that hand got up.

My eyes blinked open blearily as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Not that I was complaining. I would happily wake up like that every day, but I was definitely discombobulated.

My confusion dissipated as I caught sight of Adara, the events of the previous evening – or whenever that was – surging back to the forefront of my mind. Guilt swamped me when I caught sight of another person, however.

Adara nestled herself into Xander’s embrace, the two of them looking very cosy and happy to see one another. I wasn’t sure why she’d stayed with me when she had him, and while I was grateful, I wasn’t the kind of man to steal a woman away from another man. Especially when they were so clearly, sickeningly in love.

I moved to stand, the rustle of the sheets causing Xander’s eyes to snap to mine, but what I saw there made me relax. There was no accusation in his gaze, merely kindness and concern, and most of my guilt dissipated. Nothing untoward had happened anyway, I assured myself.

‘How are you feeling, Hastings?’ he asked, still using my last name. I wasn’t sure he would ever see me as anything more than a cadet, or at the very least his responsibility. I didn’t want to be his burden to bear forever, and now that I was free from The Program’s clutches, no longer wasting away inside that stars-damned cell

or laying broken and bleeding at the mercy of those fucked up scientists, I needed to remove myself from under his umbrella of protection. It was going to take some effort to convince him I was okay on my own, but the sudden realisation that I needed to stand on my own two feet and prove to myself that I could smacked into me with the force of a battering ram.

The epiphany bolstered me, my spine straightening as determination filled every inch of me. I knew what I needed to do. First, I would get my strength back. They may have taken it from me once before, but I would ensure no one could ever do so again. Then, I would make myself useful in this fight. I was going to be the first one in, front and centre to destroy the bastards who thought they could get away with this.

‘Hastings?’ – ‘Reece?’

Both Adara and Xander called to me, slicing through my thoughts and reminding me that Xander had asked me a question.

‘Hmm? Oh, yeah. I’m feeling okay. Better, actually,’ I admitted, a small smile tugging at my lips. It wasn’t full by any means, but I’d get there. How, I wasn’t so sure yet. Physical strength was a hell of a lot easier to recover than mental strength, and I wasn’t ready to dig into that pit of misery just yet.

‘Are you sure?’ Adara asked, unsure.

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I hoped the smile I gave her was convincing enough in its genuineness. Luckily, it seemed to appease both of my visitors. They extended an offer for me to join them for the midday meal – I had apparently been out of it for the past two and a half days and slept right through this morning – but I declined. I needed to gain my independence back, and that started right now. I could manage to get my own food. It was going to be a bland Nutri-Bar regardless, but I was capable of grabbing one for myself without an entourage of mother hens to make sure I actually ate it.

Starving myself wasn't the issue, though with the way my stomach grumbled I realised that was what I had been doing, even if it was inadvertent. I would just have to keep a stash of Nutri-Bars on hand just in case. I wasn't sure if I would get stuck in whatever that state had been again, but I wasn't going to take any chances. I'd figure out a way to deal with it if the need ever arose again.

I could do this.

The couple bode me farewell and left me to my own devices, shooting me one last concerned look before the door closed behind them and shut me away from the rest of the ship again. I took that as my cue to shake out the residual pins and needles that still continued to run up and down my extremities, though they were admittedly a lot less prominent than the day before. I must have been still for too long even after I'd snapped out of the haze.

I cleaned myself off in the bathroom and donned a jumpsuit that looked way too small for me, except when I put it on it sagged in places it shouldn't have been sagging. I tried not to let it drag me back down into that dark place that latched on with sharp, deadly claws and taunted me with how much of a failure I was.

I really needed to bulk up again, if only to feel more like myself rather than some weakling imposter.

Once I was presentable, I braced myself for leaving my room for the first time since arriving. The room was dark so stepping out into the brightly lit hallway illuminated by vibrant fluorescent lights was a bit of a shock to my system, and I squinted my eyes, shielding them with my hands as I waited for them to adjust. People passed me by, eyeing me curiously as I stood there but it took less time than it normally would have for the light to stop stabbing at my eyeballs so painfully.

I lowered my hands and relaxed my eyelids, discovering that not only had I adjusted to the brightness faster than should have been possible, but I saw everything with more clarity than I was used to. Maybe it was because I had spent so long in the darkness, but even I didn't believe that excuse. The Program had altered me, and I had a feeling this was a lasting effect.

I supposed I couldn't complain about it too much. Sure, the torture I'd had to endure to create better senses wasn't ideal, but it wasn't the worst side-effect I could have had to suffer through.

I hadn't done much exploring of the ship so far, but it was easy enough to follow the signs towards the gym. It was on the bottom floor just above the engine room. The hum from the engines and the spinning magnets that created the artificial gravity vibrated softly through the floor like a delicate tickle drifting up into my body. It was a pleasant sensation, even if it was a little alarming to be so close to such dangerous and important machinery.

The floor itself was well-utilised. Exercise equipment was spread out throughout the floor and divided into separate areas with space as dividers. The ship wasn't as large as The Carina, so there wasn't as much space for other activities such as running or flying, but there were different machines and such to provide those exercises for

those who needed them. The most interesting equipment for Drakferns to stretch their wings. It hooked them up to a sort of bungee contraption inside an augmented reality chamber that allowed them to pretend as though they were outside in a variety of different environments. I could already visualise Cadmus enjoying his time in there, though it was currently occupied by another Drakfern, this one bright red and vaguely familiar.

Then it hit me.

It was Corporal Gwym.

I spun on my heel, ready to run back to my room and hide forever, but I paused before I could take another step. I wasn't a coward. I didn't need to hide from my old instructor, afraid of what he thought of how much I'd wasted away this past solar. But I didn't want to be ashamed. I was here to build it back up, and if anyone thought less of me for losing the muscle mass then screw them. I'd worked hard for it before, I could and would do it again.

My emaciated state wasn't a sign of weakness, and I refused to let them win by making it so. I was a survivor, damn it, and I was free.

I turned back around and marched right up to the weights, surveying what was available with my hands on my hips and my eyes keen. I ignored everyone else around me, their presence unimportant in my own journey. This was about me, not them.

I decided it was best to just bite the bullet and start from scratch. I hoped I wasn't down at the lowest weight but there was no way to know where I currently sat until I tried, so I picked up two of the smallest hand weights and felt them out.

My breath left me in a whoosh of relieve to discover that they were still too light and

I wasn't as far gone as I'd feared. Putting them back and picking up the next size up incurred the same result, so I repeated the process until I found ones that suited me. I knew I wouldn't be lifting the same as before, and I wasn't by any means, but my confidence and my hope was bolstered by the discovery I hadn't been reduced to nothing. Somehow, I had retained some of my strength, and that knowledge felt better than I could have ever dared to imagine.

Just as I settled in to start my reps, a voice called my name. I placed the weights at my feet and turned to greet the one woman I still wasn't sure I knew how to interact with, a curious lift to my eyebrows as she drew closer.

'Hey,' I said, trying not to pay attention to the way the jumpsuit clung and moulded to her feminine figure but failing spectacularly. I couldn't believe I'd never noticed the ample protrusions on her chest or the prominent dip in her toned waist.

'Hey,' she replied right back, the single word holding back so many emotions that I wasn't sure either one of us was particularly eager to lay out yet.

'What's up?' I promoted.

'I'm holding a meeting in the infirmary. You should be there.'

I frowned, unsure I liked where this was going but deciding to hear her out. 'What about?'

'There are some things I need to discuss with those who were subject to The Program's experiments. I'll explain everything when everyone's there, but unfortunately this is a conversation that can no longer be avoided.'

'Right,' I said on a sigh, already knowing I wasn't getting out of this – whatever it was, and eyes the weights mournfully. 'I'll just sort myself out and be right there.'

‘No rush. I need to round up the others. The meeting will start in a turn, so you have time to finish your set and freshen up, grab something to eat if you haven’t already.’

‘Wait, the others?’ I asked, suddenly nervous that all of our trauma was about to be aired out in front of an audience, and also mentally kicking myself for forgetting to eat before I started a workout. My stomach chose that moment to protest its emptiness, growling loud and long.

She gave me a knowing look but followed it up with a reassuring smile that actually settled my overactive nerves. ‘Just those involved.’

‘Who?’ I asked, getting the sense she was talking about more than just me and Adara.

‘You, Addy, Cadmus and Henrik.’

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‘Why Cadmus and Henrik?’

Her lips pinched as her eyes darted about the room, unwilling to speak in front of the others using the equipment. ‘I’ll explain that in the meeting, too. One turn. I’ll see you there?’

She’d phrased it as a question but it really wasn’t. It was a requirement set by my captain and I was expected to follow. I nodded once, not liking this strange shift in our dynamic. It had been a long time since we’d spent any real time together, but we’d gotten close before everything went to shit. Or at least I thought we had.

It saddened me to acknowledge it, even internally, but even though I trusted Artemis for the most part I wasn’t sure how much of our friendship was real. She may have come back for me, but I’d discerned enough about the situation to determine I hadn’t been her priority. Not that I blamed her for putting those kids first, but it still stung that I was more of an afterthought.

Was that selfish? Probably, but that didn’t mean I didn’t feel it.

I settled back in with the weights as she walked away, focusing back on my newest purpose. The physical exertion allowed my mind to clear, my focus on my body’s actions rather than all the other bullshit currently surrounding my life. Here and now, with each repetition, I pushed the memories of weakness and despair to the side and focused solely on the next breath, the strain each motion caused, and the sensation of the sweat trickling over my brow.

With a final push I finished my last rep and put the weights back in their place, then I

wiped the sweat off my brow with my sleeve and stretched out my freshly worked muscles to avoid any cramping and stiffness, just the way I'd been taught. The familiar motions were a soothing balm to my soul, another reminder that I was free and I hadn't lost this part of myself. I may have been a lot skinnier than before, but I was no less capable of bringing myself back to where I used to be.

It didn't take me long to head back to my room and wash off the residual stench from my workout, and I quickly redressed in a clean jumpsuit after making a mental note to acquire some more appropriate workout attire.

I found myself in the infirmary not long after, seated in a chair to the side of the room while Henrik took up one of the cots and Cadmus was positioned at Bromm's side. I wasn't sure how or why he was holding the unconscious Griknot's hand, but I figured it probably had something to do with what had happened in the facility.

The memory of the three of them together shoved itself to the front of my mind, playing out in high definition as the grunts and moans sounded as if they were happening right now instead of in the past. It was such a vivid memory that my body's reaction was impossible to prevent, my cock twitching without my consent inside my jumpsuit. I just hoped no one noticed as I tried to discretely adjust to hide the sudden bulge.

It wasn't even that I wanted to be a part of that. Any man would get hard when people fucked right in front of them. It had nothing to do with the way they moved together like they were one being, undulating against one another with the slap of slick flesh, the panting... the pleasure.

Sex turned me on. That was all it was.

I couldn't decide if I was thankful or even more embarrassed when the woman in question stepped into the room, Adara trailing behind her. The door closed behind

them both, locking us in for whatever this meeting was about. Artemis surprised me when she immediately handed me a Nutri-Bar, but I took it gratefully and a little abashedly since I'd forgotten to feed myself a second time. Maybe I had needed to follow Adara and Xander to grab something to eat earlier. I clearly still hadn't screwed my head on straight enough yet.

'I didn't think you were going to tell anyone else,' Cadmus commented as I took my first bite. It tasted like ash and chalk on my tongue, and it was any wonder how my mouth didn't try out from the contact. Still, it was better than nothing. I wasn't about to take that for granted again.

Artemis shot Cadmus an apologetic look. 'That was the idea, but then I realised this affected them too. Keeping them in the dark didn't feel right.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Adara, frowning between the two. 'What's going on?'

Artemis inhaled deeply and levelled us all with a serious gaze. 'We need to talk about the nanites.'

'You want me to monitor these guys, too,' Henrik assumed, excitement alighting in his eyes even through his attempts to disguise it.

'That discussion is on the agenda for this meeting, yes,' Artemis admitted, and my eyebrows shot up.

I opened my mouth to protest but Henrik continued on before I could even get a sound out.

'That explains why I'm here, but why does Cadmus need to be here for this?'

‘Because...’ she began, looking to the man in question as if asking for permission.

Instead of giving it, he spoke for himself. ‘Because we think what’s happening to Bromm is also happening to me.’

Shock drew us all up short as we took a moment to process that information.

‘What? How?’ asked Henrik, his excitement immediately souring at the idea of his friend being in any sort of danger.

That was when Artemis dropped an even bigger bomb that sent a chill down my spine.

‘The nanites seem to be evolving, and I think they may be contagious.’

‘Fuck,’ Adara cursed on a strangled breath.

Fuck indeed.

CHAPTER 11

Artemis

Looking out at the stunned faces of the people I'd once considered my friends, I winced as their expressions morphed into grim fear. I didn't know if they understood the full scope of what my theory suggested, but one glance at Bromm made the situation starkly clear.

'Contagious how?' Henrik asked, jumping into his role as our medic immediately and taking the situation as seriously as I'd hoped.

'I'm not sure. If it's airborne, anyone could see start to see symptoms, but I don't think that's the case,' I admitted.

'You think it's transmitted through physical contact?'

'Yes. More specifically, my theory is that it is contracted through bodily fluids which is why Bromm and Cadmus are the only ones experiencing any symptoms so far.'

'Because they're the two men you've had intimate relations with and they're the only two experiencing any symptoms,' he summarised, and I nodded my agreement.

'This is phenomenal,' he muttered to himself under his breath, and I didn't think he intended for me to hear it.

'One of my abilities, Henrik, is enhanced senses,' I warned.

His eyes widened in surprise. 'Enhanced how?'

‘My hearing, eyesight, alongside my senses of taste, touch, and smell are finely tuned. My hearing can detect the quietest of sounds from a significant distance. My sight can detect the minutest of details. My tongue can determine different flavours and ingredients from almost any combination of food or drink. I can feel the vibrations of your words in the air and your footsteps in the ground even from a significant distance. I can pick out different scents in the air and can even determine if they are safe or poisonous.’

‘That’s... but you... I... Did you...?’

‘Did I just hear what you mumbled to yourself clear as day? Yes, I did.’

‘Shit.’

‘I hear and smell a lot of that too.’

Cadmus snorted in amusement. ‘That’s unfortunate.’

I smirked. ‘It can be.’

‘And you think we’ll be able to do all of that?’ Reece asked, his voice quavering. From the information or emotional overload, it wasn’t clear yet.

I gentled my tone the best I could, trying not to freak him out even more. ‘I don’t know what you and Adara will be able to do. That’s what I wanted to discuss with you. Without the interference of The Program reprogramming my nanites they’ve learned to adapt. My senses are even more heightened than ever before. My abilities are evolving alongside them, too. And now with Bromm’s condition and Cadmus experiencing the same symptoms that Bromm did before he collapsed... I think it’s safe to say we all need to be monitored.’

‘The entire ship, too, if the nanites are contagious. We need to watch out for anyone showing any symptoms just in case they accidentally came in contact with any of your bodily fluids, or if not then it could be airborne,’ Henrik concluded.

‘Exactly.’

‘This could be a pandemic,’ he said, his eyes darkening with concern as the gravity of the situation dawned on him.

‘So what, we can’t even sneeze without risking infecting someone? Are you saying we need to be quarantined?’ asked Adara.

‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,’ I warned them all. ‘There hasn’t been an outbreak yet, and we don’t know anything for certain. I still believe they’re only being passed on through direct contact, which means it’s containable.’

‘Do we need to warn the rest of the ship?’ Reece asked.

‘No,’ I said firmly, my answer not up for debate. ‘I will not risk a mass panic before we even have any answers to give people.’

‘So what do we do?’ asked Addy.

‘We stay vigilant. Keep an eye out for anyone exhibiting symptoms and report it immediately to me or Henrik if you do.’

‘And what are those symptoms?’ Henrik asked, still unable to fully hide his intrigue despite the severity of the situation.

I explained what Bromm had been through, though I omitted a few more personal details they didn’t need to know about. Cadmus jumped in when I finished to explain

his own experiences, and both Reece and Addy took in the information with solemn expressions. Henrik was eager to learn more, no longer attempting to hide his not so appropriate reactions.

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Okay, that wasn't entirely fair. He was doing a respectable job of taking care of everyone and he did genuinely care, but there was a scientific side to him that reminded me of the scientists at The Program that I struggled not to latch onto. There was a significant difference between the two, however, that allowed me to separate him from them, and that was his unabashed thirst for exploring the unknown with a puppy-like curiosity compared to The Program's dull, lifeless push for power.

'What's going to happen to us?' Reece asked quietly, though I wasn't sure if it was a question he expected me to answer just yet. I figured they were all just taking some time to process the overload of information and it would sink in eventually. The least I could do in this transition phase was to be patient and understanding, even if I was itching to move on.

'All I know to expect is that you will change. In what ways, we won't know until it happens. There's no way to know without digging into The Program's files what your nanites were programmed to do, and there's too much risk of opening ourselves up for them to track and attack if we try to access those files from here.'

'I think my senses are heightening,' he blurted and my brows shot up in response to the outburst, though I wasn't entirely surprised.

'Which senses? Can you elaborate?' Henrik jumped into action, retrieving his med kit to start looking over Reece. He began by shining a light in his eye which made him flinch, blinking rapidly from the sudden assault.

'My eyesight, for starters,' he sniped, smacking Henrik's hand away as he lurched forward with the light again. He was back to normal in no time, however, and I

understood what he was saying.

‘Can you see more clearly?’ I asked him.

He nodded. ‘Little details I never would have noticed before, and I’m adjusting to light changes more quickly.’

‘That’s the enhanced healing,’ I told him. ‘Any other changes you’ve noticed?’

He shook his head, Henrik now tapping away furiously on his holo-tab as he recorded all the information and I turned to Addy with a question in my eyes.

‘I’ve not noticed anything yet,’ she admitted, her lips downturned as she worried the bottom one between her teeth. Her hand rose in a claw to scratch at her arm, right over where she has recently healed from the cuts made by the scientists and I refrained from showing any reaction to the action. For all I knew, the scars could simply itch. It was something I experienced when I’d first started adapting to the injuries I’d received as a child, so it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. I couldn’t remember the itch lasting this long after healing, though.

‘You will probably start to notice a few subtle differences soon, but they may not be the same as Reece’s. That said, The Program typically paired their subjects to perform the same tests and procedures on, so it’s more than likely that you’ve both been given the same programming.’

‘You’re talking about it like we’re robots or something,’ Cadmus noted, and I nodded.

‘Essentially, that’s what you are now. Living robots.’

‘A new race of beings,’ Henrik breathed in awe. ‘Part biological, part mechanical.’

I nodded. 'Cyborgs,' I supplied for him.

'And hybrids,' Addy chimed in, a reminder that the experiments those of us in this room had been subjected to weren't the only ones.

'I'm going to pull the volunteers to monitor what abilities the children exhibit. I will give you access to that information as well, Henrik,' I decided.

'That's... a lot of work. I'm not sure I'll be able to keep up with it on my own,' he told me.

'You won't have to. You can build your own team, but they will need to be vetted. We can't let this information get into the wrong hands.'

'Of course. I understand.'

Cadmus waved his hand above his head. 'I'll help.'

I blinked in surprise. Cadmus kept surprising me lately, his actions never aligning with how I expected him to behave. I was going to need to reassess him in order to anticipate his next move. It wasn't that I didn't trust him necessarily, but more than I hated the unpredictability. I didn't know what to do with it.

'Um... okay. Sure. If you two could start compiling the information into secure files it would help keep us a step ahead of any potential problems.'

Henrik bent over his holo-tab as he spoke, his focus intent on the device. 'I'll need a list of your abilities, Arty. It'll give me a baseline for what to expect. And if you could get me a list of abilities for the children then I can start cataloguing them.'

'I can do that,' I agreed, happy to have a task that didn't involve leading this small

army I'd somehow landed myself in charge of. 'I'll talk to Libby about compiling a list of the abilities the other women have and what was done to them, then she can send it straight over.'

The only ones left without any real tasks were Addy and Reece, so I let Henrik and Cadmus get to work and moved towards the last two. Addy wrapped her arms around me in a friendly embrace when I got close enough, but Reece didn't move to greet me. In fact, I got the feeling that despite our understanding during our escape he had retreated back into himself and away from me. I didn't like this distance, and I wasn't sure where to start to bridge that gap. Things were so different between us now. I missed the way we used to be.

'Have either of you found something to do on the ship yet?' I asked them, keeping my tone professional despite Addy still dangling from my side. I thought I might have seen Reece wince, but it happened so fast that I wondered if I'd imagined it.

'I can make myself useful as an engineer,' Addy offered. 'I don't think there's much for me to do, but I can familiarise myself with the engines in case I'm needed.'

I smiled down at her, pleased that she'd bounced back so quickly after the trauma she'd faced. I had a feeling Reece had lost some of his elasticity and I mulled over how I could possibly help him get it back.

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‘I could use an engineer,’ I told her, even though I was perfectly capable of sorting things out myself. I wasn’t an expert by any means, so her knowledge and experience would be invaluable regardless.

I turned to Reece, a single eyebrow raised in question. He didn’t respond, instead seeming to cave in on himself a little as his lips tugged down into a frown. Again, he was quick to rearrange his features into something more stoic, an attempt to hide whatever he was feeling. I didn’t like that.

‘What’s wrong, Reece?’

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ he replied tersely, and I felt as if I’d somehow offended him with my prodding, that he no longer felt I had the right to prod at all.

‘I... Okay. Do you- ‘

He cut me off. ‘I should go. I’ll be sure to update you and Henrik if notice any other changes.’

He stood, giving me and Addy a wide berth as he stalked from the room. I’d never witnessed Reece in a mood like this before and I didn’t know how to respond. I had no clue if it was directed at me or if I was simply the one that got the brunt of it because I was in his proximity, but I couldn’t stop the twinge of loss and longing that panged in my chest as I watched his back disappear.

‘Give him time,’ Addy said quietly, keeping her words between us.

‘Do you know what’s wrong?’ I asked her, guiding her from the room to give the boys some peace. I trailed my fingers over Bromm’s arm as walked by, a silentsee you soon.

‘Not here. I don’t think he’d appreciate me airing out his personal business for everyone to hear.’

She dragged me down the corridors until we reached the converted closet that Cadmus and I had used to have our own private discussion before. She pulled me inside, the door clicking closed behind us, and yanked me down into the heap of pillows and blankets spread out on the floor.

‘Is this where you’re staying?’ I asked her.

She nodded. ‘Yeah, Xander and I claimed it so we could let others have the bigger rooms and we could have some privacy.’

‘Ah. Well, I owe you an apology then.’

She cocked her head. ‘What for?’

‘Cadmus and I used this room.’

She scrunched her nose and made a sound of disgust. ‘Gross!’

I frowned, confused. ‘How is that gross?’

‘You fucked Cadmus in my bed!’

I reared back, the venom in her accusation alarming. ‘What? No! I didn’t fuck him. We just talked.’

She visibly deflated, her relief apparent. ‘Oh, good. I thought I’d been sleeping on your sex juices or something. No thank you.’

I snorted a laugh, completely taken aback by my strange friend. ‘If I was going to fuck anyone I’d do it in my own bed, thanks.’

Her nose wrinkled again. ‘Good to know.’

But something she said struck me and I eyed the sheets beneath us suspiciously. ‘Does that mean I’m sitting in your sex juices?’ I asked her curiously. I couldn’t feel any wet patches, but they could have just dried.

She threw her head back and laughed. Loud and boisterous yet still somehow delicate and feminine. Must have been a Griknor thing. Yet, I wasn’t sure if I was imagining it, but I thought I caught an undertone of bitterness to the mirth.

‘No. Xander and I don’t have sex, Arty.’

I didn’t see why that was funny...

Noting my confusion, she suddenly went very quiet and still, her entire body flushing a deep magenta as she became uncharacteristically timid. ‘I... um... I’m asexual.’

My brows jumped so high into my hairline I was sure they disappeared entirely. ‘Oh.’

‘Yeah...’

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‘That’s... unusual for a Griknot,’ I commented lightly.

She snorted, but there was no real amusement to the sound. ‘That’s an understatement,’ she said, the bitterness resurfacing and confirming my suspicions.

‘Is Xander asexual too, then?’

She flinched, the topic apparently hitting an open wound I hadn’t realised was bleeding. ‘Uh, no. No, he’s not.’

I tilted me head to the side, unable to comprehend how that relationship would work. ‘How do you satisfy him then?’

She reared back as if I’d hit her, a deep pain in her eyes as she tried her best to hold back her emotions.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said quickly, reaching out to lay a hand on her arm and rub soothing circles on her skin with my thumb. ‘I don’t mean to be insensitive. I’m just trying to understand the dynamics of your relationship. I’m not particularly well-versed in these things. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. It’s none of my business.’

She slipped her hand beneath mine, tangling our fingers together tightly but the rest of her relaxed at my explanation. ‘No, it’s okay. It’s just hard for me to think about, that I’m not enough. My family exiled me when they realised I wasn’t as into sex like I was supposed to be, like everyone else, and Xander says he’s okay not having sex as long as we’re together but I don’t want to hold him back, you know? I’m not giving him up, but I know I can’t give him everything he needs. It’s an argument we have a

lot, actually.'

I scowled at the agony in her words, the suffering she'd gone through at the hands of the people who were supposed to love her unconditionally. I wanted to beat them into their graves for making her feel like she was less than simply because she wasn't interested in sex.

An image materialised in my mind of her parents pushing her to fuck people while she fought them off, some nameless, faceless Griknor attempting to force himself on her despite her protests while her parents stood back and watched.

I yanked her against me, wrapping my arms around her as rocked her back and forth. I stroked my hand over her hair, the thick strands smooth like drying seaweed, and pressed my lips to her forehead. 'You're giving him everything he needs, Addy. I promise you. I've seen the way that man looks at you. I've seen the way he would do anything for you. Just because you don't want to fuck him doesn't make you any less of a woman, or any less of a Griknor, or any less of anything.'

I crushed her to me further when she burst into tears, her fingers clawing at my jumpsuit as the deep-seated pain from her past was validated and set free. At least in this room between the two of us, she didn't have to pretend to be someone she wasn't.

Light spilled into the room as the door was wrenched open, a masculine growl emanating from whomever had interrupted our moment.

'What did you do?' He demanded, his voice low and threatening. It was Xander, and he was pissed.

I twisted my head to look up at him, ensuring Addy remained in my embrace. 'We're bonding.'

My answer made Addy hiccup a laugh through her tears and she pulled back enough to look up at her boyfriend. 'That's a pretty good description, actually.'

I gazed back down at her, taking in her puffy eyes and the snot bubbling from her nose and held back a laugh at the state of her. 'We switched.'

It took her a moment to understand, but she gave me a watery grin when she did. 'I'm so glad we're friends, Arty.'

My own eyes stung with tears at her genuine comment, and my lips wobbled as they stretched into an equally watery grin. She felt like home. Not like Libby, but no less comforting. I didn't know how to explain it, but sitting here with Addy I felt like I belonged.

I heard more than saw Xander's discomfort as he shuffled from foot to foot and he cleared his throat awkwardly. 'Ah, right. Bonding.'

'I was just explaining our relationship to her,' Addy told him. 'She was curious.'

Silence.

'What?'

My cheeks burned as I gawped at her in mortification, then I quickly turned to address Xander and clear up any misunderstandings. 'She means she was telling me about her asexuality. I wasn't asking for any details, about the, um, intimacy between the two of you, I promise,' I clarified.

Xander's whole face flushed a deep crimson, all the way to the tips of his ears. His mouth opened and closed as if he were struggling to find a response and was coming up with nothing. Instead, a strangled sound escaped his throat that made his blush

darken even further.

‘Right,’ he finally settled on, the word coming out gruffly. He cleared his throat.

I rose up from the nest –theirnest – and wiped at my jumpsuit like it was covered in dust or dirt just to give my hands something to do. ‘I’ll just...’ I pointed towards the open door that Xander was blocking. ‘I should go.’

‘No, wait,’ Addy grabbed my hand, preventing me from barrelling out of the room. ‘We got sidetracked. I still need to talk to you about Reece.’

Xander frowned, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. His large presence made the already cramped room stifling, and I was glad I wasn’t claustrophobic. There was barely any room to breathe without the action brushing up against another body.

‘What’s going on with Reece?’ Xander asked her, and she blew out a shaky breath.

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‘When I went to see him he was practically catatonic. I think he was having a flashback or something, but he didn’t even register that I was there for a long time,’ she said sadly.

‘That’s why you stayed with him last night,’ he surmised.

‘Yeah. When he finally came-to he asked me to stay. I didn’t want to leave him alone so...’

‘He’s been through a lot,’ I said, the statement obvious but needed to be spoken out into the world, nonetheless. ‘He’s going to have a response to that trauma. I caught him in the gym today, which is a good sign. It means he’s not giving up. I wouldn’t worry too much about him.’

‘I can’t worry. Not after...’ Addy trailed off, her eyes glazing over as she got sucked into her own memories.

I jostled her to bring her back to the present, and she sent me a small, grateful smile in response.

‘You’ve been doing better than most would be after everything you’ve endured,’ I told her gently. ‘He’s suffered for longer and through things you haven’t, so he’s got a lot more to sort through to heal.’

‘Solitary confinement,’ Xander said gruffly. ‘He was stuck in a cell on his own for an entire solar and then tortured alongside you.’

‘He needs help,’ she said.

I held up a hand to stop her before she could get too carried away. ‘Let him try on his own first. Make yourself available in case he needs assistance with the healing process, but Reece has always struck me as independent. He took strength from it before. He needs to find that again.’

Neither of them looked convinced, but my gut was telling me that Reece needed time to process before he was bombarded with well-meaning worriers. The determination in their gazes told me that I wasn’t going to win this argument, however, so I decided to change tactics and move away from the conversation.

‘I’m heading back to the cockpit. I left Bal and Dave Junior to nap with Eloria, and I don’t want to know what hell they’ll unleash if I’m not there when one or both of them wake up. Are you coming?’

Xander was staring at me like I’d randomly grown a second head, but Addy rolled with it and took my outstretched hand.

‘Lead on, Captain,’ she said, her mood switching just as quickly as the subject change and befuddling Xander even more. He followed behind us regardless.

‘Women,’ he muttered under his breath. Addy caught it too, and we shared an amused look between us feeling lighter than before we’d entered their room.

Our lives had gone to shit, but at least we had each other. That fact bolstered my resolve to lead these people to safety and fed the demon that hungered for The Program’s destruction.

With these incredibly resilient people by my side, I felt more confidence and hope than ever before. I could do this. We could get through this. I could feel it.

CHAPTER 12

Alexander

I was so lost. I didn't know what had happened between Addy and Artemis, but they were suddenly attached at the hip again and it was beyond concerning. What was even more alarming was that Eloria was joining in, the three of them behaving as if the rest of us didn't exist.

I was sitting beside Julius, the pair of us watching the women in stunned, flabbergasted silence as they laughed and petted the oversized monster of a pet that Artemis had somehow acquired while they took turns pulling the child – Baldr – away from danger. The boy kept trying to fly away (what the fuck) or touch buttons (stars help us all) or ride the blatantly short-tempered Kikshrut (was he trying to die?).

'Are we safe?' Julius whispered to me from my right.

'I don't know,' I answered honestly, whispering out the corner of my mouth.

Dave Junior's head snapped towards us, his eyes narrowing on us as though he'd heard and understood our whispered interaction. Julius inched closer to me as if I could protect him from the monstrous creature, but my eyes stayed on Dave Junior. It was never a good idea to look away from a predator when it had its sights set on you, and despite my attempts to pretend I wasn't afraid of him it was obvious that he knew I was still wary.

Okay, fine. I was shitting myself every time he was in the room. He was a living, breathing horror story come to life that was currently getting belly scratches from my girlfriend. Red venom was seeping from the tips of his fangs as his tongue lolled out of his mouth, for star's sake. There was nothing 'cute' about him.

Right now I was terrified of her, too, and I wasn't ashamed to admit it. Was I going to? No, of course not. I still had my pride, stars damn it. That didn't mean I wouldn't sit in my excrement in the corner while the women turned into beast tamers right in front of my eyes.

Remind me toneverget on their bad sides. Ever.

Still, I couldn't help but smile as I sat back and watched the woman I loved build friendships with people besides me. And they were other women, too, which was a bonus. I'd always been concerned over Addy's inability to make female friends. They usually only wanted to talk about sex. Their favourite positions, the sizes of the dicks they'd encountered, the weight of the breasts they'd fondled, how they were planning on seducing their victims for the night. All the things that Addy had never been interested in. It also made those women view her as some sort of strange, otherworldly creature that simply didn't make any sense to them. She'd been bullied far too much over her lack of sexual urges, especially considering her race and their overtly sexual culture. It made making friends hard for her, and it was so nice to see the three of them getting along so well without any of that nonsense tainting the process.

I was warming up to Artemis, too. Just a little bit, but she'd saved Addy from those scientist bastards so I was grateful to her in spite of everything else.

When Colonel Granger had first shown me the security footage of Artemis, and then when the footage from the facility on the Forbidden Planet had been played for all of us, I'd been beyond nervous of what Artemis was capable of. If she ever decided to turn on us we were screwed. I didn't even think there was a way to kill her. She simply regenerated within clicks as if it were nothing. I'd never even seen her flinch in pain, even when she burned the flesh off her hands, she reacted the same way as if I'd told her it was a Tuesday.

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Quite frankly, she was even more terrifying than her Kikshrut pet, and that was saying something.

Yet, as I studied the smile on her face that mirrored Addy's and Eloria's, there was something about her that softened those hard edges. She wasn't merely a killing machine. She was a person who had suffered through unimaginable torture, her body sliced apart and reassembled into the perfect assassin. A fate she had never asked for in the first place.

I ruminated over what I knew about her as a person. I had witnessed multiple acts of heroics, always putting others before herself. I had watched from a distance as she'd slowly opened up and allowed people to see a small sliver of who she truly was at her core. I'd seen her dazzle men and women alike regardless of her gender or disguises. She'd even begun a romantic relationship, possibly with more than one man if what Addy had told me happened with Cadmus was any indication.

Not just that, but I'd seen the way the others looked at her. None of us really knew what to make of her now that we all knew she was a woman, though I'd had a lot more time to let that information sit, and even I could admit she was a beautiful one at that. The footage we'd seen as evidence of her brutal abilities cast a negative light over her, shadowing all the good she'd shown us. However, that good significantly outweighed the bad.

I would have been a hypocrite if I'd held those kills against her. As a military officer, I'd killed before. I'd done it using an array of methods, too. I'd tortured and taken lives and destroyed buildings and ships and even at one point an entire city. All of it was legal since I'd essentially been hired by our government to perform those jobs. It

was my duty, and I took it seriously.

She hadn't been hired by the government, she'd been abandoned by them. She'd been turned into a monster at their behest in order for them to use her to bolster their own power. She'd seen the dark underbelly of the very people I had put my trust in, and while she was killing to survive I was doing so because I'd been told to.

Using that perspective, I was the monster, not her.

These thoughts were bringing up another issue I was struggling to wrap my head around.

Markus.

He'd been one of my best friends for so long now that I just couldn't understand why he would disappear right when I needed him by my side. And he'd been there, too, before he'd performed his vanishing act. Nothing about it made any sense to me. There were no signs of him changing his mind for any reason. It was completely befuddling.

Addy was still acting shady whenever I mentioned him, but that wasn't exactly shocking since they'd never gotten along. What worried me the most was that I was starting to doubt him now, too. I'd dismissed Addy's accusations about his character for the entire time I'd known him, and now I was beginning to wonder if there had been something to it. She'd always had a knack for pinpointing the good people from those not worth her time, and Markus was the only person I'd ignored those warnings for.

Had I been wrong to do so?

I'd made myself abundantly clear to her that he was my friend and I'd trusted him

implicitly, but after Artemis had informed us all of Jorna's betrayal during that first meeting and taking into account the connection through their relationship, the evidence was piling up against him whether I liked it or not.

My mood plummeted as I recalled the details I'd received in that first meeting after we'd escaped. I'd assumed Jorna had died in the takeover, fighting for the side of justice. Instead, I'd learned she'd been alive the entire time, had abandoned those of us who cared for her, and was likely to have been responsible for the demise of her team. That was if they weren't turncoats as well.

I hadn't been able to sleep well since all the revelations, and I had the awful feeling that they weren't even close to being over. The secret meeting Artemis had called that included Addy but not me was enough of an indication of that. It stung, I had to admit. If I was to be her second, then I was going to need to be looped in on everything, including those meetings. My exclusion made me believe that Artemis didn't trust me, at least not fully.

The only explanation I could find for her mistrust was that my meeting with Colonel Granger had not remained as secret as we'd hope. How much of it she'd witnessed I didn't know, nor was I privy to her thoughts and feelings on the matter. All I could do now was prove to her that I was someone she could trust, because we were going to be working closely for the foreseeable future. Not to mention her friendship with Addy brought us in constant contact whether we were willing or not.

But most importantly, Colonel Granger had been correct in her assessment. Artemis may have been a wild card, but she was a wild card we needed to recruit to our side. While that seemed to have come to fruition – of our own doing or otherwise – she was still a mystery, and mysteries could be dangerous in a war.

However, I had no other choice but to put all of my eggs in her basket. She was our only hope of defeating the enemy and putting an end to the corruption that had

infected the Intergalactic Union to its very core.

All levity suddenly fled from the room when the door to the cockpit opened to reveal the two people I was still the most stunned were on board. The Christianson siblings stepped through, Katira hiding behind her younger brother almost shyly with her head bent down and her hair creating a curtain between herself and the rest of the world. Tarren, however, waltzed in with the opposite posture to his sister. Shoulders back, chin up, teeth clenched as if already preparing for the push back against their presence.

Except, the reception they received was not what I was expecting. No one jumped to their feet in alarm, nor did anyone start shouting for them to leave because they weren't wanted here. Instead, Eloria took them in with an assessing eye, Addy looked at them with pity shining through loud and clear, and Artemis greeted them with an apologetic smile.

'It's been two days,' Tarren snapped, his fists clenched so tight that his knuckles had turned white. Katira shrank back at his tone, and my heart panged at the loss of the person she used to be. Sure, she'd been a bit of a brat, the entitlement from her wealthy upbringing hard to shake, but she'd been bubbly and friendly for the most part.

Now, she was just a shell of her former self, and it physically hurt to see.

Still, with her brother ready to launch himself into action at the first sign of negativity towards either of them, I prepared myself for the same. Just in case.

'I'm sorry. I've been busy, but I should have come to talk when I had a free moment. I didn't mean to keep you waiting,' Artemis apologised, and she even sounded sincere. My gaze ping-ponged between her and Tarren as I struggled to make sense of the interaction. She should have been spitting poison after everything he'd done. It

was his fault Reece had been wrongfully arrested in the first place, his fault Reece had suffered the way he had, and ultimately it was his fault Addy had ended up as collateral damage. She was their friend, not Tarren's. What was going on?

'What did you want to talk about, anyway?' he asked her, backing down a little at the apology though he didn't acknowledge it.

Artemis tore her gaze away from the siblings to look at Addy and the two of them held a silent conversation that confused me even more that I already was. That feeling grew to heights I'd never before experienced when both women turned to face me wearing identical expressions of unease that filled me with dread. Both emotions swirled within me like a tornado of doom, and I knew that whatever was going on here was something I was not going to like.

As if she really didn't want to do this with me specifically as an audience, Artemis shot me an indecipherable look before locking eyes with Tarren and then Katira, holding Katira's gaze when she spoke the two words that completely shattered everything I thought I'd ever known.

'Markus Fletcher.'

Katira flinched, immediately backing away as if the breath had been knocked from her lungs. Tarren hissed, blocking Artemis's view of his sister and puffing himself up as if readying for a fight. Their reactions told us all everything we needed to know. Artemis backed down, sharing another look with Addy that broke me even further.

I fell back into my chair, my legs unable to hold me up as the severity of what had just occurred settled itself inside me, winding itself around my ribs and squeezing as if to suffocate me.

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Artemis didn't give me the chance to recover from the last blow before continuing. 'He told you to blame it on Reece, didn't he?'

Katira was shaking like a leaf in gale-force winds, hiding behind her brother like he was the only thing keeping her safe in this world. I came to the heart-wrenching realisation that to her, he was.

'We had to,' he snapped defensively, continuing to block his sister from our sight to the best of his ability. 'He threatened to- '

'You don't need to tell me,' Artemis cut him off, her tone gentle and compassionate. How she managed to find those emotions and direct them to the people responsible for Reece's imprisonment I didn't think I'd ever know. 'I don't need you to drag it all up to the surface. I just needed confirmation, and you've given it.'

'What are you going to do with us?' he asked guardedly.

She shrugged. 'Nothing. You're free to do whatever you want. You can leave when we land on Burnos, run from The Program and the IU. Or you can stay and fight. I'll leave it up to you.'

'You're going to let them stay?' Addy asked, surprise lifting her tone.

'I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing in their position if it were Libby,' she confessed. 'I can't hold them to standards I won't even hold for myself.'

'But Reece...'

‘They’ll have to figure that one out between them.’

‘You’re not... mad?’ Tarren asked, confused.

Artemis levelled him with a deadpan look, a fierceness in her eyes that made even me flinch. ‘I’m not impressed with your actions, nor have I forgotten your attempt to extort us on Nova Station. But – and this is abigbut – I can understand why you did it. You were protecting your sister, and I can respect that.’

‘She’s right though,’ Katira spoke up from behind Tarren, her voice small and timid in a way I wasn’t used to hearing from her before she’d been attacked. ‘Reece won’t want us here.’

‘Like I said, that’s between the three of you to sort out. He at least deserves an explanation, but don’t be surprised if he puts you in Henrik’s care,’ she said pointedly.

‘That’s it?’ asked Tarren, his entire body deflating like she’d popped him like a balloon.

She shrugged again. ‘I don’t really know what you want me to say,’ she admitted. ‘Do you want me to be mad?’

‘No, I just... I don’t understand.’

She sighed, shifting in her seat in preparation for what she was about to say. ‘I masqueraded as a boy in an all-male military academy to find information that could lead me back to save my best friend. She’s the only family I have and I left her behind once before. I was willing to do anything to get back to her. To save her. What the two of you have endured is horrible, and I don’t blame you one bit for doing what was necessary to keep yourselves safe. It just so happened that in doing so you hurt

someone I care about. If you do it again, I won't be so lenient. My understanding only goes so far, but it's not me you need to apologise to. I would suggest you find some time to grovel.'

She turned her back on them in a clear dismissal, reaching out to pull Baldr down from where he'd been trying to climb up onto the holo-table. Katira backed out of the room slowly, her eyes taking in Artemis with a glint of life in them I hadn't seen in over a solar. Tarren was also eyeing her with interest, though the root of that interest eluded me. I was far too focused on my internal battle. A part of me still wanted to believe that Markus was my friend; that he wasn't responsible for such a heinous crime or that he hadn't betrayed us.

The larger part, however, understood that I'd been duped. I'd allowed such an evil man into my life, invited him close to the people I'd cared about, and trusted him to be a part of my inner circle. He hadn't just betrayed the Intergalactic Union, he'd betrayed me. He'd betrayed our friendship. He'd betrayed my trust on levels I hadn't even realised existed until this moment.

Ithurt.

'Baby?' Addy asked from where she knelt in front of me. I didn't know when she'd moved, too lost in my own head to pay attention to my surroundings, but she placed her hands on my knees as she gave herself to me for however I needed her.

I lifted my eyes to hers, the sting of tears biting at them, but I refused to let them fall. I'd allowed that man to remain close, not just to me but to her. I'd ignored all the signs, all her warnings, and even allowed him to walk free after he'd brutally raped and assaulted a member of my crew while an innocent man took the blame. I'd been blind, and I'd endangered everyone because of it.

'I should have trusted you,' I told her, my voice cracking with the emotion as it got

stuck in my throat. 'I should have believed you when you told me...'

'Let's not go there, Xan. I never saw this coming either. You're not to blame here.'

I was shaking my head before she'd even finished speaking. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't deserve her compassion or kind words. I'd failed her. I'd failed Katira, and Tarren. Reece.

'No...' I whispered, then stormed from the cockpit before my heart could completely tear in two in front of them all.

CHAPTER 13

Tormik

Mother still wasn't speaking.

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Foryk had shuttered himself away in the furthest recesses of the room, unwilling to participate in the mourning traditions with us as an active member of our family. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. He hadn't been my brother for a long time, his betrayal still a sting that burned its way through my veins. It wasn't even that I hadn't moved on from her, but the fact that I'd had to do so because my own flesh and blood had gone behind my back to steal her from me in the first place.

But that was neither here nor there. Our sire was dead. Our mother's mate torn from her. Our family was nothing but tattered remains of what once was, and I had no idea where to begin to even try to sew it back together again. I didn't think it was even possible.

I had never felt more alone than I did in that moment.

Mother was leaning against me, the weight of her grief too much for her to bear alone. I was struggling to hold myself up, let alone the both of us, but I did my best. With Father gone, that left me as the man of the family. It was now my duty to protect and provide, to support the rest of us to the best of my ability. Mother should have taken up the responsibility, but it was clear that she would be incapable of functioning well enough to take care of herself let alone others. I couldn't leave her to face that fate, so I was taking it upon myself instead.

Not for the first time since we'd secluded ourselves away to complete our traditional mourning ceremonies I wished I had Artemis by my side. I'd seen the way she behave with Prince Brommyt. I'd even seen the way she'd interacted with others within the group, the slight flirtations or the even the outright sexual tension. Cadmus Alaida was the worst offender for that one besides the Griknot princeling.

It hurt beyond measure to watch her move on with not one but multiple other men, but I took solace in the fact that she was no longer alone. Sure, she still had Liberty, but their relationship was purely platonic. Artemis deserved all the love the universe and beyond had to offer, and I would still provide that for her even if she no longer reciprocated those feelings back to me.

The most significant downside to that, however, was that I had no one to support me in moments like these where I would have supported her. The utter despair I felt over my loneliness only increased with the realisation. I had given my heart away and I didn't want it back, but that didn't mean I wasn't suffering for it.

I took a steadying breath. I deserved this suffering. I had broken the trust between us and now I had to face the consequences of my actions. For her, for my mother, even for Foryk, the undeserving bastard, I would take this pain and let it forge me into something new. I would be their pillar of strength even when the cracks widened and the stone started to crumble. I would take their pain as my own, fight their battles alongside them, and provide a safety net from the shadows for as long as my breath filled my lungs.

My stomach grumbled loudly, breaking through the compressing silence of the room. Two more empty stomachs protested the lack of food, and I squashed my guilt over wishing the fasting would end. We were to mourn for three days, uninterrupted, with no food or water, no speaking, only silence as we remembered our fallen loved one. Personally, I never liked the practice, but I knew that Mother would have thrown a fit of epic proportions if we hadn't all come together to perform our sacred duty. She would have seen it as dishonouring him and his memory, of all the things he had done for us.

I didn't think Foryk much appreciated being stuck here, forced into hunger and silence in memory of the man who had disowned him. However, there was a sadness that emanated from him that made me believe he was taking part in the process with

much more intent than I was. He had always taken the Tornu traditions seriously despite his singular infraction. I, however, was more interested in branching out and experiencing other cultures. My personal beliefs were that we should honour our traditions while merging with others. Growth and forward momentum that encompassed all races was something I strived to achieve, though this was a newer development. I had been like Foryk once, before everything went to shit. I had been loyal to my people's culture to a fault.

Now, it didn't seem so important. What was the point in being loyal to people who couldn't care less if they were loyal to you? Not that Tornus were known for being backstabbers, but when it did happen it seemed that most people simply turned a blind eye. That, or they punished everyone associated with those who were responsible for the indiscretion. The latter was what had gotten us involved with The Program in the first place, no thanks to Foryk.

My blood boiled at the memory, but I shoved it back down to its usual simmer. I wasn't going to get over Foryk's betrayal any time soon, if ever, but I was going to have to find some way to be civil with him, especially while Artemis was in the picture. I didn't think there was anything going on between the two of them, but if I ever found out he'd even so much as looked at her sideways all bets would be off. I'd tear the traitorous fuck in two before anyone could even so much as blink.

But those thoughts weren't useful in this moment. My heart was torn in two over it anyway. Some part of me wanted to be his big brother like before, protective, loving, and loyal even to my own detriment. The other part wanted nothing to do with him. It was split pretty evenly down the middle, which made this entire ordeal even more painful.

Mother wasn't even looking at him. She'd been a wreck when everything went down all those solars ago, and the shame of his actions had proven too much for her to handle. Banishing him from our family had chipped off a little piece of her soul that

she'd never managed to get back, so I understood her need for him to be here for this. I always knew she wanted him back, to be a whole family again.

That would never be a possibility now that Father was gone. Foryk's presence now was merely a paper-thin bandage that didn't even try to cover the gaping wound of her loss. Our loss. Whether I liked it or not, Foryk had lost his father for good, too, and he deserved at least as much as this moment to grieve the proper way.

I just wished none of this was even necessary in the first place, but time travel wasn't possible. Father was dead, mother was an empty shell, Foryk was still a piece of shit on the bottom of my shoe that refused to budge as it stank out my entire life, and I was still a lonely bastard bathing in his own misery and self-pity.

These past two days had given me enough time to mull over it all, and it had only succeeded in causing the pressure threatening to implode my heart to grow steadily and dangerously.

Exhausted from the mental toll, I decided to take a nap. Hopefully, sleep would allow the time to pass more quickly to be done with this. Three days wasn't enough time to mourn my father, anyway. That would stay with me for the rest of my life.

???

I slept through the majority of the remaining time left in our mourning period, happy that I only awoke for the last stretch.

When the timer went off to signify the end, Foryk was up and out of the room before anyone could speak, leaving us behind without even a single glance back. Mother was still too far gone to notice, or even care, but I did. I wanted to chase after him and demand he show her the respect she deserved, but I knew that wouldn't end well. This ship was filled with too many soldiers, all of which had just fought against the

very people we were working for. I doubted they would take my side if it came to blows, protecting their own over the idiot that found himself working for the enemy.

I chose to focus my efforts on something more worthwhile. We needed sustenance, and Mother still wasn't in any state of take care of herself so I would just have to do it for her. I pressed a kiss to her cheek and let her know I was heading out for some food, and her nod of acknowledgement filled me with hope that she would pull through. She wasn't as far gone as I'd thought.

I headed into the connecting bathroom with a change of clothes, not wanting to head out into the belly of the beast whilst wearing a flashing neon sign to point out where my allegiances had once been. I quickly freshened up and changed into the jumpsuit that would let me blend in more with the rest of the ship's occupants, stuffing my old Program uniform into a small ball that I hid in the cupboard beneath the sink. I could incinerate it later to destroy all evidence of my involvement with those psychopaths. It would be one of the most therapeutic moments of my life, and I was eager to get started on my new life away from them.

I gave myself a quick once-over in the mirror to ensure there was no visible signs of my previous employment status but realised how silly that was as I was doing it. With the uniform gone, no one would know unless they already did. I looked just like anyone else.

Satisfied, I left to hunt down the kitchens. I doubted there would be anything more than Nutri-Bars available, but sustenance was sustenance, and we couldn't always be picky.

The corridors were bright and clean as I wound my way through them. The fluorescent lights caused a dull thudding in my head after three days spent in the dark with no food or drink. The metallic clang of my boots against the floor echoed around me, adding to the brewing headache.

Relief filled me as I noted the sign pointing me towards the cafeteria and the kitchens, but entering the cafeteria was a nightmare in and of itself. This was where the children had been set up, hundreds of them screaming and screeching, clawing at the walls as countless adults ran around in an attempt to corral them. There seemed to be some sort of method to the madness, but that didn't stop the cacophony of chaos from blasting my skull to pieces. I didn't even stop long enough to wonder over the fact that many of the children was floating in the air or spurting fur and claws. I simply ran through the chaos and burst through the door to the kitchen, slamming it closed behind me.

My eyes were scrunched shut as I massaged my temples in a desperate bid for relief, which was how I missed the fact that the kitchen was already occupied. The sound of a husky voice clearing their throat had my eyes snapping open and my head whipping in their direction.

There stood Artemis, Baldr held securely in her arms while the damn Kikshrut sat at her feet, lips pulled back menacingly to reveal fatally venomous teeth dripping red like it had already shredded its kill.

If the Nutri-Bar on a plate on the floor before it wasn't there, I would have believed that were the case. Instead, it growled at me and stood protectively in front of Artemis and Baldr. Her eyes widened as they took me in, the air thickening with unspoken words and a deep tension that was practically tangible.

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‘T,’ she greeted stoically. I did my best not to flinch at her emotionless tone and the stabbing sensation it caused in my chest.

‘A,’ I greeted back.

Her eyes darted away from me as she focused them on the boy in her arms. A beat later she was looking at me again, an unreadable emotion passing behind her eyes in a flash before it was gone again.

‘I wasn’t expecting to see you here,’ she said.

‘Well, I didn’t expect to see you here, either,’ I snapped, my tone sharper than it should have been. She hadn’t done anything wrong and she didn’t deserve my ire.

‘Sorry,’ I backtracked. ‘It’s been a rough few days.’

She inhaled slowly before blowing out a long breath. ‘I can imagine. I’m sorry for your loss.’

My lips tilted up into a sad smile that I already knew wouldn’t reach my eyes. ‘Yeah.’

‘It’s been a rough few days for a lot of people,’ she said, and I didn’t know how to respond. Awkwardness invaded the space in a thick smog that made it difficult to breathe, and I stepped forward towards the counter that held an open box of the Nutri-Bars.

‘I just need to...’

‘Right,’ she said, stepping back to give me more room despite the gaping chasm already between us. ‘You’re probably hungry, huh.’

I hummed my agreement, stuffing a few of the bars into my pockets to take back to the room. Mother wouldn’t want to leave, so I would make sure she had everything she needed until she was ready to rejoin us.

I lifted a hand to open the door, but something in me twisted at leaving this interaction like it was. I turned back around and caught her eye. ‘Hey, I- ‘

The door opened, knocking into me and shoving me forward. I stumbled before I caught my balance and faced the newcomer with a scowl. My frown deepened and I pursed my lips when I made eye contact with purple irises that assessed me with a raised brow. His attention quickly turned to Artemis, effectively dismissing me.

‘Hey, Arty,’ Cadmus said with a beaming smile that revealed rows of straight, white, perfect teeth. Teeth I wanted to knock from his fucking face. ‘I was looking for you.’

She smiled back at him, curiosity alighting in her eyes where there was previously nothing but guardedness when she’d looked at me. My heart shrivelled a little bit more inside my chest.

‘Cadmus,’ she greeted him, her happiness at his arrival driving the knife deeper into my gut. She used to look at me like that. She never would again.

I tried to hide my hurt and jealousy, but from the sudden darkening of Cadmus’s expression as he moved to stand beside Artemis, eyeing me warily, I didn’t think I was successful.

‘I’ll just leave you two alone then,’ I said curtly, my sudden shift in mood causing Dave Junior to snarl in warning.

‘There’s no need. I’m just here to grab Artemis. You don’t have to leave,’ Cadmus said and my eyes zeroed in to where his hand pressed against the small of her back as he started to guide her from the room. Except I was still standing in their way.

‘It’s fine. I’ve got what I needed. There’s nothing else for me in here now.’

I swore I saw a flash of hurt in Artemis’s eyes, but she covered it with a blank look before I could be sure. All it did was make me feel like the shittiest person in the entire Intergalactic Union and beyond. I was just putting my foot in my mouth, spewing shit I didn’t want to mean but kind of did. There really wasn’t anything for me in here. I wasn’t wanted. But that was on me, not her.

Without waiting for a response, I took the cowardly way out and stormed out of the kitchen. I picked my way through the army of small children as carefully as I could while still rushing to get as far away from the woman I’d left behind as I could. I could have tried to apologise or elaborate, but I didn’t think my efforts would have been appreciated anyway.

Once free from the cafeteria, the doors closing behind me dangerously close to crushing the reaching fingers of several of the small children as they attempted to crawl to freedom, I hurried back to my room, the ghosts of that interaction haunting me the rest of the way.

The light was on when I entered, and I found that Mother had cleaned up and changed into her own jumpsuit. The old Program uniform lay in tattered shreds around the room as if she’d torn them off her body in a blind rage, but the smile she sent my way showed that some of the weight dragging her down had lifted.

I dug into my pocket to pull out a Nutri-Bar, handing it to her while I studied her sudden turn-about. She thanked me, tearing into it with shocking gusto.

‘These things are terrible,’ she said around a mouthful, scrunching her nose as she chewed. ‘Your father detested them.’

I blinked, surprised at the casual way she’d just mentioned her recently deceased mate. Concern for her rose within me as I watched her move about the room, straightening the place up and disposing of the destroyed uniform. When she turned to me with a smile on her face, I knew something was up.

‘Stop,’ I said, pushing her to sit down on her bed with my hands on her shoulders. I looked deep into her eyes, holding them with mine. ‘What’s going on? Why are you acting like this?’

‘Like what?’

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‘Like Father didn’t just die,’ I said crassly. I knew it was a horrible thing to say, but I feared she was in denial. She needed to acknowledge the loss, and I needed to hear it from her so I knew she wasn’t suddenly delusional.

Her lip quivered before she hastily covered up the reaction. ‘I know he’s dead, but we’re not. There’s work to do.’

I frowned, refusing to budge even as she tried to dislodge my hold on her. ‘Where is this coming from?’

She huffed, but there was legitimate grief that poured through her frustration. ‘He wouldn’t want us sitting around moping. He’d want us to stand up and fight. He’d want us to move on with our lives. I will always love him, and I will always remember him fondly, but I have never nor will I ever be the kind of female who pines after the dead. Now let me be useful or else I’ll go insane stuck inside these four walls.’

I scrutinised her carefully, but what I saw gave me enough trust that letting her go was the right thing to do. There was a deep sadness in her gaze, but there was also strength and determination. Her mate was dead, but she hadn’t been broken. Fractured, perhaps, a theory which was further perpetuated by the tear that escaped the corner of her eye. She wiped it away before it could fall further than her cheekbone and levelled me with a look filled with resolved.

‘We have been a broken family for far too long, Tormik. I need to fix things. Life is too short and uncertain to let old grudges determine our paths for us. I want both of my sons back.’

My breath was expelled from my lungs at her words like she'd just punched me in the gut. 'I... Do as you will.'

I gave her my back, settling in to make my way through my own Nutri-Bar. I didn't yet have a place in the ship's hierarchy. I had no job, not purpose other than to protect the people I cared about. I resolved myself to wait patiently until I was needed. Until then, I would leave them to do as they needed without getting in their way.

If Mother wished to properly reunite with her other son, then so be it. I wouldn't stop her, not when she so clearly needed to cling on to some sort of hope. If this gave her purpose, then it could only be a good thing.

I wasn't so sure I could be a part of it, though. My heart and my ego were far too battered and bruised. I wasn't sure there was anything left of it to damage, but it was clear that putting myself out there in any way would only result in more pain and heartache. I simply did not have the mental capacity to handle it. I didn't know if I ever would.

CHAPTER 14

Cadmus

I ground my teeth as the ex-guard stalked from the room like someone was trying to shove a piping hot fire poker up his ass. Artemis was staring after him like she'd eaten something sour when she'd been expecting something sweet, and not for the first time did I wonder what had actually happened between those two.

But not today.

Today, I needed to pull her aside and have a serious conversation. A serious conversation that ended with her teaching me how to be a badass superhero like

her.Cyborgs United!

But first, she would need some convincing. I would need to prove that I could be safe and responsible with whatever new abilities I acquired, and that meant enlisting help. I already had Henrik on board in case of emergencies, which was why I needed to get here there.

‘Has he always been such an odd fellow?’ I asked her to break the ice. ‘He seems... tense.’

She snorted a laugh, her head darting to the side to dodge a well-aimed tiny finger heading straight for her eyeball. ‘You could say that. He never really talked much when I knew him before, but he was a lot...softerback then. I guess there’s no reason for him to hide his true colours anymore,’ she shrugged, but I could tell the admission caused her a significant amount of emotional pain when her eyes drifted away from me, a watery glaze to them. I knew she didn’t like to outwardly showcase her emotions, so it must have been pretty severe for her to slip like that.

I smoothed out my frown before it could give me wrinkles, pasting on a smile that I hoped was contagious enough to bring one out in Artemis, too. Baldr pointed at my face and laughed, which I thought was very rude, but when Artemis giggled – actuallygiggled– at us I knew it was worth it.

Damn, I was turning into a sap over this woman. Who even was I anymore?

‘So I really did want to talk to you about something,’ I said.

‘Oh?’

‘Yup.’

‘Are you going to tell me or what?’

‘Not here,’ I said, taking her free hand in mine and tugging her from the room. I was man enough to admit that she was letting me.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she asked, a lightness in her tone that made my heart swell. I caused that. It might have also had something to do with the boy in her arms and the creature at her heels, or possibly all the children we had to wade through that we’d freed. Either way, her mood was improving after the storm cloud of a Tornu had cast its shadow, and that was all I cared about.

I tugged her through the narrow, winding hallways until we reached the infirmary, and I was pleased to see it was still empty besides Bromm and Henrik. I needed both of them here, too.

Henrik looked up from his holo-tab to eye us curiously, gifting us a smile in greeting. ‘To what do I owe this pleasure, Captain?’

‘I don’t know,’ she admitted. ‘This is Cadmus’s show. Apparently he wants to talk.’

Henrik shot me a look that spoke a thousand words. I wiggled my eyebrows, mockingly confirming his assumptions but didn’t correct him. If I could get Artemis naked and sweaty beneath me then I wasn’t going to complain, but that wasn’t why I’d brought her here.

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‘I need you too, Henny.’

He lifted a brow at the nickname but didn’t comment. He was used to me butchering his name by now.

‘Cadmus, what’s this about?’ Artemis prompted when the silent conversation continued between me and Henrik.

‘Right, well... I figured that since we’re changing and I’m going to get some awesome superpowers soon, I thought you might want to teach us how to wield them. With great power comes great responsibility, don’t you know.’

I expected her response to contain more levity, but she simply mulled over my request with a thoughtful expression. Her eyes flicked to Bromm and I knew she was thinking along the same lines as me.

‘Actually, that’s not a bad idea. But why didn’t you grab Reece and Addy for this, too?’

‘I just wanted to bring it up with you first. Figured we could go say hi to Bromm together and bring him into the loop as well. Maybe have another threesome, except this time I’ll get to fill you with my cum too.’

She blinked at me, then slowly covered Baldr’s ears as her face turned a rather delicious shade of pink. I probably should have censored myself in front of the little ears, but I wasn’t used to monitoring my words around children. I wasn’t used to children at all.

Henrik threw his head back and laughed, cutting through the sexual tension with his boisterous mirth. 'You're somethin' else, man. I can't believe you just said that.'

'Me either,' Artemis agreed under her breath. Henrik didn't seem to catch it, and I wondered if that meant my new nanite friends were kicking in and enhancing my senses. Yes, please.

'What do you need me for, then?' Henrik asked, bringing us back on topic.

'In case something goes wrong. In case I randomly fall into a coma like Bromm. I could go on, but I think you get the point.'

'Ah. So that's why you've been hanging about so much lately. You've been using me.'

I shot him a cheeky grin. 'Of course.'

'Well I hate to break it to you, but maybe it's been the other way around this entire time. You've been such a good little helper.'

I fluttered my lashes at him and blew him a kiss. 'Only for you, Henny.'

'Well, it seems I'm no longer needed here so I'll leave you two lovebirds to it. I'm sure Bromm would enjoy having me to himself, Cadmus, but Henrik's a lucky guy,' she winked, then handed Bal to me. She placed her hand on top of Bromm's, closed her eyes and started to glow before I could even respond.

I passed Bal over to Henrik who was smirking at me with a knowing glint in his eyes.

'You're so far gone for her man,' he sniggered.

I sighed, all teasing leaving me as I levelled him with a serious stare. 'I know.'

His smile dimmed into something softer. 'What a woman to pick.'

I huffed out a breath through my nose in agreement. 'I know.'

'You heading in there too?' he asked, tipping his head towards the glowing couple.

I took a steadying breath as I made my way over to them, placing my hand on top of theirs. 'Yup.'

'See you on the other side,' he said, and I gave him two-fingered salute before closing my eyes and allowing the web to pull me in.

There was no sign of Artemis or Bromm when I landed on the white line. I turned every which way as I searched for them, but all I succeeded in doing was making myself feel sick as I gazed through the thick black void. I lost my balance, almost falling off the line and windmilling my arms to regain my footing. That was when I noticed my hand was completely solid, not a transparent digit in sight.

Suddenly, my line started to shine brighter as I felt an unseen force pull me down until I was flat on my back. Unable to move an inch while I was dragged along and despite leaving all my organs behind in the process, I did my best to relax into it and allowed the web to do what it needed to do. Bromm had already told me this had happened to him and Artemis, so I took it as a sign that I was progressing exactly as I was meant to.

A blinding white light illuminated the surrounding void and I slammed my eyes closed in a feeble attempt to avoid it, but it was over within a tick. I peeked through a small slit in my eyelids, noting the dancing colours leftover from the brightness as my eyes tried to adjust, but it was my ears that pulled through for me as the most incredible sound drifted towards me.

A sound I had heard only once before, and I had helped create it.

A moan of pure, unadulterated desire.

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With a herculean effort, I managed to tear myself from the line enough to sit up and take in the scene before me. Artemis and Bromm were entangled in a passionate kiss. Hands were roaming everywhere, clothes were halfway undone as if they'd given up in favour of continuing to taste one another.

Artemis's hand dipped below his waistband, the movement of her caressing his cock hidden beneath the fabric. His beard went wild, reaching for her and stroking down her throat, teasing her lips, and attempting to move beneath her jumpsuit to get to her breasts.

'Holy fuck,' I breathed, my jumpsuit already way too tight as I stiffened to full mast inside them. The drag of the fabric against my sensitive tips drew a moan from me that had both of them turning to face me.

'Decided to finally join us?' asked Artemis, come fuck meeyes luring me closer.

'I was beginning to think you were going to miss all the fun,' Bromm teased, one of his lower tentacles escaping its precarious confines to caress Artemis's inner thigh.

'I wasn't expecting this, but I'm certainly not complaining,' I said, watching the progression of the tentacle as it slid closer to her centre in slow, small circles.

Artemis froze, pulling away from Bromm as she turned to look at me with a confused expression that he mirrored.

'But you said... I thought you wanted...' she stammered.

‘What?’ I asked, not understanding why she was putting a stop to things before they could even get started.

‘Arty said you made a comment about the three of us together,’ Bromm said, giving me a pointed look.

‘Yeah...?’

He pulled back further, tucking himself away as he levelled me with disappointed look. He kept his hold on Artemis though, pulling her closer when she attempted to put some distance between all of us.

‘I think there’s been a miscommunication here,’ he said. ‘Just to clarify, Cadmus, you want to be with us, right?’

I squinted my eyes at him. ‘‘Us’?’

He chuckled. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to touch you. Unless you want me to,’ he winked.

I shot him a lopsided smirk. ‘You just want to get your hands on my ass.’

He let out a deep, sensual laugh that caused my cock to twitch despite my lack of interest in men. He truly was sex incarnate.

‘Your ass is delectable, but I have eyes for only one person and it’s not you.’

I shrugged. ‘Your loss.’

His smile turned more serious, his eyes burning into me with an intensity I didn’t think I was quite ready to meet head on. Artemis was squirming where she stood at

his side refusing to look either one of us in the eye.

‘You still haven’t answered the question, Cadmus,’ he said, and I suddenly understood why Artemis had retreated. Guilt swamped me and I stepped forward, reaching out to her and taking her free hand in mine. Her head snapped up, those dark brown depths finally meeting mine.

‘I may have flirted in jest, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t mean it. I wasn’t expecting you to take me up on my offer, but I’m here for it. I would very much love to keep going if that’s what you want.’

My eyes dipped to her half-bared chest as her breath hitched, the tops of her breasts straining against their restraints. Saliva pooled in my mouth at the sight of her nipples pebbling beneath the fabric, their hard outline clearly visible with the glow from the web’s lines.

‘I... am unsure what is happening between us,’ she finally said.

I cocked my head to the side. ‘What do you mean?’

Bromm elbowed me with a scowl. Obviously, I knew what she meant, but I was taking the cowards way out. He may have had it in his head that she was more interested in me than she let on, but I doubted that interest extended to romantic feelings. I was shocked that mine had developed that far, and I didn’t have an established relationship getting in the way.

‘I’m getting mixed signals from you, Cadmus,’ she said, and I frowned as I tried to think back on my behaviour around her. ‘I assumed you wanted a casual fling once or twice, but then you keep doing these things that don’t make any sense.’

‘What’s he doing, love?’ asked Bromm, an eager glint in his eye that made my own

start to twitch as I held back my embarrassment.

‘He’s been... serious,’ she said.

Bromm tried to hold back a laugh but failed spectacularly, choking on it instead.

‘Right,’ he coughed. ‘And that’s... a problem?’

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‘No,’ she denied, lifting an eyebrow at Bromm as he banged on his chest with his fist before turning back to me. ‘It’s just confusing. I don’t see you interact with anyone else the same way you’ve been interacting with me. One moment you’re you, and the next you’re someone completely new.’

I wanted nothing more than to withdraw into myself and act like this conversation wasn’t happening. I’d never been a feelings kind of guy, and I was more uncomfortable than I could remember being in a long time. On top of that, I felt cornered by both of them. Artemis was asking for upfront honesty and Bromm was egging her on. I knew he meant well, but I had spent my life rebelling against this kind of pressure, only then it had been my father.

But that was the key difference, wasn’t it, I mentally pointed out. These two people were the furthest thing from my father. They weren’t trying to control me, they were simply trying to understand me. The only person who had even come close to that was Henrik, and that was more of a living in the present sort of situation. He cared about who I was right now, not who I had been in the past.

That was also true for Artemis and Bromm.

If there was any time to come clean about my feelings, to take that leap of faith and pray to any deity that would listen that they wouldn’t let me fall, it was now. I was being given an opportunity here, and even though it was the most terrifying decision I’d ever had to make, I wasn’t the type of man to back down so easily.

I wanted Artemis, and this was my shot. I might not get another one.

That didn't mean I wasn't going to fall back on old habits, though. Humour had always been my shield, and that was now a part of who I was whether it was appropriate or not.

'Tell me about it,' I groaned. 'You're turning me into a new man, Artemis. Someone with...feelings,' I confessed, keeping my chin held high even when my skin started to itch.

I could put myself in danger every day of the week, but baring my soul to not one buttwo individuals? Kill me now...

'What feelings?' asked Artemis, her voice softer and breathier than before as she gazed at me with wide, curious, expectant eyes.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply through my nose, letting myself feel my surroundings to ground myself in the moment. The magnetising force keeping me secure on the line. The sensation of Artemis's soft, warm skin as her hand remained between mine. The sound of my heart beating a wild song inside my chest. The blood rushing through my ears.

When I opened my eyes, I found them both studying me with intent focus. Bromm watched on with a hopeful expression while Artemis seemed ready to jump out of her own skin from the wait. I decided it was time to put us all out of our misery.

'I have feelings for you, Artemis. I want more than sex, I wantyou. I want to get to know you. I want to know what makes you tick, the things that you love, the things that you hate. I want to know how far I can push you beforeyou push back. I want it all with you, and that is the scariest thing I have ever told anyone because I've never wanted anything like this before.'

She didn't answer for the longest time, and I held my breath as I waited. I was

lightheaded by the time she spoke.

‘I think I want that too.’

My breath left my lungs in awwhoosh, my relief almost knocking me off my feet. ‘Really?’

The smile she gave me was shy in a way that seemed out of character for her, but she quickly scrambled my brain by cupping my still-aching cocks. The juxtaposition wasn’t of her forwardness combined with her timidity had heat scorching through my body as she took turns rubbing each of my cocks through my jumpsuit, the thin layer of fabric the only thing separating us from the skin on skin contact I craved so much.

She leaned closer, tilting her head up so our lips were just barely brushing. ‘Really.’

I removed the rest of the space between us, pressing our mouths together in a heated kiss that fed my very soul. She moaned into my mouth and I heard Bromm mutter afuck yeah as he watched on.

As I bit down gently on Artemis’s plump bottom lip, some part of me was screaming that I couldn’t believe this was happening. The large part, however, was rushing straight to my groin. With two cocks to get hard, there wasn’t much blood left to circulate to my brain and the only thing I could do was chase the pleasure. I rocked my hips against her palm, needing more, needing her.

‘I need to fuck you, baby,’ I groaned into her mouth. ‘I can’t wait much longer.’

‘Then do it,’ she said, pulling back to strip out of her jumpsuit. It left her in nothing but a basic set of white underwear, the design plain yet the sight of her in them absolutely wrecked me. The stark contrast of the black against her smooth, olive-

toned skin, the deeper colour of her nipples peeking through the fabric. The way it clung to her core, a large wet spot visibly outlining her lower lips. I wanted to taste it. I wanted to shove my tongue so deep inside and stay there forever.

She turned her head to the side to address Bromm as she traced little circles over the tips of my cocks through my jumpsuit, two wet patches forming to match hers. Her finger lifted away for a brief moment, a thick string of my precum keeping us connected.

‘Strip,’ she ordered, her tone leaving no room for disobedience. He moaned as he hurried to obey, tossing his clothes into the pile that was accumulating on the line behind him.

‘Good boy,’ she praised as her eyes leisurely perused his naked form, and even I let out a little whimper at the dominance she was displaying. I’d never seriously considered the possibility of allowing a woman to dominate me, but it was hotter than I could have imagined.

‘Come here,’ she demanded, crooking a finger towards Bromm. He obeyed, his steps sure and eager as he moved close enough that my arm brushed against his with every breath.

Artemis cupped his jaw with one hand and held his beard spread open with her fingers. Then she leant down and captured his mouth in one of the most sensual kisses I had ever seen, all the while still using her other hand to stroke my cocks. I wanted to be naked, too, but the thought of her stopping even long enough for me to remove them was enough to stop me.

I wondered if she was going to order me about, too. I never thought I’d say this, but I would gladly submit to her in any way she desired.

She could Domme me any day.

CHAPTER 15

Artemis

It was a heady feeling, having these two beautiful men at my mercy, my tongue tangling with one and my hands roaming their delectable bodies.

Bromm's tentacles were secreting that incredible substance that set my desire aflame, my skin tingling and breaking out in goosebumps from the sensations each stroke encouraged.

Cadmus was thrusting against my palm, and I needed more. I'd seen his cocks before, but only for a brief moment before I'd covered my eyes, and they weren't yet fully hard. Now, they were all mine to do with as I pleased.

The most intoxicating part about this whole experience was that both men wanted me for more than just my body, and I felt the same about them. When Demari had forced himself on me it had been uncomfortable and physically repulsive. At one point, I'd almost vomited all of him as his sweaty skin rubbed against mine, his hot breaths in my ear twisting something in my very soul that I didn't think I'd ever be able to smooth out again. Yet, when Cadmus's breath skirted my ear it had the opposite effect. I wanted more. I wanted to make those little pants turn into unfiltered moans of pure pleasure. I wanted to drag as much out of them both as I possibly could and enjoy every moment of it.

I wanted to tease. To use their bodies for my own enjoyment. To make them fall apart in the most beautiful way.

Cadmus's hands drifted around my middle to pull me closer. The new angle made it

too difficult to continue rubbing him so I dragged my hand from between us to grope at his deliciously plump ass instead. Without my arm to separate us, he ground his cocks onto my leg, groaning into my ear at the friction.

‘Your turn,’ I panted. ‘I want you naked. I need to see you.’

He did as instructed, stripping out of his jumpsuit in record time and leaving him in nothing but the brace containing his wings. The loss of contact cleared my head enough for me to step away from both men to take in the sight of them together, completely bared to me.

I studied Bromm first. I had seen him naked before, but he never failed to dazzle me with his stunning body. Smooth skin, strong muscles that poked through light padding, his strength working in tandem with his softness. He was trying to rein in his beard as it reached for me, searching for a body to caress. His lower tentacles were extended, curving around his cock and slowly squeezing, stroking, and twisting at the tip to provide him the pleasure of my touch that I was currently denying with my perusal.

Lust darkened his eyes so intensely that I found I couldn’t look directly at them without falling to my knees to pleasure him with my mouth, so I moved my gaze onto Cadmus. Unlike Bromm, his muscles stood starkly beneath his skin with hard ridges and divots that I wanted to trace with my tongue. His skin, a pale tone, was interspersed with dark purple scales that matched the shade of his eyes and I wondered how they would feel rubbing against my naked flesh as our bodies moved together as one.

Bromm took an impatient step forward, but I held up a hand to stop him. He let out a whine of impatience, his cock jerking with need and his tentacles tightened their grip.

Cadmus went to remove his brace, but I stopped him as well. I wanted to feel his

wings, to explore the sensations I could draw from him, but I didn't want to do that here. That was something I needed to save for when we were in our real bodies, not whatever form we had manifested inside the web.

He frowned at me in confusion, so I answered his question before he could verbalise it. 'Right now, I want your cocks, not your wings. Those I want when we have more time for me to explore all of you.'

He smirked at me then, the expression underlaid with bemusement. 'I always knew you were fascinated with my wings, but I didn't think you'd turn them down. Okay, I'll keep them closed for now and you can play with them later.'

'Maybe I just don't want you smacking Bromm in the face with them while he goes down on me.'

Bromm whimpered, his need evident as he practically salivated at the thought. 'Yes please. Please let me. I need to taste you, baby.'

I didn't answer, instead laying down on the line that had thickened into a platform for the three of us to stand on more comfortably and spread my legs wide. My hand dipped below my panties, my fingers teasing my clit tauntingly beneath the soaked fabric. I used my other hand to crook my finger towards them both.

They obeyed, reaching me at the same time. Bromm took up position on his knees between my legs while Cadmus settled in behind me. Hands caressed my naked skin, Bromm's smooth scales tickling up my thighs while Cadmus's gentle fingers traced the lines of my tattoos. His forefinger ran the length of the single line outlining my body, pausing at the brand on my arm. One glance showed it was a vibrant pink. Not a usual colour.

'I seem to remember this being a different colour,' he commented.

‘It changes depending on my body’s needs,’ I admitted.

‘Fascinating,’ he murmured in my ear. ‘And what does pink mean?’

‘It means I need to be fucked.’

The sound of both men’s low, dark chuckles was music to my ears and shot a straight line to my clit. I pulsed, clenching on emptiness as Bromm got closer to where I needed him to be while Cadmus shifted his attention from my tattoos to my breasts. His arms circled me from behind, his hands squeezing my breasts over the top of my bra.

‘I want to see you bare between us,’ he said, his voice so low I felt the vibrations sinking deep into my core. ‘I want to feel you moving against me, skin to skin, while he fucks you raw.’

Bromm’s dulcet tones mixed with mine as we both groaned at his words. All that was missing was Cadmus’s, and in that moment I wanted nothing more than to hear the symphony of sounds the three of us could make.

‘Take it off, baby. Let us see you.’

Neither man gave me the opportunity to do it myself. Cadmus unsnapped my bra from the back and slid the straps down my shoulders until it fell in a tangled heap on the line. Bromm tucked his fingers into the waistband of my panties and slowly dragged them down my legs, delicately revealing me to him in the process. As the fabric peeled from my lower lips, sticking with the wetness that had already seeped through, the sound it made was lewd and amped up the tension between us. Cadmus’s breath hitched and his hands quickly found their way back to my breasts, plucking and tugging gently on my nipples.

Bromm ran a finger through my folds, his eyes heavy with lust. ‘Fuck, my love. Look at you. So fucking wet for your men.’ He raised his finger to his mouth and sucked my juices off, moaning wantonly at my taste.

‘Fucking delicious,’ he growled.

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‘Fuck, I want a taste,’ Cadmus begged, a whine catching in his throat.

Rather than switching places, Bromm ran his fingers through my folds and recoated them in my slick, then extended the finger as an offering to Cadmus. Without even missing a beat, Cadmus wrapped his lips around Bromm’s finger, his tongue flicking out as he lapped up my wetness.

Bromm’s eyes, impossibly, darkened even further, his voice husky as he addressed the other man. ‘You sure you’re not into men, Cad? Because you’d be great at sucking cock.’

Cadmus released his finger with a pop, a teasing smirk lighting up his features. ‘Sadly, I’m only into women.’

‘This one wants your attention again, please,’ I said, my voice needier than I’d ever heard it before.

‘Sorry, love. He’s sexy as fuck, and he knows what to do with that tongue of his.’

‘She has great taste in men,’ Cadmus complimented right back.

‘I feel like I should leave you two alone,’ I pouted, though the idea of them fucking had wetness surging from my core to pool on the line beneath us.

‘Don’t you dare move,’ Cadmus warned.

Bromm took that as his chance to shove his face between my legs and lick a long,

sensual line from the base of my pussy up to my clit which he then circled, teasing me by refusing to provide friction where I needed it the most.

‘Bromm,’ I panted out his name. ‘More.’

He lubed up a single finger by running it through my juices before inserting it inside me, crooking it at just the right angle to make me see stars.

‘Fuck, yes. Right there.’

Cadmus, not one to be outdone, bent his head over my chest and started sucking on my nipple, still using his fingers to toy with the other one. As if they’d choreographed it, his teeth scraped against the stiff bud at the exact time Bromm’s scraped against my clit, the sharpness an added sensation I didn’t know I needed until I was writhing beneath them with urgent need, and then they bit down at the same time, causing me to scream out my pleasure.

Bromm added a second finger just as his beard reached beneath me and started toying with my other hole. It was a relatively new sensation I enjoyed more than I thought I would, and my hips bucked up and down as I fought for more friction.

My walls fluttered around Bromm’s fingers just as he added a third, and I ground down on them, one hand grabbing at his head to push him closer while the other tangled in Cadmus’s hair, keeping them in place as I rode the waves of pleasure, inching closer and closer towards my climax but still missing something.

‘I need you inside me, Bromm. I need you to fuck me. Now.’

I waited. And waited. And waited some more. Neither man made any effort to do as they were told, so I took matters into my own hands. With a surge of strength, I pushed away from Cadmus and knocked Bromm onto his back, quickly straddling

him and sinking down on his cock. His tentacles went wild, grappling at my flesh and wrapping around my hips and my thighs to keep me flush against him. Two of the tentacles broke free from the others and made their way to my ass where they poked and prodded at my hole. The tingling sensation they left behind had me clenching around his cock, and I moaned long and satisfied as one finally breached me.

Cadmus moved to kneel by Bromm's head, his two cocks bobbing up and down with the motion. Without a word of instruction, I bent low and sucked the top on into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the tip while I grabbed the lower one in my fist and pumped. At his grunt of surprise, I started rocking my hips, drawing out sounds of pleasure from the both of them, my own moans mingling to create a siren song of desire.

As I ground down on Bromm's cock, his tentacle pushed further into my ass, swirling around and caressing his shaft through the thin wall separating them. The sensation was strange but so good that sparks of pleasure danced up my spine, goosebumps breaking out across my skin.

Suddenly, Cadmus looped his arms beneath my armpits and hauled me up off of Bromm's dick, his own falling from my lips and I made a sound of protest. The only reason he'd managed the manoeuvre successfully was because he'd caught me off guard. I wouldn't allow it to happen again.

I didn't protest for much longer, however, when the men switched places. Cadmus was suddenly laying beneath me with Bromm kneeling at his head, all three cocks pointed right at me.

'Sit of my cocks, baby,' he begged gruffly. 'Please, ride me.'

I wasn't sure which one he expected me to use, but I chose the one on top, sinking down all the way to the base until my clit rubbed teasingly against his pubic bone.

The other one slide between my cheeks and with every thrust it teased my back hole that still tingled from Bromm's natural lubrication.

I leant forward to take Bromm's cock in my mouth but he moved away before I could get close, repositioning himself behind me to watch as Cadmus disappeared inside me.

Suddenly, I felt his knuckled brushing my ass, but what was surprising was that he wasn't aiming for me. A glance back showed that he had taken Cadmus's second cock in his hand and was lathering it with his own lubricant, coating his hands in it before rubbing it into Cadmus's skin.

The sound Cadmus released as the sensations kicked had my walls fluttering. I was close and it wouldn't take much to tip me over the edge.

'Fuck, man. That feels incredible.'

Bromm merely chuckled in response, a low moan forming in his throat as he rubbed the tip of his cock against my rear entrance, getting himself off as he added more of his natural lubricant to me.

Then, in another shocking turn, he positioned Cadmus's second cock at that entrance and slowly pressed it inside.

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‘What are you doing?’ I panted.

‘Don’t you want to takeallof him, my love?’

‘Yes,’ I breathed out the word. ‘But what about you?’

‘I want to feel your mouth sucking me dry while he fucks you in both holes, baby. I want you to be completely filled with the both of us. Do you want that, my love? Do you want to have all of your holes filled by your men?’

The sound that tore from my throat was practically feral. ‘Yes. Fill me up. I want all of your cocks. I want your cum to so deep inside me it never leaves.’

‘Fuck yes, babe,’ Cadmus hissed, pumping his hips lightly as his second cock sought me out.

Bromm helped push him inside me, the stretch causing my legs to quiver as he sank fully into me. I’d never felt so full in my entire life. Once I wasfully seated, Bromm moved back to kneel beside Cadmus’s head, his tentacles reaching for me just like his cock. Without missing a beat, I took him into my mouth and sucked.

Hard.

His hips bucked, his shaft digging further into my mouth and halting when it hit the back of my throat. I swallowed, the motion teasing his most sensitive spot and he cursed viciously.

Cadmus's hips rose up more quickly as he pounded into me from below, and soon I was only able to hover above him as he took his pleasure from my body, giving me just as much in return. I choked on Bromm's length, my nose grazing his groin as his tentacles worked alongside his hands to tangle in my hair and wrap around my neck, holding me in place.

'Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,' he chanted above me in time with the music of our skin slapping and primal grunting. I moaned around his length, the vibrations causing his thighs to quake as I drove him closer to his release.

'I'm gonna come,' Cadmus ground out through his teeth. 'Fuck, I'm gonna come baby. Just like that. Don't fucking stop.'

I slammed myself down on his, squeezing him tight to keep him inside me and sucked harder on Bromm, eager for them both to come. Cadmus came first, his cocks twitching inside of me as the spurted rope after rope that shot so deep I felt it in my stomach. Bromm followed soon after, his hot liquid shooting down my throat and I kept sucking, eager to drink it all up.

Their releases triggered mine, and soon I was shaking and screaming as the most intense pleasure I had ever experienced wracked my body in wave after wave.

I collapsed on top of Cadmus, his cocks still rigid inside me and Bromm's dick fell out of my mouth with a pop. He dropped down beside us, draping his arm over my back to maintain the contact between us as we caught our breath.

'Fuck,' he panted. 'That was incredible.'

Cadmus's arms snaked around me, scootching beneath Bromm's as he held on like he couldn't believe I was actually here and would disappear if he let go. My heart clenched with emotion as I lay wedged between them, my brain struggling to

comprehend what had just happened.

I lifted myself up and propped myself on my elbows to gaze down at Cadmus in utter disbelief.

‘What?’ he asked breathlessly. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘Is this really happening? Are you really mine?’

The smile he sent me may have been small, but it was brimming with emotion that I didn’t think either one of us was quite ready to express just yet. ‘I think the bigger question is are you sure you want me?’

I bent my head down to brush my lips against his, the kiss soft and lingering. ‘Surprisingly, I do.’

He barked out a laugh. ‘Surprising indeed.’

‘Told you so,’ Bromm teased lightly, his eyes closed as he soaked in the after-sex glow.

‘You did?’ I asked him curiously. ‘Have you boys been gossiping about me behind my back?’

‘I wouldn’t call it gossiping,’ Cadmus protested. ‘More like discussing our very many feelings. Because we’re manly men, and men have feelings too, you know.’

I threw my head back and belted out a laugh. ‘Manly men indeed,’ I agreed, grinding my hips down onto and squeezing my walls one more time to emphasize both of his thicknesses still hard and sensitive inside me.

He whimpered and attempted to pull his hips away from me but there was nowhere for him to go. Instead, I kept circling my hips and teasing more sensation from him while Bromm chuckled at us.

‘It seemed our girl has a thing for a little post orgasm torture,’ he remarked.

‘Stars above,’ Cadmus cursed, gripping my hips in a futile attempt to stop my motions. ‘It’s so sensitive baby. It hurts.’

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‘A good hurt or a bad hurt?’ I asked him, eager to learn his limits. I wanted to see how far I could push them, but I didn’t want to cross any boundaries.

‘Both,’ he panted, his voice nothing more than a growl.

I stopped, not wanting to push him too far until we had the time to truly delve deeper into our limitations. We could explore each other at a later time when we weren’t running from imminent danger, when he could spread his wings and let me feel out each and every erogenous zone without being rushed.

I rose up, his cocks sliding from me and landing back on him with a wet slap. He jolted at the sensation, his hips jerking as if he couldn’t decide whether to seek my heat back out or run away from the sensation overload.

‘Stop teasing, my love,’ Bromm chuckled, but then his expression fell into something more serious. ‘I know you didn’t come here for a threesome.’

‘Right,’ I nodded, gathering up our jumpsuits to redress. Once we were all covered, Cadmus was the one to broach the reason for our arrival in the web.

‘I asked Artemis to teach us how to use our abilities,’ he confessed. ‘I don’t want to find myself inundated with superpowers I can’t control.’

‘Ah,’ answered Bromm contemplatively.

‘He has a point,’ I said. ‘I know how difficult it was for me and Libby while we were discovering our new abilities, and we were doing so under the watchful eye of The

Program. It was easier once we knew what we were working with, and once we managed to master one skill it was easy enough to figure out how to work the others as well when they manifested. It just takes a bit of patience to work out the trigger, then you'll be a pro in no time.'

'How do we go about this then?' he asked. 'And what about Reece and Adara?'

'I'm going to speak with them about a training schedule soon. You deserved to be included in it, too, though, especially since you're further along the acclimation process than Cadmus. I thought you might find some instruction beneficial.'

'I'm not sure it'll do me much good in here,' he pointed out. 'But when I wake up then I think that's the best course of action.'

'Perfect,' Cadmus grinned. 'That settles it, then. Our superhero training shall commence.'

I couldn't help but smile as I gaze upon these two insanely beautiful men, one of which I never would have believed I would ever find beauty in physically. I thought back to my reaction to the first time I'd encountered a Griknot in person. Their beards were so far beyond what I considered attractive that I was still shocked that I had somehow managed to see past it to fall in love with the man beneath and even find beauty in the wriggling mass covering his face. When I looked at him I no longer saw something creepy or abnormal. Instead, I imaged how they felt between my thighs, tangled in my hair, or even how it would feel to have them wrapped around my neck, tightening ever so slightly to cut off my air.

My clit pulsed at the thought, still sensitive and throbbing with a dull ache and I had to suppress another moan. Fantasies bombarded me as I considered the different ways I wanted these men at my mercy, and not just sexually. Bromm held my heart, and I was well on my way to giving another piece of it away to Cadmus.

It blew my mind as I considered the way things had turned out. I'd come from an isolated life with zero romantic prospects (T notwithstanding, since that turned out to be a dead end), and now not only did I have one man butt two, and I didn't know how I'd ever gotten so lucky.

CHAPTER 16

Dorian

I didn't know how many times I was going to be forced to watch people have sex, but this was getting ridiculous. I'd come to the infirmary to check in with Henrik and Cadmus, only instead of a professional setting I'd found Henrik outside attempting to separate Baldr and Dave Junior while moans drifted out of the room behind him. And they were definitely not pain induced.

'I wouldn't go in there, if I were you,' he'd said breathlessly as I'd walked up, but naturally I'd ignored him. Looking back, I should have listened, but there was something drawing me to those sounds that I found myself unable to fight. I'd opened that door and stepped on through, and the sight that greeted me was one I would remember for the rest of my life.

It was a combination of hot as fuck and what the fuck. Bromm was still on the table with the respirator sticking straight up out of his mouth, yet despite this his tentacles were in full motion, reaching, stroking and grabbing seemingly at nothing but air. His cock was straining against his jumpsuit, the tentacles surrounding its base also active enough, undulating beneath the fabric.

Artemis was sitting in the chair beside his cot, panting as her hips gyrated to some unseen touch, dirty little moans falling from her parted lips as she chased her orgasm. Cadmus was matching her, his hips pumping back and forth as his cocks strained comically under his own clothes, a flush to his cheeks as he groaned long and loud.

I watched with morbid fascination as spurts of come shot from the tips all the way through the fabric to land on Bromm. Soon after, Bromm also shot his load, his own released mixing with Cadmus's while Artemis screamed out her orgasm with a full body shudder.

And throughout the entire ordeal all three of them continued to glow a bright, vibrant blue.

I was still frozen just inside the doorway, gawping at them while my dick hardened painfully in response to their pleasure when the door opened again and someone entered behind me. They ran into my back, causing me to stumble and fumble around for something to hide my boner behind. After a moment, I chose to stand behind Artemis, angling my hips so that her body hid the evidence of my reaction.

To make matter worse, it was Reece who entered. He took in the scene, his brows dipping low over his eyes in confusion. Stepping closer to the glowing trio, I watched as he examined their flushed cheeks, then the still erect cocks, and finally the white semen stains covering Bromm. His eyes shot to me to ask a silent question I presumed he was too scared to ask out loud.

Henrik chose that moment to tentatively poke his head around the doorframe, one hand holding Bald's ankle as he floated above his head while the other attempted to push down Dave Junior as he fought to chomp down on Baldr's leg. 'Are they done yet?'

'What the fuck?' Reece finally verbalised the question.

'Um, yeah. They're done,' I confirmed, heat flooding my cheeks and effectively moving it away from my groin. My dick finally deflated, though it still remained at half mast no matter how hard I tried to make it go down all the way.

‘Oh, good. I was worried they were going to go on all day,’ he said and pulled Baldr inside the room with him like he was holding a balloon instead of a child. Dave Junior followed, immediately moving to Artemis’s side and curling up at her feet.

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‘All day?’ Reece asked, his nose scrunching as he glared at the evidence of their copulation. Was it really sex if their bodies weren’t even touching? Actually, I didn’t want to know.

‘They were just finishing when I walked in, I swear,’ I said, holding my hands up like that would prove my innocence. I didn’t know why I felt so guilty, but the chub in my pants wasn’t helping.

Henrik roared out a laugh. ‘I told you not to go in,’ he teased.

I huffed out a sigh. ‘I don’t even know why I did,’ I admitted.

‘Wait, you walked in on them knowing they were...?’ Reece trailed off, gesturing vaguely towards the glowing, catatonic trio.

‘Did you need something, Dorian?’ Henrik asked, throwing me a lifeline.

‘I was just swinging by to check on everyone...’ I finished lamely.

Reece snorted. ‘And join in the fun?’

I stuck out my bottom lip in a pout. ‘I didn’t know they would be... indisposed.’

Henrik held both arms out as he gesticulated to the room at large, then scrambled to recatch Baldr when he accidentally let him slip through his fingers. The blond boy was laughing and clapping, squealing with joy at the perceived game and it cut through the remaining awkwardness of the situation. I couldn’t help but smile at his

innocent little face, and I'd always thought baby laughs were contagious. It was the best part of growing up as one of many siblings.

Large families weren't uncommon on Gerinium, our impoverished planet lacking the funding for basic healthcare such as contraceptives. I was by no means the oldest or the youngest, so I had spent my life surrounded by babies. My siblings, and my siblings' children. Babies were kind of my thing, which was why I'd been volunteering in the overturned cafeteria. Technically, I was supposed to be resting to prepare for my next shift, but I'd wanted to check in with my team as we'd gravitated away from one another since leaving Nova Station.

We only saw each other in passing, and only for a moment or two before we were needed elsewhere. I was actually missing these guys, though not enough to watch them have freaky mind sex. That, I could've done without, even if the sound of Artemis's moans still rang in my ears like a siren song.

It was still weird to think of her as a woman, and even more strange to recognise her as an attractive one, but there was an undeniable allure to her that I didn't know how to process. So, I chose to ignore it. We had far too many problems to keep us busy, I didn't need to add more to it by following my dick. I could find someone else to get laid, it didn't have to be her.

'We're good,' Henrik smiled, sensing the direction of my thoughts, though I hoped not all of them.

'I was just doing the same,' Reece stated. 'I don't really have anything to do, so I figured I'd do some rounds, see if anyone needed an extra hand.'

'We could always use more volunteers with the kids,' I offered, but by the way he wrinkled his nose I could tell that was a no-go.

‘I’ve got Cadmus to help me in here, and there aren’t really any injuries or illness that need seeing to so we’ve mostly been twiddling our thumbs.’ Henrik sent him an apologetic smile, but then his eyes lit up with something and he immediately brightened. ‘I know that Artemis wanted to pull you and Addy to discuss your abilities, though. Cadmus wanted her help practicing the new abilities. That’s why they went into the web, to talk to Bromm. You can wait around here until they wake up if you want. Saves her from having to hunt you down.’

‘Oh, yeah. Sure. Okay,’ he said, suddenly unsure of himself as he perched on the edge of the second cot.

I cleared my throat exaggeratedly and moved to leave. ‘Well, I’m not needed for that. I’d better head back to the bunks. I need to get some sleep before I have to wrangle hundreds of kids again in another twelve hours.’

‘You’re a better man than me, Dorian,’ Henrik praised, gesturing to where Bal was clawing at his hair above him with his toes. ‘I’m not a kids person. This guy’s taking it out of me enough as it is. I can’t even begin to imagine being stuck in the cafeteria right now, let alone willingly. It’s bad enough that I need to go through it to get to the kitchen.’

I laughed, throwing my head back as I pictured it. ‘You’re doing a surprisingly good job of babysitting Baldr right now, Henrik. I wouldn’t sell yourself short.’

‘He’s turning my hair into a nest with his toes, and he keeps trying to put himself inside the Kikshrut’s mouth like hewantsto be eaten.’

Reece tried to hide his laughter behind his hand, but the shake of his shoulders and the mirth in his eyes was a dead giveaway.

I turned back when I got to the door. ‘Oh, and if I see Adara then I’ll send her this

way, yeah?’

Reece nodded, but Henrik was too absorbed in ensuring Baldr didn’t get into a drawer. I hoped it wasn’t filled with anything sharp, but Baldr seemed to have a knack for being troublemaker. That drawer probably contained needles, or worse, scalpels.

Cutting out before something was cut off of me, I waved over my shoulder as I exited the room and headed towards our shared bunk.

A yawn burst out of me, my jaw cracking with the stretch. I just hoped that when I got there my bed was empty. Sharing was becoming an issue wherethere were so many individuals without a job to do on a ship that wasn’t intended to hold so many passengers. We were all on top of each other, and it was getting old real fast.

Thankfully, the only occupant when I arrived was a snoring Urman. He’d also been helping out with the children, though he’d been assigned a different shift than mine. We’d split the day into four shifts, and he was one shift ahead of me.

I headed straight for the bathroom to quickly freshen up, the most random parts of me somehow sticky, and quickly got ready for bed. I was as quiet as I could be to avoid disturbing Urman, and soon enough my head was on my pillow, my eyes closed, and sleep encompassed me.

???

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A loud bang followed by some fierce cursing jolted me awake. I caught myself just before I could fall out of my bed, and since I was on the top bunk that would have been a painful fall.

Blinking the blariness from my eyes, I impatiently searched the room for the cause of the ruckus. I laid back down with a huff of tired laughter when I realised it was Urman. He was trying to get ready in the dark and had somehow stubbed his toe. Currently, he was hopping around holding it while cursing up a storm under his breath.

When he looked up and saw me watching him, he sighed in defeat and placed his foot delicately back on the ground, testing it before putting his weight on it.

‘Sorry, Dorian. Didn’t mean to wake you.’

‘It’s fine,’ I waved his apology away, my voice croaky from sleep. ‘I’ll just head to the gym. I’ve been slacking the past few days anyway.’

‘Yeah, same. It’s been too chaotic to find a spare minute to do anything other than wipe tiny butts and sleep,’ he groaned out.

With a strained grunt I heaved myself out of bed to get ready. Urman waved goodbye as he headed out, a slight limp tilting his gait from his injured toe. I had no doubt it would face even more abuse by the end of the day. Children had an eery ability to smack, grind, and twist an injury even if they didn’t know it existed.

Before I knew it, I was dragging my feet out the door and trudging through the

hallways towards the gym. Working out was the last thing I wanted to be doing, my entire being screaming at me to go back to bed, but I really needed to keep in myself in shape and I wasn't going to get a better time than now to do it.

As the gym doors slid open, I was surprised to find that it was mostly empty. Only one individual was currently utilising the weights, but other than that it was just the two of us in here. As I moved closer I realised I recognised him, too.

Reece was just putting back one set of weights and grabbing the next size up when he noticed me. He dipped his head in acknowledgement before going back to his sets.

We hadn't actually had a real conversation, at least one on one, since before he'd been arrested. It was strange to see him here, too. His previously muscular form had diminished significantly, and I wasn't sure I wanted the details that explained why. I could surmise enough myself without forcing him to relive it to sate my curiosity.

Instead, I watched on as he tested out the weights, stopping after one rep with a shake of his head before he replaced those, too, and upgraded yet again.

He saw me watching and motioned me over, settling himself back on the bench. 'My strength is changing,' he explained. 'Started out with lighter weights a couple days ago and now I can't find any that work.'

'The nanites are making you stronger?'

He sighed. 'Yeah. You'd think that would be a good thing, right?'

'Well, yeah...'

'The problem is that I'm gaining strength without gaining any muscle. I wanted to get back to where I was at before, but I don't know if that's even possible now.'

I frowned, concerned about how he was taking all of these new changes. It wasn't just his physiology, but his entire life and I couldn't begin to imagine how hard it must have been to process.

'Have you talked to Artemis about it?' I asked.

'No, and I don't intend to,' he snapped out.

I backed up a step at his tone, hands raised placatingly. 'Sorry...'

He exhaled a long breath, his shoulder slumping as he set the new weights down at his feet. 'No, I'm sorry. I just don't want to add to her plate, you know? She's got a lot going on, she doesn't need to take on my problems, too.'

'When was the last time you talked to her?' I asked tentatively.

His only response was to shrug.

'You were pretty close back on The Carina. I know a lot has changed since then, but I don't think she'll mind if you go to her. She's still your friend, right?'

'I don't know what we are anymore,' he admitted glumly.

Slightly uncomfortable with this conversation, I sat beside him and awkwardly patted his arm. 'If you don't mind me asking, but why?'

He bit his lip as he contemplated his answer. 'I don't know. Things just aren't the same anymore. She's a different person. I'm a different person. I don't know where to even begin bridging that gap.'

'I think the bigger question is, do you want to?'

He nodded slowly. ‘Yeah, I think so.’

‘Then what’s holding you back?’

His eyes looked haunted as they met mine. ‘What if she’s too different? What if Arthur Mercer was completely made up?’

I scoffed. ‘Stop it. You know that’s not true. She’s still the same person, just with tits and more confidence.’

‘But...’

I cut him off before he could continue. ‘I didn’t know Arty as well as you did, but I knew enough to see that the only thing Artemis really lied about was her anatomy. She doesn’t have to hide now, but I doubt it would feel good for her friend to be keeping his distance because he was suddenly afraid of her.’

‘I’m not keeping my distance,’ he argued. ‘And I’m not afraid of her.’

‘Then prove it. Stop hiding and go see for yourself that she’s exactly who you knew her to be. Just knock first, because you don’t want to walk in on a mind-fuck threesome like I did. That shit was just weird.’

He let out a laugh at that, the absurdity of the whole situation finally settling in with humour rather than disbelief.

‘She’s a lot more...open than when she was undercover,’ he remarked.

‘She’s been through more trauma than any of us could possibly comprehend. Except

perhaps you and Adara. And her friend Libby, of course. But I think she's keeping a lot of it back to save us from that nightmare. She could use a friend who understands.'

He blew out a breath. 'Yeah, you're right. I've been kind of a bad friend, haven't I?'

I blanched at his self-deprecating. 'No, you've been processing. There's nothing wrong with that.'

'Do you think she even still wants to be friends?'

I smacked him upside the head in an attempt to dislodge his idiocy. 'Of course she does, dumbass. She wouldn't go through the trouble of saving your sorry ass if she didn't.'

'All right, all right. No need to get violent.' He shoved me away, but his strength must have seriously grown because it sent me flying ass over head.

'Oops... Sorry...'

I flopped to the ground and stared up at the ceiling. 'Damn,' I coughed out, my breath knocked out of my lungs.

It seemed I was going to need to watch out for more than just genetically altered super kids, but the adults, too.

CHAPTER 17

Reece

I stared at the closed door to the cockpit, anxiety and nerves making my palms sweat.

I wiped them on my jumpsuit and took a deep breath, trying in vain to calm myself down. I didn't know why I was so nervous, but standing here at the precipice seemed like taking a leap off the tallest cliff. Either I was going to fly or I was going to plummet into the rocks and die a painful, gruesome death.

'Pull yourself together, man,' I chastised myself under my breath. 'Just knock.'

I raised my fist to do just that, but froze before my knuckles could make contact.

'For fuck sake, Reece, just knock,' I berated myself again.

With more effort than it should have taken, my knuckles rapped against the door. A tick later, it opened to reveal GC Stanson.

'Mister Hastings? What can I do for you?'

My jaw worked as I tried to get words out of my mouth. Finally, I'm able to stammer out a sentence. 'Um, is Arty... wait, no, Artemis, I mean... Is the captain available?'

'Reece?' Artemis's voice drifted to me from somewhere inside the cockpit. She popped up behind the Yu'Rom pilot, her curiosity blending with concern. 'Are you okay? What's wrong?'

I wanted to hate the fact that she could tell I was struggling, but her actions were proof that she was more in tune with me than I'd dared to hope. She could still read me like an open book, and there was something reassuring about that, enough to help me relax.

'Um, nothing's wrong. I was just wondering if you had a click to talk?'

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She squinted her eyes at me as if searching for a lie, but she wouldn't find one. Seemingly satisfied, she nodded. 'Sure. Is this a private conversation?'

'That would be preferable,' I concurred.

'I've got Bal and Junior,' Stanson told her and Artemis gave her a grateful smile.

'Thanks, Eloria. I'll be back soon.'

The pilot waved her comment away. 'Don't worry about it. Take your time.'

Artemis led the way, and we ended up at a doorless bunk. There was a single, large bed in the centre and a pile of shredded blankets in the corner which I assumed was Dave Junior's bed. She'd taken me to her room.

She sat on the edge of her mattress and gestured for me to join her. I perched carefully on the corner, uncertain what to do with myself or how to begin this conversation. Artemis took the decision from me, however, and made a comment that made my heart clench painfully in my chest.

'You're mad at me.'

'No! No, I'm not mad at you.'

'Yes, you are. It's okay, I get it, but please don't lie about it.'

I swivelled my body so I was facing her fully, catching her gaze in my own. 'No,

Artemis. I'm not lying. I'm not mad at you.'

Her previously stoic expression shifted so minutely that I almost didn't catch it, but there was a flicker of confusion and hurt that she quickly covered up again. 'Then what is this about? I thought...'

'That I was going to have a go at you for lying? No, Arty, that's not what this is about.'

'So... you're not upset with me?'

I inhaled a stuttered breath, my exhale just as shaky. 'No, I'm not upset with you. I'm upset about this whole situation. I'm upset that I was wrongfully convicted of a disgusting crime that I never committed. I'm upset that I ended up under The Program's knife. And I'm upset because I miss you and I don't know how to talk to you anymore.'

'Oh, Reece.' Her arms wrapped around me in a desperate hug that I fell into without any protest, burying my face in her shoulder to try and hide the way my emotions screamed through my expression.

'I knew you'd come for me, I just didn't expect everything to no longer make sense,' I whispered into her neck.

Her hands rubbed soothing circles on my back, one coming up to tangle her fingers at the base of my hair. Her nails scratched pleasantly, and I sank even further into her embrace.

'Can I be honest with you, Reece?' she asked, her voice small and hesitant while her arms tightened around me as if afraid I would run away.

‘Please.’

‘I never planned on coming back.’

Surprisingly, my heart didn’t sink like I thought it would at her confession. ‘I figured as much,’ I admitted.

‘I was never planning on staying, either.’

‘I gathered that, too.’

‘I only came back because the kids were on Nova Station.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

This time I was the one who tightened my grip, afraid she would pull away when we were finally starting to get somewhere. ‘You never would have left us there. I know the kids were the reason you came back, but I know you never would have abandoned us if you had the chance to get us out. I understand.’

‘Do you really, though? Because I would have left you all there if our paths had never crossed again.’

‘But they did cross,’ I said determinedly, pulling back so I could look her in the eye. ‘You had the opportunity to get me, Addy, and all those kids out and you took it. You escaped your own prison and saved all those women there, too. Just because you weren’t actively planning an escape doesn’t make you a bad person, or a bad friend. You can’t be everywhere at once.’

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‘I wish I could. It would make this all a hell of a lot easier.’

A chuckle escaped unbidden. ‘Right?’

Silence ensued, but it was a comforting quiet as we held onto one another like our lives depended on it. With each moment that passed I felt the fissure between us stitching together, a scar forming as we healed the rift between us. Our relationship would never be the same as it was before, we were too different from those people to continue where we’d left off, but there was hope and trust and something pure between us that made me believe we were going to be okay.

I felt silly now, thinking back on how I’d been avoiding her. Dorian was right. Artemis was still Arty, just a lot more feminine now than before. With multiple lovers as well, apparently.

‘So... you and Cadmus. Is that like, a thing now?’ I asked, ending our moment.

She laughed as she untangled her arms from around me, a faint blush painting her cheeks. ‘Yeah, that’s definitely a thing now.’

I coughed to try and cover up my laughter, but it was a useless endeavour.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Liar. Tell me.’

‘It’s just...Cadmus?In arelationship?I can’t see it.’

She chuckled. ‘Yeah, it was a bit of a shock to me, too, but he’s actually really sweet when he wants to be. He gets all shy sometimes, too. It’s adorable.’

I shook my head in disbelief. ‘How did you go to a blushing virgin to fucking two men at the same time?’

She shrugged but her lips pulled back in a lopsided smirk. ‘I’m not complaining.’

I gave her a playful shove that almost knocked her onto the floor, just like how I’d pushed over Dorian earlier this morning and she gave me a wide-eyed look.

‘You’re stronger.’

I sighed, my earlier worries coming back to me in a flood of uncertainty. ‘Yeah. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to pull you.’

‘Oh?’

‘It’s just... will I ever be able to get back to where I was at before? I’ve lost so much muscle mass...’

She snorted a laugh and tried to cover it up by throwing her hand over her mouth. ‘You worried about your figure, Reece?’

‘Shut up,’ I gave a weak chuckle. ‘I’m serious. I’ve never been a skinny guy and I worked hard for those muscles. I can’t find any weights that will help. They’re all too light now.’

She held out her arm and flexed, showing me the bulging bicep outlined beneath her

jumpsuit. ‘Does it look like I’m struggling with that?’

Hope lit up within me as I eyed the physical representation of her strength. ‘No.’

‘You don’t have to worry about that, Reece. Weights aren’t completely pointless. The nanites give you a boost, the grafts in your bones will make them withstand stronger pressure, but your muscles still work like regular muscles. They need a proper workout to keep them in shape.’

I let out an exaggerated sigh and fell back on the bed, spreading my arms wide as I let the relief run through me. ‘Thank fuck for that.’

‘You’ll need to keep on top of it, though. Missing a workout means losing any progress even quicker than usual.’

‘I don’t care. As long as I’m not doomed to be a twig for the rest of my life, I’m happy.’

‘We can work out together if you want. Maybe we should make it a part of our training sessions.’

‘Sure. We can call it Cyborg Zumba.’

She let out a bark of laughter and smacked my stomach. ‘Never.’

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When our laughter died down, I sat up and studied her speculatively. I noted a lightness in her that hadn't been present while she was posing as a male, but there was still something weighing her down.

'Are you okay, Arty?'

'Me? Of course. Why wouldn't I be?'

'Because you've lived a life of torture and pain. You're on the run from the organisation that caused all your suffering. You got a ship full of strangers and hundreds of babies. You're away from Libby again.'

'Okay, okay. Stop. I get it.'

I waited patiently for her to answer the question, honestly this time. 'The thing you need to understand about me, Reece, is that I've lived my life in a constant state of survival. I've been tested in every way imaginable, and even some unimaginable. I've endured physical, mental and emotional turmoil. I don't know any other way to exist. I think I'd be more worried if there wasn't something to worry about. I wouldn't know what to do with myself.'

A growl rumbled from deep in my chest, and the sound held a slightly mechanical tinge to it that I ignored in favour of my anger. 'That's fucked up. You don't have to live your life like that anymore, Arty. You have people on your side now. A whole damn army.'

Her next words sent a chill down my spine.

‘An army isn’t going to be enough to stop The Program. They’re too powerful.’

‘But we have you,’ I argued. ‘You can teach those of us who have been their subjects how to wield our abilities. We can help you fight back.’

‘They have more just like us, Reece, except they’ve been successfully brainwashed into believing they’re fighting for the betterment of the Intergalactic Union. Some of them believe The Program is the IU’s most powerful governing body. I’m not enough. Even with the others, we’re never going to be enough on our own.’

I levelled her with my most serious stare. ‘Then we’ll just have to make sure we’re not on our own.’

‘I’m not in the habit of seeking out miracles,’ she said, her tone sharp and her eyes hardening.

‘Miracles are for dreamers. We’ll fight for what we need and win allies on our own merit,’ I told her.

The smile she gave me told me enough. She didn’t believe anyone would back us. Maybe she didn’t believe anyone would backher, but she’d managed to corral a decent crowd of soldiers directly from one of the IU’s largest military bases onto her side with only a single speech. She’d been herself, shed light on the truth, and hadn’t asked anyone for anything except to think for themselves.

That was how we were going to win this war. That was why we’d all chosen to stand by her side. She’d accepted us despite the inconvenience because that was the kind of person she was, and I was proud to call her my friend.

‘Believe what you want, Arty, but we’ll prove you wrong soon enough. We’ll have an army ready to fight in now time, just you wait.’

Her smile brightened at my words, and I felt my chest swell with pride that I could succeed in turning her mood around so quickly. She may not have believe those words just yet, but I tell she wanted to.

The moment was interrupted when Adara skidded to a halt just inside the mangled doorway, panting from her sprint.

‘Artemis, come quick. Bromm’s awake!’

CHAPTER 18

Artemis

Reece and I jumped to our feet at the same time and raced into the hallway after Addy. She led the way, surprisingly fast for her small size and I knew she was experiencing the same enhanced abilities as Reece, but I was far too focused on getting to Bromm to ruminate over those developments.

The infirmary was packed with the old teams when we arrived. I had to shove my way through between Xander and Dorian to get inside. Henrik was leaning over Bromm who was sitting up on the cot, his legs swung over the side. Cadmus was already there, a hand resting on his shoulder while Urman and Foryk rounded out the group off to the side.

Bromm’s grin when he saw me was weak, the happiness undercut by the exhaustion lining his eyes, but I grinned back anyway. Seeing him sitting up on his own after almost dying in my arms was the best feeling in the world.

‘Hey, love,’ he said, his voice croaky from misuse and the trauma from the intubation.

‘Welcome back,’ I told him.

‘I would say it’s good to be back, but I feel like shit and I come bearing not-so-great news.’

The smile immediately dropped from my face as my mask fell into place. ‘Tell me.’

‘He should be resting...’ Henrik tried to argue, but Bromm waved him away.

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‘No. I should be helping.’ He looked me in the eyes. ‘Remember the task you gave me in the web?’

I nodded, apprehension steadily rising. ‘Of course.’

‘Well, I found an anomaly.’

I inhaled sharply. ‘Who?’

‘One of the scientist.’

‘What’s going on?’ Addy cut in, her tone hard and demanding.

‘We have a stowaway on the ship,’ I informed the room.

The room devolved into silence for a beat, and then pandemonium erupted. Voices shouted over other voices, fighting to be heard. Questions were lobbed at both me and Bromm.

I ignored everyone in favour of meeting Bromm on his cot, leaning in close to get the information needed to weed out the spy.

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘I couldn’t find a name. There’s no record of him anywhere. It’s like he’s been completely wiped from existence, but I’ll recognise him when I see him.’

I pursed my lips. It was probably my fault he was untraceable. After I'd let slip that I'd done my research on Demari it came as no surprise.

'I'd bet my ass that The Program's employees no longer exist in any database, not after they'd discovered how easy it was for me to run a background check.'

He smiled at me, a wicked glint in his eyes. 'Did you spook them, my love?' I mirrored his smirk. 'Probably.'

'What are you two whispering about?' Cadmus asked as he moved in closer, tilting his head down to our level.

'We were just discussing how our woman is a badass that scared the shit out of the enemy,' Bromm said smugly.

'Damn straight,' Cadmus grinned, wide and toothy.

Reece sidled up to us, filling in the open space between me and Cadmus and effectively cutting off Bromm from the rest of the room.

'I can hear you from across the room,' he admitted, his features slack with surprise.

'Me too,' Addy popped her head through a gap between our arms, joining the huddle.

Xander cleared his throat as he suddenly peered above all our heads, looming over us with a single thick eyebrow lifted to display how unimpressed he was. I matched his expression. They were the ones who had started that chaos. What did he expect me to do, sit back and watch?

'Care to share with the class?' he deadpanned.

‘I don’t know. Are you all going to shut up and let Bromm speak?’ I bit back.

‘Um... can I get back to my patient, please?’ Henrik asked from where he’d been inadvertently shoved outside of the huddle.

The crowd immediately dispersed, though Cadmus and I remained by Bromm’s side while Henrik took back his spot. He didn’t bother asking us to move. He knew it would be pointless. ‘Is this really necessary?’ Bromm whined. ‘I swear I’m fine.’

‘And I’m glad you are,’ Henrik said with a patient smile that reached his eyes. ‘But this isn’t just about you. Cadmus is experiencing the same symptoms as you were before you collapsed. I need to keep track of your vitals and any other emerging symptoms and such so I know what to do if and when it happens to anyone else.’

Bromm looked slightly cowed, but not enough to stop squirming. Instead, he held his hand back out for Henrik to replace the observations device back on his finger.

‘It’s giving main character energy,’ Cadmus leaned in close to whisper in my ear. I cracked a small smile at the joke and jabbed him gently in the ribs with my elbow, but I was too relieved that Bromm was awake and well to allow any other emotions through right now.

I glanced around the room one more time, taking in each and every person that had shown up for Bromm and realised someone was missing. ‘Hey, Addy. Did you tell Foryk that Bromm woke up?’

She bit her lip, eyes darting toward Xander as if seeking permission before levelling her gaze on me one more time. ‘No. I couldn’t find him.’

Somehow, I didn't believe her.

'What's going on?' I asked her, capturing her eyes with mine and refusing to let her look away again.

'Nothing,' she practically squeaked, and that was confirmation enough.

'I'll only ask one more time before I find another way to figure it out,' I warned.

She sighed in defeat, glancing at me as if I were going to be angry with what she had to say. I didn't know how that could even be a possibility since Foryk and I had never been close, but when her gaze darted towards Bromm I suddenly understood her concerns. She thought whatever information she had would trigger my protective instincts over Bromm.

'Foryk's been... um... making new friends.'

I blinked, confused. 'Sorry?'

Her eyes flickered in Bromm's direction again, and I glanced at him to ensure he was okay. He looked mildly curious, but beyond that he seemed fine.

'He's his own man, Addy,' he told her, though she remained unconvinced. 'He doesn't need to stick to me like glue. That's never been our relationship.'

Even I frowned at him in disbelief. Those two were stuck to each other like they'd been grafted together.

‘Oh, stop. We’re close, but he’s always been able to leave to find new people. He’s not exactly a social butterfly, so I don’t know what you’re so worried about. He’s probably just found a fuck buddy. Or two. The man does enjoy sharing.’

‘That’s a little too much information for me,’ Xander said, backing away to lean against the opposite wall and pretend he wasn’t listening.

We watched on in silence as Henrik continued checking over Bromm, but a cheer went up when he was finally deemed healthy. Henrik gave him specific instructions to rest and take it easy just in case, but already he was looking much better. Colour had come back into his skin and his beard was more active than it had been in days. He hopped off the bed with more energy than any of us expected after being in a coma, immediately scooping me into a bear hug.

‘Hello, love.’

I fisted the back of his jumpsuit, clinging to him like he was about to disappear at any moment. I didn’t want to think about how close I’d come to losing him. It just wasn’t a possibility. He was stuck with me forever now. He wasn’t allowed to leave.

‘I love you,’ I whispered into his ear, low enough that no one else in the room could hear except him.

‘I love you too, baby.’

Long, muscular arms wrapped around us both, jolting us from our little bubble. Cadmus rested his chin on me head and splayed his hand on top of Bromm’s. ‘I know you guys aren’t leaving me out,’ he said cheekily.

I pushed him off of me but didn’t object when he kept the contact between us through his hand on the small of my back. My own hand entangled with Bromm’s and I

pulled them towards the door.

‘I should get back to the cockpit. I left Baldr and Dave Junior with Eloria, so I should probably go rescue her.’

Henrik choked on a laugh. ‘Oh, that poor woman. Go.’

I heard Xander mutter behind us as he followed us out. ‘PoorJulius.’

My amusement dimmed at the thought of leaving quiet, jumpy weapons master to deal with that without any backup, but I decided to give him a little more credit. He had joined the military and climbed the ranks enough to be sitting where he was today, and he’d had enough courage to fight for what he believed in rather than blindly following orders. He may have been a little uneasy around us cyborg’s and Dave Junior must have been terrifying for others in general and he was still here.

‘I need to send a message to Foryk,’ Bromm said as we wound our way to the upper decks. ‘I don’t want to interrupt him if he’s... occupied, but he should know I’m okay.’

Cadmus handed over a holo-tab. ‘Here. I kept it safe for you.’

Bromm took it with a grateful smile, quickly tapping out a message to Foryk and then sliding it into his pocket. He wasn’t wearing a utility belt with the holo-tab pouch. There was no immediate response which had the men sharing knowing smirks. I wasn’t sure what the big deal was. So he was likely getting laid. Good for him. Move on, boys.

I was shaking my head when the door to the cockpit slid open, and the scene that greeted me was not what I had been expecting. Not in a bad way, though, which was a pleasant surprise. Dave Junior was curled up asleep at Eloria’s feet while Baldr sat

on her lap. Julius was as far from them all as possible but seemed to be more relaxed than he had been in previous similar situations. What had the smile stretching across my face was Libby in holographic form above them all, singing a song with Eloria while Baldr watched with rapt attention.

I froze just inside the doorway, the others bumping into me as they were forced to halt as well. Their singing was beautiful. I'd heard Libby sing before, and I'd sung with her. We'd been professionally trained by The Program as part of our espionage training, but this was the first time I'd heard Eloria sing. I should have realised after I'd heard her laugh that she would be incredible. Her voice was sweet, airy, and light, almost delicate as she blended the notes with Libby's. Their voices wove together to create something truly incredible to witness, and I was shocked when tears sprang to my eyes.

They finished their song, Baldr now sleepily leaning back against Eloria as she cuddled him. The sight took me aback so much that I considered leaving, but Libby finally caught sight of me in the doorway and beckoned me in with a smile.

'Wow,' was all I managed to say.

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‘Ellie was just teaching me a lullaby her mama used to sing for her as a kid,’ she informed me, and I nodded mutely in response.

‘She’s got an incredible voice,’ Eloria complimented.

‘Not as good as yours,’ she replied. The soft way they spoke to one another proved that I’d missed something in my absence. Something was developing here, and I was so here for it. I knew that Libby had the other women back on the Forbidden Planet, but it was nice to see her making friends.

Or maybe it was more than that.

‘How is everyone, Libs?’ I asked, my train of thought reminding me of Francesca and the others.

‘They’re great. They’re excited to see their kids again, but most of them understand that it will take some time before they’re reunited. I was just brainstorming with Ellie how to let them see their kids. We’ll need some sort of schedule at least.’

‘Sounds like you two have been busy,’ I observed.

Bromm’s arms brushed mine and I remembered his news about the stowaway. Possible connections started trying to piece together in my mind at a rapid-fire pace, a dim light bulb flickering hopefully to life as I look at Libby.

‘Hey, Libs. Can you described your contact from The Program? You never really talk about him.’

‘Oh, um... I didn’t really think it was necessary. I don’t know what happened to him. For all I know, he died when you destroyed their facility.’

The sadness in her tone caught me off guard, but if I was correct then we needed confirmation. ‘I’m sorry, Libs, but bear with me. Can you just describe him?’

She frowned. ‘Do you think he could be alive?’

‘It’s more than possible,’ I admitted.

‘Okay, well... He had dirty blonde hair and dark blue, almost grey eyes. He was kinda skinny and about our height. Oh, and he had a scar bisecting his right eyebrow in a sort of wiggly C shape.’

‘Holy shit,’ Bromm muttered beside me.

‘What?’ Libby asked him, catching his words.

‘Is it him?’ I asked him.

‘It might be. We’d have to bring him in for Libby to identify, but I think that’s our guy.’

‘The stowaway?’ Xander asked, catching on. ‘So he’s not a danger to us? He’s on our side?’

‘Wait, hold up,’ Libby called. ‘What’s going on?’

‘What was his name, Libs?’ I asked her. I had never figured out the nature of their relationship, but I knew that she had developed some sort of relationship with him. She cared about his wellbeing, even if only vaguely. I sensed it was more than that,

though.

‘Cameron. Doctor Bryce Cameron. All the other scientists just called him Doctor B.’

‘Bromm, can you identify the guy you saw and bring him in?’

‘Can do, Captain,’ he gave me a two-fingered salute.

‘Do you know where to look?’

‘Actually, I do. I was watching the surveillance cameras to keep myself occupied, I’ve caught him in the cafeteria as one of the volunteers a few times now.’

‘Why there?’ Cadmus mused out loud.

‘If he’s one of the scientists from The Program, he’ll most likely want to be monitoring them,’ I deduced.

‘But why? That would mean he’s a spy rather than a turncoat, but why would he help you and Libby if he was still loyal to The Program?’ Xander asked, his expression pinched in concern.

‘He’s no longer loyal to The Program,’ Libby stated matter-of-factly.

‘How do you know that, Libs?’ I asked her suspiciously.

‘Because...’ she took a deep breath and levelled me with a guilty but determined look. ‘Because he’d Baldr’s biological father.’

CHAPTER 19

Dorian

Ididn’t think they realised the rest of us had followed. The conversation we’d all just overheard was a bit of a nightmare to process, more so for some than others, but the implications were major. There was someone on the ship that wasn’t supposed to be here, but his allegiance was still up in the air. Was he on our side because of his own child, or was he simply playing coy to keep tabs on them all?

I hoped it was the former, because the latter would break far too many hearts, one of which would undoubtedly be Liberty’s, which would lead to an angry Artemis on the warpath. Another one.

Unexpectedly, the entire ordeal just made me miss my family. I’d give anything to see my siblings right about now, to tousle with my brothers, to eat father’s cooking despite how ill it would make us on the nights ma would be out working. Stars, I’d even allow my sisters and nieces to dress me up however they saw fit or allow my nephews to climb over me like a playground apparatus. All the things that had annoyed me before, I couldn’t wait to experience them again.

I may have come from an impoverished planet, but my family was a lot less

dysfunctional than all the others', I was beginning to realise. At least I grew up with freedom to be who I wanted to be, with parents who were very much in love in a place that didn't judge based on race, wealth, or status.

I couldn't wait to get back.

Unfortunately, just as Bromm was about to leave for the cafeteria, an alarm bleated on the holo-table, interrupting Libby.

'What's happening?' she asked, panic raising her voice as she glanced towards her son.

'The scanners have detected an incoming ship. It'll be on us in a day,' Eloria informed us, switching to her professional personal in an instant and turning to Artemis. 'Captain, we need to change course. They're catching up.'

Artemis plucked Baldr from the GC's lap, positioning him so Liberty could see for herself that he was safe, at least for the time being.

'Are we still on course for the asteroid field?' she asked the pilot.

'Yes but therein lies the problem. We can no longer go around it and we can't turn back without running straight into the enemy.'

'There's one more option,' she prompted, causing the Yu'Rom female's eyes to widen comically.

'Captain, I may be a skilled and experienced pilot, but there is no way I will be capable of manoeuvring this ship through such dangerous terrain.'

Artemis placed a grounding hand on Eloria's shoulder, looked her in the eyes and

spoke with a conviction I wished I felt in that moment. ‘You focus on flying this ship and leave the rest up to me. I won’t let us go down.’

I could see the indecision in Eloria’s expression, but her face quickly hardened and she gave Artemis a single, decisive nod. ‘Okay, I trust you, but how?’

She turned to face us, her eyes skirting over me and Xander only to land on Adara, Reece, Bromm and Cadmus. ‘I’m going to need your help.’

Bromm stepped forward without hesitation. ‘What do you need us to do?’

‘The nanites should have infiltrated your biology enough to enter the web. I’m going to need your help shielding the ship. We’ve got to think about the enemy ship’s fire power and potential collision with asteroids. It’s time to put your abilities to the test.’

‘What if it doesn’t work?’ Reece asked nervously. ‘I’ve never been inside the web before. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.’

‘I have,’ Addy spoke up from beside Xander who’s head whipped around at her admission. ‘I accidentally connected to the ship last night. I told Henrik, but then Bromm woke up so we didn’t have the chance to tell anyone else until now.’

‘I’ve been there,’ Cadmus piped in.

‘We know,’ I deadpanned, and he had the audacity to smirk.

‘I don’t know how reliable you’ll be, Cadmus,’ Artemis redirected the conversation back on topic. ‘Bromm collapsed randomly. It could happen to you at any moment, or it might not happen at all. The point is, we can’t just rely on using your abilities.’

‘Which is why you need us,’ Reece concluded.

She nodded. 'Exactly. Do you think you could try and enter the web now?'

'I can give it a go, but I don't know how successful I'll be. I don't know what I'm doing.'

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Addy stepped up beside him. 'I can teach him while you sort out the rest, Captain,' she offered.

Artemis looked to Reece, a question in his gaze, but he merely shot her a reassuring smile. 'Go on. Addy's got me. You need to sort out the rest of the ship.'

She patted his arm then turned to face Xander. 'We need to secure the children, and someone needs to keep an eye on our stowaway in case he tries something.'

'He won't try anything A. He's on our side,' Liberty's voice drifted over, startling me. I'd completely forgotten the call was still active.

Artemis faced her friend, her expression grim and apologetic. 'I trust you Libs, but I don't trust him. I can't risk everyone on board.'

Liberty's lips thinned into a straight line but she conceded without any further argument. 'I get it. After T... I get it.'

'Speaking of, where is Tormik?' I asked.

'That's his name?' Liberty asked, her nose scrunched in disgust.

My curiosity over the entire Tormik situation was reaching its peak, but it still wasn't any of my business so I held back. As my ma would say, my nose did not belong over there.

'Actually, Dorian has a point. Bromm, did you see Cameron with T or his mother at

all?’

He shook his head no. ‘They’ve been in the same vicinity as they’ve started volunteering with the kids as well, but other than that there have been no interactions between them that I’ve seen.’

‘Well, let’s keep an eye on them all the same. Urman, you’re volunteering, right?’

‘I am,’ he confirmed.

‘You’re now my eyes on the inside. I want you to report back to me after every shift, and if there’s any suspicious activity then inform me immediately.’

‘Understood, Captain.’

‘Xander, I need you to find Foryk and fill him in. I could use a second pair of eyes in the cafeteria, and he’s surprisingly good with kids anyway. I’m not sure how close he is with his family, but until they can prove they can be trusted, we don’t trust them. Not completely.’

‘Understood, Captain. I’ll get right on that.’

‘I’ll send updates to your holo-tabs every turn. If you don’t have one, stick close to someone who does,’ she instructed, then her eyes met mine and I knew I wasn’t going to like what she had to say.

‘I’m going to need a sitter, Dorian. You up for the job?’

I groaned long and low. ‘No, but do I have much of a choice?’

She smirked, amusement turning her eyes from an almost black shade to lighter, more

amber brown. 'Unfortunately not. It's all hands on deck, soldier. I need someone I trust to take care of them.'

'I'll do my best,' I promised, though if I would be able to keep that promise I had no idea. In fact, I sincerely doubted it. I may have been well-versed with kids, but those two were T.R.O.U.B.L.E.

She handed me the small blonde boy and I took him without complaint, especially when his first act in my care was to gaze up at me with those big green eyes then rest his head on my shoulder and promptly fall asleep. My heart melted, and I was a goner.

I held wrapped my free arm around him, hugging him to me and I knew I would give my life for him without a second thought. It should have scared me, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

'Come on, little guy. Let's get you settled somewhere safe.' I twisted around to find Dave Junior eyeing up Baldr like he was just waiting for the moment to chow down on him. I could practically see him salivating, and it sent a shiver up my spine. I was going to need to keep an extra close eye on him to keep him from devouring Baldr. Or any kids, for that matter, but it seemed he was awfully fixated on the sweet blonde boy.

'Okay, buddy. Let's go somewhere less populated, hmm?' I cooed at the oversized animal I was trying my best think of as a pet rather than the killing machine they were depicted as in the stories, hoping he'd see me as a friend and follow without a fuss. He didn't of course. All six of his red eyes zeroed in on me with narrowed intent, and I got the feeling he was glaring at me like I was the only thing standing between him and his meal. Actually, in that moment, I probably was.

I glanced anxiously towards where Artemis and the others infected with the nanites

had moved further inside the cockpit, already deep in discussion. I didn't want to interrupt. I'd been given a task by my captain and I should be able to see it through. So what if it was babysitting duty? It was just two younglings that needed me to watch over them while their guardian was busy. No big deal.

I took a tentative step out the door and patted my leg, calling for Dave Junior to follow. Instead, as soon as my toe touched the floor outside the cockpit he released a deep, menacing growl that was more vibration than sound. It caught the attention of the others and Artemis shot me a worried look.

I didn't want to look like a wuss, like I wasn't capable of the simple task I'd been given, but it was soon clear that this assignment was anything but simple. One more step outside caused him to release a snarl that had shivers wracking my entire body. Bal lifted his head and blinked blearily at the Kikshrut, then did something that almost knocked me over with shock.

I had only ever seen him try to play with the animal, annoying him in the process but always pushing forward as if that in itself was fun and games. Not once had I ever seen this little boy lose his temper, least of all with Dave Junior. But that was exactly what happened. He scowled at Dave Junior, wrapped his arms around my neck and started babbling angrily, waving a finger in his direction like that was all it would take to ward him off.

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All it did was provoke the beast even more.

‘Dorian, don’t move,’ Artemis warned, slowly approaching Dave Junior like he was about to bite her head off. I obeyed.

She got close enough to rest her hand firmly on Dave Junior’s back, stroking down his purple fuzz. Unfortunately for her, he whipped around and bit her, mangling her arm with a single clamp of his jaw. When he saw it was her that had touched him, however, he immediately let go and backed away with an apologetic whimper.

‘Dave Junior,’ she snapped, sounding exactly like my ma when she was telling off me or my siblings. And sometimes pa. ‘That was not nice. We do not bite or growl at friends.’

Blood dripped from her arm momentarily, but then she was fully healed and standing with her hands on her hips, her lips pursed in displeasure. The fact that she didn’t even flinch at the pain was chilling in and of itself, but after everything I’d witnessed when it came to Artemis, it shouldn’t have surprised me that a bite from a fucking mythological creature of death and destruction wouldn’t faze her.

The three red eyes closest to me darted in my direction with a glower while the three on the other side peered innocently up at Artemis. I didn’t think she’d fall for it, but I was shocked yet again when she melted, bending down to press a kiss on his snout.

‘Be nice, Dave Junior.’

He backed down, ears flat against his head as he conceded to her admonishments,

acting as if he were genuinely apologetic for his actions towards Artemis while still glaring daggers at both me and Baldr. I was certain then that he was more than just an animal. He may have been a baby himself, but there was intent in the way he behave that belied an intelligence that matched our own, and I wondered if we'd gotten them wrong the whole time. What if they weren't animals but a sentient species in their own right, and they were just sick and tired of being treated like lesser beings simply because we failed to understand them?

I cradled Baldr to my chest protectively as I met the Kikshrut's eyes defiantly. I was the adult here, not him. I was putting my foot down, even if his temper tantrums would kill me.

Artemis's gaze bounced between us, catching onto the showdown and her frown reappeared, a V forming between her brows. 'I think I'll just keep Dave Junior here while you take Bal,' she said, her fist gripping Dave Junior's scruff and making him cower from her. I understood the dynamics of their relationship a lot better after that display. Artemis was quite literally the only person in the entire Intergalactic Union that he couldn't kill, so listening to her was his only real option. Whatever else their relationship contained, it really only boiled down to that one point. Artemis was the top dog, and his job was to fall in line.

The final epiphany I had was that I was in no uncertain terms going to be found alone with that creature. Ever.

'Right,' I said, not knowing what else to say. 'I think I'll just... take him to the cafeteria to play with the other kids. Keep him occupied.'

'Okay. And I'm sorry about Junior, Dorian. I didn't think he'd react like that. He's been fine with everyone else I've left him with.' She gestured to where GC Stanson and Adara was sharing a chair, Adara perched on the arm.

‘Maybe he’s not so great around me?’ I suggested.

She contemplated that for a beat. ‘It’s possible. Regardless, I won’t ask you to look after him again.’

I gave her a bleak but grateful smile, already backing out of the room. ‘Thanks.’

Baldr settled back into me as we headed down to the cafeteria. As I approached the door I doubted my decision as he snuggled into me sleepily, debating whether the cafeteria was the best choice for him when it was so noisy. I wasn’t sure what he’d been subjected to while The Program had him captive, nor was I sure if he had bonded with any of the children just beyond those doors. My new inclination was to seclude us in my bunk where it was calm and quiet, but the impending danger of the ship following us and the asteroid field we were about to enter had rattled me enough that I didn’t want to be alone.

Settled in my decision, I stepped through into the habitually hectic room, only to stop short as soon as I entered. Someone rushed towards me, and it took a moment for me to process that it was Foryk, his finger raised to his lips as he shushed me. And I understood why. For the first time ever after stepping into this room it was silent. Like, completely and utterly quiet. The only sound to be heard were the soft snores of all the children as they slept peacefully, not a single one of them awake. Baldr’s breaths soon joined in with the others having fallen asleep in my arms.

‘How?’ I mouthed the word, completely astonished.

His response was to shrug and gesture towards Bal as if his sleeping state was answer enough.

The Tornu I recognised as his and Tormik’s mother approached, eyeing Baldr in a way that reminded me of Dave Junior, like she wanted to steal him for herself, though

obviously not to eat. I hoped. I watched her cautiously as she took up a position beside Foryk, my gut twisting uncomfortably when he scrunched his nose in disgust and moved away to the other side of the room. Her eyes tracked him mournfully, but she was quick to dismiss the brush-off and focus back on Baldr.

Her attention never drifted from him once, not even to glance at me despite the fact that I was holding him. It was disconcerting, to say the least, and my guard immediately went up. Something about the way this woman was behaving wasn't sitting right with me, and I didn't like the way she had fixated on Bal.

My instincts were correct when she wordlessly reached over to pluck him from my hold, but I pulled away and gave her my back to block her access to him. I shot her a glare over my shoulder that I hoped conveyed my distrust in her actions, and she scowled right back. Instead of backing off she tried to move around to my front. When that didn't work, the bitch actually tried to reach over my head to take him from me that way.

I was about to lay into her when Tormik suddenly popped up, inserting himself between us. I couldn't see the look he gave her, but whatever that look said she didn't like. He shook his head curtly, using his larger body to block her view of us, and I finally figured out what it was that Artemis had first seen in him. Their past may have been shrouded in mystery and betrayal, but he was fighting to protect a child he had no connection to from his own mother and that was enough to prove to me that he wasn't a complete write-off.

Now, if only Artemis could see it for herself, she might be able to sleep a little more peacefully at night. I could see how much strain she was under every time someone brought him up.

Morgrid finally gave up her attempts to get around her son, choosing instead to motion for us to leave the room so we could speak freely without disturbing the kids.

I shot Tormik a questioning look, and he nodded with a slight frown and slumped shoulders, as if the weight of all our problems were physically crushing him.

I made eye contact with Foryk from across the room, the same question in my expression which he also responded with a nod of approval. I wasn't sure what was happening, but I decided to trust that the brothers, Foryk at the very least, wouldn't let anything bad happen to Baldr.

So, I followed Morgrid out into the hallway, Tormik a step behind.

As soon as the doors shut, blocking any noise we made from entering the room, Morgrid rounded on me.

'You need to give me the boy. Now,' she demanded, taking a stern tone with me that made my spine straighten. Who was this woman to speak to me as if I were a misbehaving child?

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‘I don’t think so, lady,’ I practically snarled, moving Bal away from her again. I didn’t know what her end game was, but this wouldn’t end well for her. Not if I was forced to get Artemis involved. And I would if I felt she was a big enough threat to the sweet boy snoozing peacefully in my arms, drool dripping from his open mouth and pooling in the fabric of my jumpsuit.

‘Mother, what are you doing?’ Tormik asked, as equally as baffled as me.

‘He needs to be with the other children until we can get him back to his mother,’ she snapped. ‘Tor, he needs to be in our care. How can we protect him if he’s not in there with the others?’

‘He’s not going anywhere with you,’ I stated clearly so there could be no misunderstandings. ‘Artemis, our captain, tasked me personally with his care, so until she says otherwise he stays with me.’

‘And how is a puny thing like you going to protect this boy, hmm?’ she asked, her derisive tone and comments causing me to grind my teeth as I fought back my own responses. I wasn’t large like a Tornu, but there was nothing puny about me.

‘That is none of your concern,’ I bit out.

‘That boy is most definitely my concern. I happen to know his mother, and he deserves to be taken care of by someone who cares about him,’ she said, and my head started throbbing as my blood rushed up in my anger. By now, I was likely turning purple.

‘Mother, it doesn’t work like that,’ Tormik attempted to calmly deescalate the situation, but it was clear it wasn’t working.

‘Of course it does. We were the ones who tried to free her in the first place. Even though we failed –especiallybecause we failed - the least we can do is ensure her son is returned to her safely and in one piece,’ she responded, her nose in the air so she could look down on me as she spoke. I wanted to punch that superiority complex right out of her, maybe break her face a little in the process.

‘Look, lady. I don’t care who you are or what you believe you’re entitled to, but unless you’re a cyborg named Artemis then I’m not handing him over to you.’

Morgrid stepped forward, her posture aggressive, a menacing glower twisting her brutal features. Tormik wedged himself between us again, his hands out to block his mother’s progress.

‘Mother,stop. This is insanity. You have no right to take Baldr, and I’m sure ArtemisorLiberty wouldn’t be too pleased if you tried. You’re not a kidnapper, mother. You’re better than this.’

‘I can’t in good conscience leave this young boy in the care of a woman who has never known anything beyond The Program and its whims and pawns him off on random men, Tormik,’ she snapped at him, the words slashing like a whip. I had never hated someone so much as in this moment, and I’d been held captive by evil scientists.

‘Watch how you speak of her,’ he growled, a dangerous note to his voice that had the older woman immediately backing away in caution. ‘She and Liberty raised that boy inside The Program for an entire solar. How dare you accuse her of being incapable. Artemis has sacrificedeverythingfor the people she loves, including Baldr, and you are not in any position to deny that. As of a few days ago,wewere the bad guys from

her perspective. She has no reason to trust us, and you have no right to try to take Baldr into your care and further that distrust in the process.'

'Tormik,' she exclaimed in disbelief.

'No, mother. You have gone too far. I understand you're grieving the loss of Father, but this is too much. You need to back off.'

'Tor,' she tried gentling her tone. 'I know you love her, but that love is blinding you. Your father would not stand for this. She let them take him once, proving she is incapable of keeping him safe, and your father was killed because of her actions. I can do it. I can protect him. You know this is the right thing. For the boy.'

'His name is Baldr, not the boy, and he is not yours to take,' I spat out.

'You don't understand,' she tried again, and this time Tormik physically restrained her from getting any closer with his arms wrapped tight around her torso before tossing her away from us.

'Go lay down, Mother. You're not thinking straight,' he ordered her.

'Tormik...'

'Now, Mother. Before you do even more irreparable damage. Go sleep it off.'

'But... the kids...'

'Will be fine with the rest of us watching over them. Just go.'

She sniffed, her nose raising even higher in the air as she dusted herself off. 'Fine.'

She stormed off down the hallway without looking back, and I knew then that whatever that had been about had nothing to do with Baldr specifically.

Tormik turned to me, his expression pinched with distress but apologetic, nonetheless. 'I am so sorry. I know she was behaving completely irrational, but please give her some grace. She has just lost her mate and isn't taking it well.'

'Clearly,' I grumbled.

'Please, forgive us.'

I sighed, the entire confrontation depleting me of mental energy. 'You're not to blame here Tormik. I should be thanking you for stepping in.'

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‘It was nothing. She really just needs to sleep it off. She’s been working ‘round the clock with the kids to keep herself busy and her mind from wandering back to Father’s death. She’s just tired, I swear. Please don’t tell Artemis. She’ll kick us off the ship if she finds out.’

‘I’m not going to lie,’ I warned him. ‘Not to Arty, and especially not about you. She doesn’t trust you as it is, and I don’t want her to think I’m colluding with you to kidnap Bal.’

‘We’re not trying to kidnap him, Dorian. I swear. She’s just exhausted and grieving. That’s all it is,’ he pleaded, desperation taking hold.

I sighed, knowing I was about to butt in where I wasn’t welcome but also done with the entire ordeal. And not just with Morgrid. Tormik and Artemis needed to put their past behind them and move on, and someone was going to have to make the first move.

‘You misunderstand me, Tormik. Artemis doesn’t deserve secrets and lies. You’ve done that before and it hasn’t worked out well for you so far. You need to tell her what happened here. It might help rebuild some of that trust,’ I told him.

‘I... what?’

‘You need to talk to her, Tormik. Be honest. Start proving that you’re trustworthy. She won’t be mad about your mother if she knows the truth. Well... nottoomad, at least. She’ll be furious for a bit, but in all the time I’ve known her she’s never been unfair in her judgements.’

He contemplated his words before speaking, opening and closing his mouth multiple times before finally letting them out. 'Why? Why would you try to help me mend my relationship with her?'

I shrugged. 'You helped me, the least I can do is help you. I doubt it will fix everything between you, but it will help her see that you mean no harm. I'll vouch for you and your actions today, but you're the one that needs to put in the effort.'

His gaze probed mine, searching for any hint of deception but he wouldn't find any. He scratched my back, I would scratch his, simple as.

'You're serious?'

I nodded decisively, eager to just make my point and move on. 'I can see you're not a bad person, Tormik. Whatever mistakes you made in the past... It's hard to watch the two of you in the same room together. It's painfully awkward, actually, and the least I can do after you stood up to your own mother for Baldr's sake is give you the opportunity to make things right.'

He released a long breath through his nose, a flicker of hope shining dimly in his eyes. 'Do you think I have a chance?'

My eyebrows danced between arching and frowning, undecided on if I should focus on my confusion or my surprise at the way he suddenly let down his walls, showing me a glimpse of vulnerability. 'A chance for what?'

'To make things right.'

'I don't know exactly what you did, Tormik, but there's always a chance to do the right thing. It's up to her if she sees it, though.'

‘Thank you.’

I gave him a thin-lipped smile. ‘Don’t mention it.’

As we re-entered the cafeteria I had to wonder if I’d just opened up another bag of shit for Artemis to deal with. It was highly possible, but my gut told me Tormik was a good guy at heart. He just needed the chance to prove it. She needed to pull up her big girl panties and deal with the situation, too. Whatever it was he did that she was struggling to forgive, she needed to look past it to see who he was now.

I had a feeling that was going to be the only way forward without her kicking him and his mother off the ship. I just hoped she wouldn’t get so mad about this incident that she’d do it anyway.

Regardless, if anyone deserved a break from all the shit it was Arty, and I just hoped the stars would shine down on them both and relieve them from this vicious cycle of animosity. I’d done my part, it was up to them now.

CHAPTER 20

Artemis

‘Captain, the enemy ship is encroaching with increased velocity. With the asteroid field approaching, we can no longer outpace them,’ Eloria stated, interrupting our discussion.

I shared a worried look with Bromm and Cadmus. Adara was already focused on the holo-screen while Reece scowled down at his feet.

‘How long, GC?’ I asked her.

‘They will be in firing range within a half a turn, Captain.’

‘Shit,’ Addy swore, the sentiment mirrored by us all.

‘Captain, what are your orders?’ Julius asked, piping up for the first time since the ship was spotted. Though there was sweat already beading on his brow and he had turned a rather alarming shade of green, his spine was straight, his voice steady and he spoke with confidence indicative of someone of his station. He was pushing his fear aside with a professionalism that I admired, and for the first time since I’d met him, he was a true soldier.

‘Ready the weapons. Prepare to fire on my order, but not a moment sooner. Hopefully, if we play this right, we won’t need to.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

I looked around, wondering where Xander was and what was taking him so long to return. Surely, Foryk wasn’t that difficult to find. I needed my second.

No, it was more than that. I needed the security of an experienced captain to act as a safety net in case I fucked everything up. I had never been responsible for so many people before, and I was actively pushing down the anxiety that was shoving at my mental walls with increased intensity.

‘Adara,’ I called. ‘Have you heard from Xander?’

‘No, Captain.’

‘I need you to find him and bring him back. He should be done informing Foryk by now. I need him here.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

She turned on her heel and exited the room without further prompting, her shoulders tense and steps hurried. Surprisingly, before the door could shut completely, another person stepped through that I wasn’t expecting.

‘Katira,’ I greeted impatiently, though I tried to keep my tone gentle out of respect for her traumas. ‘Now’s not a good time.’

‘That’s actually why I’m here, Captain,’ she said, and though she was clearly fighting

the impulse to avert her eyes and hunch her shoulders, she held herself aloft with a confidence I didn't think she was capable of after her abuse.

'What is it?' I asked, suddenly on alert. If she had information I wondered why she hadn't come to me with it sooner. Perhaps she felt like she couldn't.

'The ship's logs state that we're headed towards an asteroid field. Is this correct?'

I scowled, unsure where she was going with this but confirmed, nonetheless.

'The only asteroid field I know of close to Nova Station's current coordinates is a trap,' she said.

'A trap? How?'

'Pirates, Captain. Pirates aligned with The Program.'

My breath left my lungs on awhoosh. The blows just kept coming.

'How do you know this?' I asked her, weariness like a weight now dragging me down.

'I overheard my father speaking with the scientists. They've been using the pirates as their primary method of transporting their... newly acquired subjects to the different facilities.'

I cursed, a single word one of anger and frustration that swirled into a mass of pure, unadulterated rage. The implications of what she had just informed me not only caused us trouble in the present but was apparently a long-standing issue I was previously unaware of. How I had let something like that slip through the gaps in my knowledge...

But that was it, wasn't it? They were using pirates under the table to avoid leaving a paper trail of their actions. It was a way for them to skirt accountability if they were ever discovered, the pirates the ones who would take the fall for trafficking all those people. All those children. It was smart, I would give them that.

The biggest problem now, however, was that if we managed to successfully evade the incoming enemy ship and then successfully manoeuvre through the asteroid field, we were going to face another enemy as soon as we came out the other side. An enemy that would keep us locked in place while The Program and their army took their time going the longer, safer way around. They were going to catch us no matter what.

We were trapped.

'Why didn't you come to me with this sooner?' I asked her, my helplessness latching onto her and morphing into fury.

'I... I-I didn't know. I o-only just s-saw our c-course, C-Captain,' she stammered, her false bravado fleeing under the force of my anger.

'Why were you even looking?'

'Y-you said...' she paused to take a deep breath, the action steadying her enough to speak with a little more confidence again. She was standing up for herself. Interesting. 'You said my brother and I were free to go once we landed. We were researching our options, and when we discovered the ship's course, we knew we were headed for more trouble. I came to you as soon as I had the information to give, Captain.'

I forced myself to back down, caging my raging emotions. It would do no one any good if I lost it now.

‘I see. Thank you, Katira, for coming to me with this.’ I turned to Eloria. ‘Can you run a quick scan to confirm the information, GC?’

‘Of course, Captain,’ she said, already pulling up the holo-screen and tapping away.

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‘There’s a rogue planet on the other side of the asteroid belt that they’ve made their base,’ Katira informed us both. Eloria, lips pursed, nodded her acknowledgment and started the scan. The hologram projected to the space above us, giving us a three-dimensional view of the upcoming scenery. Sure enough, after navigating past the asteroid field, a larger, dead-looking planet appeared floating freely just far enough away from the asteroids to avoid collision but close enough to almost blend in. Almost, because it was far larger than the drifting cloud of oversized rocks we were coming up on.

What was the most concerning, however, was that there were multiple ships detected surrounding the planet with more joining the fray as the scanner gave us a constantly updating image.

‘Intel confirmed, Captain. We’re surrounded.’

‘They’re already mobilising,’ I said breathlessly. ‘The Program must have contacted them to pin us in when they realised where we were heading.’

‘It was a good plan, Captain, but now we need a new one.’

‘There isn’t much else we can do except follow through, Eloria. And prepare to fight our way out.’

‘Captain?’ Julius called for my attention.

‘Yes?’

‘How are we going to fight our way out of that? We’re just one ship and they’re...many.’

‘Bait,’ I said, a plan forming in my head.

‘Captain?’

‘We need to adjust the plan.’

Adara chose that moment to return with Xander in tow, both looking particularly harried.

‘Perfect timing, you two,’ I greeted, relieved to see them both.

‘Kat?’ Addy drew up short in surprise at the unusual guest.

‘Katira here has just informed us of another problem. A big one. And I’m going to need everyone’s help if we’re going to get through this,’ I informed them, then proceeded to explain my plan.

???

‘I’ll round up the others. Let’s just hope everyone can access the abilities we need,’ Addy said, also heading out with an urgency we were all feeling.

This plan was going to be risky, no doubt about it, but we didn’t have any other choice, but if we were going to pull it off then everyone needed to play their part to perfection. The Program were slippery fuckers, and with the military and government backing they’d accrued it was going to be even more difficult to pull this off, but it was either this or surrender, and surrendering was not an option.

When she was no longer in view, I collapsed into the chair I had claimed as my own and let out a shaky breath. Xander came to stand beside me, though he didn't lower himself into his own chair to be on my level, choosing to remain upright instead.

'It's a good plan,' he said. Was he trying to soothe me?

'Why did you choose this side of the fight?' I blurted the question, gazing up at him from below.

My question seemed to shock him enough that he staggered back a step before he caught himself. 'What?'

'You're choosing to fight against an organisation that has no morals, that has latched itself into the very DNA of the Intergalactic Union whether we like it or not, and who can hurt the people you love. Why did you choose to stand against them?'

'I am no coward, Artemis,' he said, and this time it was my turn to be taken aback as he used my name.

'I never claimed you were a coward, Alexander Hironimus. I am merely curious why you chose to put everyone you've ever cared about in danger to fight for what will likely be a losing battle.'

'There are no victors until it's over, Artemis. I have faith that we will overcome and persevere to see the other side. Yes, we may lose people on the way, people we love and cherish, but that is the burden of war. It wouldn't matter which side I chose when it comes to their safety, because it is the war itself that puts them in danger, so I will continue to choose to fight for what is right. My morality is not so easily bought or swayed.'

I mulled over his answer, letting his words sink deeper into my bones where they

reinforced my convictions and stabilised my decision.

I stood up, still weighed down by the gravity of our situation but feeling reinvigorated by his little speech.

‘Get everyone in place, Xander. I’ll make the announcement.’

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‘Yes, Captain,’ he acknowledged, hurrying from the room. With the enemy ship approaching even faster than anticipated I’d used up any moments we had to spare.

Addy returned with the others barely a click later, their faces sallow and tense. I held up a finger to ask them to wait as I connected to the ship’s intercom.

‘Soldiers, this is your captain speaking. The enemy are on our tail and are fast approaching. They will be on us within a turn. We will not be engaging with weapons. Instead, we will be commandeering their ship. All volunteers must remain with the children. Everyone else, ready for battle. Let’s show these bastards what we’re made of.’

When I ended the connection an alert popped up on the holo-screen, replacing the intercom’s interface. Large, flashing images that took up the entirety of the wall as our scanners tracked the progress of the enemy ship, a warning that our time was running out. The enemy was almost upon us.

I turned to address Julius first. ‘Are our weapons on standby?’

‘Yes, Captain. Everything is set up and ready to fire.’

‘Perfect.’ I turned to Eloria. ‘Are you sure you can do this?’

‘If you get those shields up I can do what needs to be done. They’ll never catch on.’

I nodded my appreciation then faced the rest of the bodies in the room.

‘Ready?’ I asked them.

‘As we’ll ever be,’ Cadmus responded as Reece’s jaw ticked nervously.

‘Okay, then. Follow me into the web. Let’s see if we can all communicate inside or if it’s just me, Bromm and Cadmus.’

I settled myself back in the chair and gestured for the others to do the same. Bromm took the seat to my left while Cadmus took the one to my right, scuffling for a moment with Adara before ultimately winning out. My lips twitched in amusement before I could stop them, but I didn’t think anyone saw. Adara eventually sat beside Reece on the opposite side of the holo-table, leaving the remaining seat for Xander when he returned.

Without further ado, I closed my eyes and connected my mind with the ship’s interface.

CHAPTER 21

Tormik

I picked my way carefully over the myriad of tiny, wayward limbs, desperately trying not to step on fragile little fingers and toes. It was a magical event. Every last child was sleeping, the cafeteria was completely silent, but it was a delicate, precarious balance. If anyone so much as breathed wrong and woke a single child up, that would be it. They’d all rouse, we’d all be stuck with hundreds of crying, needy little bodies while we scrambled to comfort, soothe, feed, and change them.

Volunteering in the makeshift nursery may have been a rewarding job in some ways, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t hellish. It was akin to the horror stories from the Forbidden Planet, my race’s old home that we’d abandoned due to the dangers it

posed. A warrior race we may have been, but even we could only take so much before we'd snapped.

It had come at a most opportune moment as well with the enemy closing in on us from all angles. We were going to have to work damn hard to ensure the kids remained calm and quiet, though I had a feeling Artemis would know the best way to ensure that. Unfortunately, she was busy performing her duties as our captain, so it fell to us to keep things controlled and contained.

My eyes connected with Foryk's from across the room and I held in a wince. I imagined my own expression mirrored his, with pinched features tight with anxiety. There were so many lives on the line and Mother had chosen this moment to break down. His concern for her matched mine, though I was sure his was more about the chaos she would cause whereas I was more worried about her wellbeing. Her mental state was deteriorating, and while I didn't blame her, her actions could very well destroy everything.

I'd checked on her earlier to make sure she actually was resting and had found her asleep, curled up in a ball and hugging a pillow to her as if it could replace Father. My heart clenched even now at the memory of that sight, but I was glad she had listened as was getting the rest she needed.

Unfortunately, it had come at a most inopportune time. We were all hands on deck, and she wasn't even aware of what was happening. I was loathe to wake her, but someone needed to fill her in.

Just a few more clicks, I kept telling myself. Let her sleep just a little bit longer. I would go to her when we couldn't wait any longer.

A crackling over the ship's intercoms preceded the voice that came next. Everyone stopped moving to listen as Artemis informed us of what was coming and our

instructions. I didn't think it was possible, but the hush in the room quietened even further into an almost sentient, oppressive being. My skin felt itchy. My protective instincts screamed at me.

I was out of time. I needed to talk to Mother.

When the other volunteers began moving once more, I picked my way over to Foryk. Disgust twisted my stomach as I approached, though I kept my face placid and locked those emotions away for the time being. Now was not the time to broach the subject of my ire, but instead to work together for the better good.

He met me with his own stoicism, though he raised a single eyebrow to indicate his curiosity over my choice to advance. It took everything in me not to punch his eyebrow right off his face, but that wouldn't be beneficial to anybody so I refrained.

It hadn't helped assuage the betrayal the first time my fist had connected with his flesh, either.

I leaned in close, holding my breath so I wouldn't have his scent filling my nostrils, so I could speak in low tone that wouldn't disturb the sleeping children. 'Mother doesn't know.'

His inhale was sharp, understanding alighting behind his eyes. He tipped his head to the side, indicating we move towards the exit. I followed, torn between relieved that I didn't have to give him my back and insulted that he had so easily given me his.

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When the door shut us off from the cafeteria, he didn't bother turning around. Instead, he marched on as if I wasn't even there.

I was scowling at his back, imagining lasers beaming from my eyes and burning holes into his head, exploding it in a gory mess all over the walls. The imagery didn't soothe me, however. Instead, it merely added to the guilt that had become my constant companion these past few solars. Guilt and shame. He was once my brother, by blood he still was even if I refused to acknowledge him as such.

The harsh reality was I didn't want him dead. Suffering, yes, but I assumed he was after all this time. It was his fault she was dead, after all. His fault that both our families were disgraced. His fault we'd felt the need to take the damn job with The Program in the first place.

Yet, when I thought about it, I struggled to hold onto that rage, the emotion slipping through my fingers like water whenever I tried to grasp it again. The ultimate truth was that I never would have met Artemis if it weren't for the unfortunate chain of events that led us here. She may have hated my guts, the love I held for her unrequited after my own actions, but that was something I could live with. The love was bittersweet, but it was still a hell of a lot more potent and wonderful than the constant battle between numbness and fury.

She made me feel again, and if it hurt then so be it.

As we turned the corner, another figure appeared. Almost as tall as me and Foryk, Alexander Hironimus paused as he caught sight of us, his thick black eyebrows dancing high on his head.

‘Aren’t the two of you supposed to be in the cafeteria?’ he chastised.

I’d seen him and Foryk speaking privately not long ago and wondered if perhaps he had been given a task by Artemis that he had abandoned for this. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

‘Morgrid is resting,’ he began the explanation. ‘She is unaware of what is happening.’

Xander blinked. ‘I see. Well, make it quick. You heard the captain. We need to be in place for the plan to work.’

‘Yes, sir,’ he responded, immediately walking around the man he’d once called captain and headed straight for the room I was sharing with Mother.

I moved to follow but a hand on my arm halted me before I could take more than a step. My eyes raised to meet Xander’s, confused why he would stop me.

‘Your feelings for our captain are apparent,’ he stated, the comment freezing the blood in my veins. ‘How deep does your devotion go?’

I gaped, stunned at the audacity of his questioning. Who was he to demand such person answers from me?

‘How deep does your devotion go, Tormik?’ he asked again.

Something about the desperation in his tone, hidden beneath layer upon layer of forced nonchalance and stoicism, had the answer wrenching from my chest with such velocity it was impossible to contain them. ‘I would die for her.’

He scrutinised me for a beat, his eyes boring into mine while he searched for any sign of deception. He would find none. Finally, he straightened his spine and nodded once,

satisfied with what he found.

‘Good. Come with me.’

‘Sir?’ I asked, unsure of his thoughts or intentions. I glanced behind me towards the door Foryk had disappeared, where my mother was resting blissfully unaware of the encroaching danger, but I trailed behind him, nonetheless.

He spoke without inflection, but the tense set of his shoulders told me he was feeling more wound up than he was willing to let on. ‘Artemis is used to doing things on her own. She doesn’t trust easily, and while she trusts me on some level, I still haven’t earned it completely. Unfortunately, that means she is more than willing to put herself in harm’s way. I want you to keep her focused on her job. I need you to be her guard.’

I scoffed in disbelief. ‘Artemis would never accept a personal guard, let alone me,’ I told him.

‘Which is why we won’t be telling her,’ he said decisively. ‘Plus, I have a feeling you were already planning on doing so regardless. Now, you won’t have to hide it, and you won’t be doing it alone.’

I huffed out an exasperated breath. ‘I don’t understand why you would care.’

He halted in the middle of the corridor and spun to face me, a fierce determination and protectiveness shining through. ‘Because she is friends with the woman I love, and I have come to care for her wellbeing just as much as anyone else here. She is our only hope at getting through this alive. She is our leader, and I will not stand by and watch while she continues to sacrifice herself for others, especially when she is more important than all of us combined.’

He sighed, his shoulders slumping forward slightly as he peeled back his mask to show me just enough vulnerability that I would take him seriously.

‘We need her, Tormik. We cannot win this war without her. She is the glue that holds it all together. If she’s captured...’

‘She won’t be,’ I practically snarled. ‘Where do you want me?’

While his spine straightened once more, his shoulders were no longer as tense as they were before. ‘Those with enhanced abilities are in the cockpit performing duties the rest of us cannot. You will be stationed near her at all times.’

I snapped to attention at the order. ‘Yes, sir.’

The rest of the journey to the cockpit was quiet, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. We had come to an understanding between us. He saw me for my truths, and I was beginning to see him for his, as well.

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As we approached the door that would lead us to the woman I loved, I paused. Sensing I needed to say something, he stopped with me and waited patiently for me to speak.

‘You care for her, too,’ I said, only to receive not reaction. I didn’t expect one anyway. ‘More than you’re willing to admit.’

‘She is important to our cause.’

‘She is important to your woman,’ I amended. ‘Which means she is important to you. This is now personal for you, too, whether you like it or not.’

I wasn’t sure why I’d decided to confront him about it, but the burning need to ensure she was surrounded by people who were loyal to her, who genuinely cared about her won out. There would be no moving forward until we could all be honest with ourselves. He may not love her like I did, like Prince Brommyt and potentially even Cadmus did, but we were all a part of her unit.

Even when she tried to push us away, we would remain steadfast by her side. She deserved nothing less.

He didn’t respond, choosing to ignore my words and their truths in favour of walking inside the cockpit. I followed him inside, leaving the discomfort from the interaction outside. I pulled up short at what greeted me.

Dave Junior was in the corner, pretending to snooze but the single eye peeking open gave him away. The pilot was tapping away on the holo-screen, the controls lighting

up under the contact of her fingertips. The weapons specialist was poised and prepared to fire, but his wide-eyed gaze was set firmly on the people seated around holo-table in the centre of the room, each one of them with their heads bent, eyes closed, and emanating a telltale blue glow.

Artemis, Adara and Reece were whom I expected to see in such a state, but Bromm and Cadmus were the reason for my shock. While everyone was aware of Bromm's collapse and his recent awakening, the fact that the two of them were somehow a part of the Cyborg Club was news to me. Blindsiding news.

'Take your position by the wall, Tormik,' Xander ordered, and I snapped back to the present to obey.

I positioned myself so I could see all angles of the room and the door, but that also allowed me full view of the holo-screen and its contents. Currently, there were images displaying our ship and the surrounding areas as the scanner picked up on potential dangers. In front of us was a large, cloud-like congealment of rocks that was undoubtedly the asteroid field stretching for miles ahead of us like a wall of doom. Behind us, a fast-approaching ship larger than our own was gaining ground at an alarming rate. It was clear that whatever time we'd thought we had was up sooner than anticipated.

My eyes connected with Xander's as he took the last remaining seat around the table beside his girlfriend, the gravity of our situation digging deep grooves into the lines of his face that I had no doubt was mirrored on my own. Adrenaline coursed through me as my body prepared for the coming fight, and I my gaze finally rested on Artemis. She looked deceptively frail with her head bowed over the table, hands reaching out to the men on either side of her, and a part of her was. The part of her that still longed to belong, to have family and friends and lovers alike. To be surrounded by people who cared for her just as much as she cared for them. And she had that here, whether she realised it or not. She was building her dream, and pride

rose to the surface as I gazed upon them all.

She may not have needed me to protect her body, but she still needed someone to protect her heart. Whatever happened, I would protect it at all costs, even if she didn't want me to. That was my real assignment.

CHAPTER 22

Reece

The web was aptly named. White lines of varying luminosities spanned out in a vast web-like tangle. I didn't know why I expected anything different, especially considering she'd described the place before, but I had. Perhaps I thought the lines would be more delicate like a thin trails of spun silk, or perhaps I had imagined the lines to have some sort of organisational structure like an arachnid's web.

Hell, for all I knew, there was a giant, eight-legged creature just waiting on the outskirts for its prey to wonder close enough to pounce. Obviously, that wasn't the case, but I couldn't help that my mind had conjured up the worst.

The other thing I discovered upon my entrance was that I was, in fact, completely alone. We knew it was a possibility, but I had held out hope that Adara at the very least would be visible to me here, thanks to our nanites coming from the same batch.

The biggest downside to being alone, besides not being able to communicate with the others that I knew were in here somewhere even if I couldn't interact with them, was the soul-sucking abyss the web was weaved in. I wasn't corporeal like Artemis said she, Bromm and Cadmus were here, but if I recalled correctly that hadn't happened until they'd been connected through the transmitted nanites.

A curiosity over the whole situation hit me hard. I wanted to delve deeper into that

mystery to figure out how that was not only possible but why the nanites had made it so in the first place. When I removed myself from the situation, the whole thing was mind-bogglingly fascinating.

Regardless, that wasn't what I was here for. I had a job to do and we had planned for this eventuality. I was sure Artemis already knew Addy and I would find ourselves alone here and had let us hope just in case.

I remembered my instructions and as soon as I thought of what I wanted to do I was in motion, the web responding to my desires without any further effort from me. Lines whipped by at dizzying speeds only I wasn't physically here so I felt nothing. Images and sounds jumped out at me from all around, disappearing as soon as they came until I finally came to a halt at what looked like an oversized holographic keypad. I scowled at it until I realised I needed to put in the pin, and though I didn't know the code I started inputting random numbers.

Suddenly, the web took over once again and the codes began rapidly inputting themselves until they came to the correct combination, unlocking the blockage in the pathway and allowing me entry.

Okay, that was awesome.

The web picked me back up again and zoomed me down the line until we reached another roadblock with the same result. Again and again it happened until, finally, I came to my destination.

Reminiscent of the holo-screen in the ship's cockpit, one appeared in front of me displaying exactly what Eloria was doing back in reality. I watched as the holographic images depicted the enemy ship closing in on us while we were inching dangerously close to the asteroid field. If we weren't careful we would end up being squashed by both.

I got to work, utilising the web's natural helpful inclinations to achieve my goals. I noticed others were working alongside me as well, the screen showing multiple actions taking place. It was helpful in the way that I could see what they were doing to weave my own actions around theirs. Addy, Bromm, Cadmus and I were tasked with layering shields over the top of one another's to provide extra protection from all angles. It took a moment to connect my mind with the ship's programming enough to create something so physical, however, and I felt that my tangible body back in the cockpit was sweating profusely with the effort. It was a strange sensation, my mind almost being in two places at once. Or perhaps that was exactly what was happening. My mind was focused more inside the web, but if I tried I could still sense what was going on around me back in the real world.

I struggled to wrap my head around it and eventually gave up trying. Not everything needed to be understood to be fully experienced and appreciated. This was one of those cases.

All in all, I was pretty damn proud of myself for how quickly I was picking up on this whole cyborg deal. I'm sure it was a lot easier with the help from Arty, her experience and expertise allowing us to fine-tune our understanding of what we were capable of in a manner in which I was sure she hadn't received herself. I was more than grateful that we all had her.

Suddenly, an incoming alert popped up on the holo-screen. It was hard to see, hidden behind the images tracking the distance between the ships, but there was no way I could have missed it. The shock of what I was seeing dragged me right out of the web and I slammed back into my body with a jolt. My arms windmilled as I attempted to catch myself but it was too late. I crashed to the ground, limbs akimbo.

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‘Shit, Reece, are you okay?’ Xander asked, suddenly standing over me with concern furrowing his brow.

I sat up so suddenly that my forehead barely missed colliding with his nose, but I was too panicked to care. ‘Did you see it?’

‘See what?’

‘The alert!’

‘Reece, what are you talking about?’

‘On the holo-screen. It’s behind the images of the ships.’

He turned immediately to where Eloria was already minimising the other programs and maximising what I’d seen. There, for the entire world to see, was a selection of wanted posters, each one broadcasting our faces.

‘This is going to put a wrench in our plans,’ Eloria groaned, receiving a grunt in response from Xander.

‘We’re never going to win this war, are we? We were doomed from the start,’ the weapons guy started to panic.

‘They do have a lot more resources than us. This was to be expected,’ Xander commented. ‘The plan remains the same. Reece...’

I could barely hear him over the sound of the blood rushing through my ears, his voice trailing off into muted background noise. I was on a wanted poster. I had escaped one prison and now the entire Intergalactic Union was going to be hunting for me.

I couldn't go back. I didn't think I'd survive it again if they took me. I couldn't go back to those cells. I couldn't be their prisoner again.

My breathing was becoming too shallow, the world around me fuzzy around the edges as I stared in horror at my face on the holo-screen surrounded by my friends. It wasn't just me this time. It was the people I cared about, too.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't think.

The fuzziness blended into black, swarmed me from all angles, then swallowed me whole.

CHAPTER 23

Alexander

My surprise at seeing our faces plastered all over the holo-screen alerting the entirety of the Intergalactic Union that we were dangerous criminals did not stem from the fact that our enemies took that step to limit us in our escape. If anything, I was shocked that it had taken them this long to put our faces out there for everyone to see.

They thought they were punishing us, ruining our chances of finding a safe haven to make things easier to catch us. They were wrong.

Unfortunately, Reece was not aware of this fact. Truthfully, even if he were, I didn't think it would have done anything to prevent his panic attack but perhaps it could have helped prevent the fainting.

Henrik burst into the room in a flurry of anxious activity, a heavy-looking bag practically dragging behind him from its sheer size.

'Where is he?' he demanded and I pointed to where Reece still lay on the floor, though I had done my best to rearrange him into a more comfortable position. He'd landed with his limbs twisted, some of them beneath his body that was contorted at an odd angle. I'd called Henrik in just in case he'd broken something as he'd impacted with the floor, figuring it was better safe than sorry.

Reece needed to be awake and functioning throughout the next stage of our plan, or else he'd become another obstacle to overcome. While I understood his reaction to the trauma he'd faced, now wasn't the time to lose his head. He needed to pull it together and remember that he was better than that. He was allowing them to win, and someone needed to remind him of his strength, both of body and of mind.

Henrik's crouched down to run a scanner over the entirety of Reece's prone body then checked his vitals before lifting his face up to look at me. 'He's fine. No broken bones. His heartrate is still a little high, but that's to be expected from a panic attack of this magnitude. He'll wake once its calmed down again.'

I nodded, moving my attention back to the holo-screen. The notices were hidden behind the scanners again, the ship now close enough that they would be visible if we had windows.

It was time.

A groan sounded behind me, signalling Reece's return to consciousness.

‘What happened?’ he asked, rubbing the bump on the back of his head from where he fell on it.

‘You had a panic attack and passed out,’ Henrik informed him gently. ‘How are you feeling, Reece?’

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‘Like my head is full of hammers.’

‘Your nanites will likely fix that in a moment,’ I told him.

Henrik checked the little machine still attached to Reece’s finger and nodded. ‘Your heartrate is already evening out.’

‘The pain is almost gone,’ Reece muttered thoughtfully.

‘Good,’ I said, drawing their attention back to me. ‘Because it’s time.’

Henrik quickly packed away his supplies and stood, raising the bag up as evidence that he was packed and ready to go. ‘I’ll head to the hangar bay.’

‘Reece, you should go with him,’ I said.

His brows dipped low and his lips pursed in dissatisfaction. ‘But I’m okay. I said I was fine. My head doesn’t even hurt anymore.’

‘Exactly,’ I said. ‘I assume your job inside the web was completed?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Then head to the hangar bay. I’ll meet you down there as soon as I’m done up here.’

He inhaled sharply, understanding my order. ‘Have they made contact yet?’

My lips thinned. 'Not yet, but I'm expecting it any moment now.'

'Right. Okay. The hangar bay.'

I caught his glance towards the others still glowing blue as they navigated whatever technological realm I wasn't privy to. 'I will send them to join you when they have completed raising the shields.'

He nodded curtly and strode from the room, spine ramrod straight as tension radiated from him like a physical warning not to get too close. Good. He would need that to drive him forward for the next stage, especially considering who and what we were about to face.

The holo-screen beeped just as the door slid closed behind him, signalling the incoming transition I had been waiting on. I brushed off some invisible dust from my jumpsuit and positioned myself to avoid showing the table full of cyborgs within the frame, then nodded for Eloria to answer the call.

My breath hitched at the face that filled the screen, answering a question that had been plaguing me since we left Nova Station while adding even more.

'Captain Hironimus,' she greeted.

Her face was more gaunt than I remembered it being, dark bruises circling her eyes and her cheeks hollowing from malnutrition. Stress lined her face in even more wrinkles, and her previously salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back into a tight bun of pure grey. Had it only been a few days since we had last seen one another? Surely not, if she looked so haggard.

'Colonel Granger.'

I didn't correct her misuse of the title. Yes, I was still technically a captain by military standards, but the lack of a ship under my command nullified that fact. And, of course, the fact that I was a deserter.

'The ship you have stolen is owned by The Program and is therefore under the jurisdiction of the IU's military. You will stand down and surrender to your arrest as the law demands. Prepare to be boarded and face the consequences of your betrayal, Captain.'

'Understood, Colonel Granger. You may board at your leisure,' I agreed, keeping my voice and expression devoid of all emotion. I couldn't give up just yet.

Her eyes widened in surprise as her demands were met with zero resistance. From my standpoint I couldn't figure out if she was glad or disappointed in the easy acquiescence, nor could I tell if she had been bullied into joining enemy forces or if she was still on our side. I supposed it didn't matter in the end, her role in this war already used up and her significance greatly depleted. All I could hope for was that she came out the other side.

The call cut off before she could reply, and I scowled at the suddenly empty holo-screen.

'Xander?' Eloria's sweet voice called, her concern for me clear. She was well aware of the relationship I had with Colonel Granger. Professionally, she may as well have been my military mother after taking me under her wing all those solars ago.

I sent her a sad smile, a small concession out of respect for our growing friendship. 'I'm fine, Eloria. Don't worry about me.'

Her answering deadpan look wasn't even slightly apologetic. 'Don't tell me not to worry about my friends, Xan. That will always be a given.'

I sighed but let it drop. Truthfully, her response filled me with a mixture of emotions that confused me. On the one hand, I was pleased at her referencing me as a friend, but something about that was bittersweet. Yes, we were friendly, but there was something about her that made a heat stir in my groin. A heat I hadn't entertained since I first discovered my feelings for Adara.

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It was a slow burn, just like the realisation, which curled in my lower abdomen. I was attracted to Eloria Stanson.

‘Where’s Reece?’ Addy asked, and I swivelled to turn what I was sure was guilty eyes on her only to find her not even looking in our direction. Now wasn’t the time for such frivolous things, however, so I schooled my features back into my professional mask.

‘Hangar bay,’ I told her.

‘They called,’ she stated, finally turning her eyes on me.

My chin dipped in confirmation. ‘Colonel Granger is alive, though I wouldn’t say she is well.’

She took a deep breath through her nose and exhaled slowly. ‘I see. Are you okay?’

‘Fine,’ I lied, and I was glad no one called me out on it. ‘You need to get in position. Everyone is just waiting on us.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said, and for the first time it wasn’t even sarcastic.

The remaining three came back to us just as she stood, and we explained the situation. Cadmus reluctantly joined Addy as she left, but Bromm stayed behind. He would be staying on the ship with Artemis, his role one I almost envied. Since he had been ill before we left he was the only one we could really allow to stay behind. Well, besides Tormik, but it seemed he was blending into the wall a little too well since

even Addy had yet to notice him.

I glanced over my shoulder to confirm that he was, indeed, still in the room and hadn't snuck out and, sure enough, there he stood. The others followed my line of sight and the guard received a range of mixed reactions. Artemis scrunched her nose as if she'd smelled something bad, Bromm and Cadmus both looked curious, and Addy raised an accusing eyebrow at me, clearly figuring out his presence was my doing.

'Come on, Cadmus. Let's get in position.' Addy grabbed his hand and he let her lead him from the room. He cast one last sorrowful glance behind him at Artemis and Bromm before the door blocked him off, and Artemis released a shaky breath as she stared after them.

'Captain,' I called for her attention which she gave without further delay.

'Go,' she ordered, slipping a small metal ball into my hand. I didn't wait around for goodbyes. The only ones who were remaining on this ship were the children, the volunteers, and everyone left in the cockpit. The rest of us had our own jobs to do.

I hurried to catch up with Addy and Cadmus, reaching them just before the elevator door closed to take them all the way to the lower deck. The space was small and cramped with the three of us inside, My larger size alongside the bulk of Cadmus's wings had us squished together, poor Addy crushed between us.

Exiting the elevator wasn't any better. Throngs of soldiers milled about the hangar bay, the large laundry carts that were used to transport the children were pushed to one side, and an amber light flashed above to signal the incoming boarding mid-space. We pushed our way to the centre and everyone quietened down when they saw me, turning expectantly while they awaited their instructions.

‘The enemy is boarding!’ I called. ‘Remember, act as if you are preparing for your arrest. Do not fight back until we are on their ship.’

I paused to give them time to ask any questions but continued when they remained silent, raising the spherical device Artemis had provided me in the air for them all to see. ‘I have in my possession device that will remove our cuffs. Wait for me to free you, and then we’ll show those fuckers exactly who they’re messing with.’

Cheers arose from all angles, deafening in as they bounced around the chamber.

The air lock alarm blared and everyone settled down, turning to face the door and wait. The amber light turned red as the ship jolted, the connection between the two ships now made, and then the airlock doors opened. A few clicks later, the hangar bay door opened to reveal a contingency of soldiers, weapons already pointing at us.

‘Hands in the air!’ a male voice boomed.

We complied.

The soldiers swarmed us, roughly yanking our hands behind our backs and snapping handcuffs around our wrists. I almost broke when they were too rough with Addy. They knocked her over only to catch her by the handcuffs and pulled her up by her arms, but as they were behind her back they almost pulled them clean out of the sockets. She winced as they pulled them straight up, her shoulders straining against the assault.

We were dragged through the bridge connecting the two ship, a few of the soldiers staying behind to clear our ship for any of us that had decided to hide. They would be in for a shock when they realised they weren’t hiding and were about to walk right into our trap.

As they herded us through their ship, an array of personnel lining the halls, I could only hope that our plan would work. Uniformed officers glaring at us while white-coated scientists stared at us with a hunger that chilled me to my bones, and I couldn't stop myself from searching the crowd for Addy. I'd lost her in the scuffle of bodies, her frame too small and slight to keep track of amid so many larger bodies. I caught sight of the top of Cadmus's head, his mousy brown hair usually neatly smooth back was mussed, little pieces flopping down over his forehead as he, too, searched the crowd. He relaxed slightly when he saw me, his eyes darting to the soldiers beside him. They parted just enough for me to catch a glimpse of a sliver of pink, and my own heart rate lowered at the knowledge that at least Addy had one of us beside her.

After all, I had a pretty strong gut feeling that I would be separated from the bunch to face interrogation. They seemed to believe I was still the reigning captain. They would soon learn that was a fatal mistake.

???

I was right to assume they would separate me from the others.

The holding cell I had been waiting in for the past few turns was small and contained only the bare necessities. A metal cot with a thin mattress, pillow, and blanket, a toilet in the corner with a small sink beside it, and that was it. It was cold, but there were more important things to worry about than the temperature of the room. I didn't think they'd kill me with the conditions, but I was prepared for discomfort. It was a method of information extraction I had used in the past myself.

My biggest issue was that I had searched high and low for any sign of surveillance only to find none, but I still felt that prickle on the back of my neck telling of watchful eyes. I needed to get the skeleton key device from my pocket to release myself from my shackles, but I couldn't risk it when I didn't know what angle to shift

my body to hide my actions.

I was about to scan the room again when the locks snicked on the door before it slid open to reveal the two people I had very strong feelings for, plus a third I was unfamiliar with. Colonel Granger stepped through, her frame startlingly thinner and more frail than the last time I had seen her in person. She was flanked by two scientists, one a tall, thin man salt-and-pepper hair and a chillingly empty expression. I knew him to be Doctor Demari. The second scientist, a woman, was short and plump, her own hair streaked through with strands of silver as it was pulled back into a low ponytail at the base of her skull. Her nose crinkled in a sour expression as she stared down at me with brazen derision, her beady eyes hard and judgemental. I had never seen her before, but she fit the description Artemis had given of the other scientist Jorna had been guarding back on Nova Station.

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My stomach clenched at the reminder of her betrayal, and not just hers. Markus was still hanging around somewhere, and I was glad it wasn't him that had come to interrogate me. I didn't think I'd have been able to remain level-headed enough. I probably would have torn out his throat with my teeth for what he'd done. To Katira and her roommate, to Tarren, Reece, Addy... me. His secrets cut the deepest, a pure evil that rivalled even the scientists that had torn into the people I cared about. His was untamed, a feral sort of malignancy that opposed The Program's neat, organised, emotionless tendencies.

Markus Fletcher was tumour that needed to be ripped out of the source and left to wither away into nothing more than ash and dust.

I didn't bother to stand to greet them, refusing to give them any form of respect. At least two out of the three had not earned it, and I still couldn't be sure if Granger had been compromised or not. Instead, I kept my eyes intent on Colonel Granger, though I knew the scientists were the biggest threat in the room. I wanted them to believe I was underestimating them so they would, in turn, underestimate me.

'Alexander Hironimus,' Granger addressed me. 'We're going to ask you a few questions. You will provide truthful answers only, do you understand? We will know if you lie.'

Her eyes darted to the hovering scientists who took turns to remove small square device from their pockets that they attached to their holo-tabs as they eyed me with a cold expectancy. I assumed they would somehow allow them to keep track of my biological responses. Pocket lie detectors. Of course, they would invent such a thing.

‘Yes, ma’am. I understand.’ I kept my tone even while I inched my hands towards the pocket in my jumpsuit. I didn’t know how their interrogation would pan out and I felt better to have the option of freedom within grasp.

The scientists remained standing, almost as if they were guarding Granger as she produced a metal chair from the floor and sat facing me, just barely out of reach. I supposed they were. If they suspected she was working against them then it made sense for them to be keeping a close eye on her.

‘Alex, I need you to tell me where the subjects are,’ she said, her tone hard but her eyes soft and pleading while the others couldn’t see.

‘Which subjects?’ I ask obstinately, though there was legitimacy in my question. ‘You’ll need to be more specific.’

‘All of them. Any of them. Just tell us what you know.’

I shrugged then leaned back against the metallic wall. The cold seeped into my skin and burrowed deep, but I used the sensation to keep me in the present.

‘Alex,’ she tried again, this time a little more forcefully. ‘I can’t help you if you don’t help me...us,’ she quickly corrected, her shoulder tensing at the blunder. I wondered what it was they were threatening her with if she was so eager to try to drag the information they sought out of me, of all people.

‘I don’t know. Not here.’

The scientists studied the results of my answer but I couldn’t read any emotions reflected over what they found.

‘What about the children? Where are the youngest subjects?’

I shrugged again, settling in for the long-haul. 'Don't know.'

'Reece and Adara?' she pushed.

'I don't know what you want me to say. I don't know where they are.'

The female scientist stepped forward, her scowl so deep her eyes were nothing more than slits as she waved the little device in front of my face. 'Subjects NS-001 and NS-002 are on board this ship. They were apprehended with the rest of you, so that's one lie confirmed, Mister Hironimus,' she spat, dropping my title in an obvious attempt to rattle me while she called me out. I was getting quite used to Artemis taking over my position, so it didn't work, and I didn't owe these bastards the truth so they wouldn't be getting it from me regardless.

But one thing made me frown in confusion. 'Subjects NS-001 and NS-002?'

'You will have known them as the criminals named Reece Hastings and Adara Brin, but as their rights have been stripped from them so have their identities. They are now property of The Program and will be addressed as such,' the woman sneered and I fought every instinct within me not to leap over Granger and throttle the bitch.

With a herculean effort I managed to keep my face void of all emotion as I responded to her unspoken threats. 'I don't know what you want me to tell you. You might have Addy and Reece in your custody again, but that doesn't mean I know anything about the others. Did you consider the possibility that Artemis took the kids on another ship?'

Her lips pinched as she stepped forward, attempting to intimidate me. It was an unsuccessful attempt due to the fact that she was about a third of my size, clearly not trained in combat if her portliness was any indication, and her face was turning a rather amusing shade of purple. Granger rose a single, weathered hand to stop her

progress, however, and stood from her seat. The chair slid back into its spot in the floor. That action alone let me know this conversation was about to be cut short.

‘Last chance, Alex. You won’t like what happens next if you don’t cooperate. Obstinace will not help you.’

When my lips didn’t even twitch, hers pursed in disapproval before the scientists pocketed the devices. Granger turned and left the room. Demari was hot on her heels and I wasn’t sad to see either of them go, though I did pause to wonder why he hadn’t spoken up once in that entire interaction. The nameless woman remained for a moment longer, scrutinising me with a simmering rage I was all too happy to incur, and then she, too, left the room.

As soon as the lock snicked on the door I was moving, the ball-like device in my hands. I felt around for the hidden divot and pressed down when I found it. A barely perceptible hum emanating from it followed by a click, and then the handcuffs holding my arms behind my back slid off my wrists.

I put on a show for the cameras by keeping my hands pinned behind my back and holding onto the cuffs, but I needed to get a move on if our plan was going to work in time. I shot up off the bed and pressed an ear against the door, listening for any signs of life outside the room. I was relieved when I caught the sound of someone’s heavy breathing just on the other side. At least they weren’t stupid enough to leave me unguarded, but they were going to be in for a shock when they realised that wasn’t enough. Perhaps Granger wasn’t a complete write-off if she hadn’t given them the full scope of my capabilities, though I suspected if they wanted to know then they would just look it up. Even if they didn’t have authorised access to my files they would have just hacked into them regardless.

On a positive note, there was only one individual guarding my door which meant I would be able to get the drop on them as soon as I burst through. Still, I waited for a

few more clicks just to be sure, and when I heard no other signs of life I placed the tiny orb against the locking mechanisms and listened to the low whir as it worked its magic. The locks retracted noisily so I didn't waste any time shoving out into the hallway, immediately jabbing the guard in the throat with my knuckles before he could process what was happening in time to react.

He bowled over with a wheeze, clutching at his throat, leaning right into my grasp as I gripped his head and smashed it into the doorframe, disorienting him further. I did it again, then once more until he collapsed on the ground unconscious.

One guard dealt with quickly and easily, I scanned the corridor for more only to find it completely deserted. I knew I didn't have long until someone was alerted to my escape, so I rushed to open the next door down. A group of officers I was unfamiliar with were crammed inside the tiny space, but they grinned when they saw me, eager to get the show on the road.

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One after the other I released them from their restraints, the clang of metal against metal as they fell to the floor far too loud after the first one was free, so the others made sure to catch them before they could fall.

They followed me out, but while I headed for the door after that they continued on to dispose of any threats in our path.

We were deadly. We were silent. We struck quickly and efficiently, rounding up both soldier and scientist alike as we took over the ship. By the time they realised what was happening, it was too late.

The ship was ours.

CHAPTER 24

Bromm

It was such a relief to be back in my body with people and reality surrounding me over the endless void of the web. It was also interesting to see the evidence of what I'd been told for myself. Sure, we were in the midst of a war, but we were also building friendships and relationships and fighting the good fight.

Some might have called me crazy, but it was invigorating.

Or it could have just been my newfound strength and vitality thanks to the nanites. Either way, I felt amazing.

I allowed those sensations to run through me, invigorating me even further until I could no longer hold it in. I needed a release, and I needed one soon or I was going to burst.

Stepping up behind Arty, I wrapped my arms around her middle to pull her back flush against my front and ground my quickly hardening cock against her ass. What made it even better was that she was still as strong as ever but my strength now matched hers, so while before she could have easily stepped out of my grasp, now I was able to hold her still as I showed her how I felt.

A small moan escaped her throat, teasing more desire from me as she ground her ass back against me.

‘Stop it, Bromm. Now’s not the time,’ she protested, but it was weak and her words warred with her actions.

I scraped my sharp teeth against her earlobe and nuzzled my nose into her hair, breathing deeply her scent and adding the little breathy noises she made to the list of reasons why we should just bang it out on the holo-table, right here right now.

‘Why should I?’ I growled lowly by her ear, my lips and beard brushing against her neck. The tentacles tangled in her hair and yanked her head to the side to give me more access.

A throat cleared from behind us and then the man stationed against the wall forced me to stop with his words. ‘The enemy have boarded the ship, Captain.’

Artemis took my momentary lapse in attention to pull out of my grip, though she didn’t move far. Her fingers tangled with mine while she reset her body’s reaction to the unrepentant heat between us.

‘Right,’ she said, her tone professional despite the way her pupils were still blown wide with desire. They quickly shrank, however, when she narrowed her eyes on the Tornu still present. ‘And what are you still doing here, T?’

‘Tormik,’ he corrected.

‘Sorry?’

‘The use of our initials no longer serves a purpose now that they know who we are and what we’re up to. Call me Tormik.’

‘I think we have more important things to worry about than what I call you,’ she snarked, but he took it in stride.

‘You are correct.’

Arty frowned, displeased with his lack of push-back.

‘Xander and the crew have been arrested and taken on board their ship,’ Eloria interjected, drawing us back to the current situation that needed our attention. I wanted to feel guilty about my horniness, but I couldn’t bring myself to dredge up any remorse. I wanted my love, and I wanted herbad.

‘Focus, Bromm,’ Arty ordered, snapping her fingers in front of my face and drawing my eyes back up to hers from where they’d been staring longingly at her tits. The jumpsuits really didn’t leave much to the imagination, and I smirked when her nipples pebbled into hard points through the fabric at my lustful scrutiny.

It took a great effort but I stepped away, untangling our fingers since physical contact only seemed to make it worse. I knew as a Griknor Prince that I was typically always looking for my next hook-up, but this was more than that. And I wasn’t referring to

the fact that emotions were involved. It was like I needed to fuck, and not just anyone. I needed to fuck Artemis, and my body was urging me to do so regardless of our current circumstances.

That probably should have been the moment I snapped out of it after realising how wrong it was to be so narrowed in on my body's desire to release inside of the woman I loved, but, again, I just couldn't bring myself to care.

'What's wrong with him?' I heard Tormik ask, though I was far too focused on the way Arty's well-toned ass strained against the fabric of her jumpsuit and how I wanted to sink my teeth into that flesh and then fuck the hole they hid.

'I don't know...' Arty replied, slapping my hands away as I moved to grab her again. My cock pushed against my own jumpsuit, my lower tentacles working together to rip free from the fabric. I needed to be inside her. Now.

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‘Bromm, stop,’ Arty tried again and a vicious growl sounded from beside her, a warning from Dave Junior that I did not heed. It was like I was now listening to their voices from the other side of divide, the sound muted and fuzzy.

I inhaled her scent again, breathing it in so it would settle inside my lungs and never leave. She smelled vaguely of salt, but not like the ocean. More like a wet coin. Metallic, I realised. But above that, there was a more prominent scent, like the most alluring ambrosia calling to me for a taste.

Just one nibble. A little one.

Arms wrapped around me and yanked, pulling me off balance for a beat and causing me to fall into a tall, large, muscular frame. I settled in, enjoying the sensation for a moment as I ground my ass against the bulging cock nestled against his leg. It was soft, but I could have changed that.

Only, that wasn’t right. I didn’t want him. I wanted Arty. I needed to insert my seed deep inside her womb and implant a baby. Our baby. Yes, that was what I needed.

I reached for my love again, desperate to put our baby inside her when those thick arms pulled me back again. Annoyed now, I shrugged out of them, pushing the large male away so I had unfettered access to my love.

Just as my fingers brushed her shoulder, yet another person attempted to get in my way. I didn’t see who it was, nor did I care. My irritation at being denied my love, my release, and our future baby was rising into something far more sinister and I lashed out at whomever it was.

Blood spurted as I tore them apart, the ripping sounds of their limbs separating from their body music to my ears as I turned back to Arty to continue what we'd started.

Only, an entire army practically ran inside the room and got between us.

No. No, no, no, no, no!

I snarled, the sound more mechanical than biological but just as fierce. These bastards were in my way and I wasn't about to let them get away with it. They all had to die.

The haze blurring my vision tinted, first red until it bled to purple. Energy built within me and I pushed my hands towards the bastards who'd dared interrupt and released it with aboom!

The room settled down, but I tilted my head to listen as I waited for further signs of disruption. When none came, I turned back to Artemis, my sight clearing as my world revolved completely around her.

'What the fuck?' a male voice asked and I tensed, preparing to attack again if someone else attempted to halt our progress. I could feel my cum leaking from the tip of my cock, my balls heavy with the need to release their load. I needed to be inside Artemis now before I lost too much sperm. It was imperative that I didn't waste a single one to ensure the pregnancy took.

'I don't know, Tormik,' Artemis addressed the man behind me, and I snarled again at her attention being on anyone but me. 'Get Henrik.'

No. No man would come between us. Ever.

I lunged.

‘Get him now!’ she yelled, holding me at arm’s length.

‘Stop pushing me away, my love. I need you now. I need to unload inside you. I need to put a baby in you now. Please,’ I begged, desperate for her to let me in. She was wearing clothes, but then again so was I, so I finally pushed my tentacles through and shredded my jumpsuit from the waist down.

‘Stars above...’ someone else breathed, though I didn’t bother to check. I was going to fuck my woman, and I didn’t care who watched as long as they didn’t intervene.

We struggled some more, her reluctance confusing me but not deterring me from my goal.

‘Baby. We need to make a baby. I need to put a baby in you, my love. Why won’t you let me?’

My tentacles reached out for her from both my face and my groin but she somehow kept successfully avoiding them. I was getting frustrated, but I still wasn’t ready to give up. No, that wasn’t right, I couldn’t give up. It simply was not an option.

‘What’s happening?’ another male voice joined the fray and caused my urges to increase to a point where I felt like I was going to burn up if I didn’t get inside Arty soon. Sweat rolled down my back and slicked my hands which made holding onto an already slipping Artemis all the more difficult, but I kept trying.

‘He wants to impregnate me, Henrik, but he’s not himself and he won’t stop. I don’t know what to do!’

I paid no attention as the male mused aloud, using the distraction his presence presented to finally grab a hold of Arty. Unfortunately, I merely got to grind myself onto her fully clothed body briefly before she tore herself from my grip once again,

smacking my tentacles away as they attempted to keep her in place by wrapping around her hips, legs, waist... any part of her they could reach.

‘Okay. Tormik, make yourself useful and ensure the path is clear. I don’t want anyone getting on his bad side after...’ Artemis trailed off and I watched as she gestured around us with her head, her hands occupied with keeping me at bay.

‘Please, my love,’ I panted, my cock aching and my balls already clenching in preparation of my release. I was going to blow, and soon.

‘Now!’ she shouted and bolted from the room.

I whimpered, my erection causing more pain than pleasure now so I wrapped it in my tentacles for protection as I ran after her. Even still, the slightest touch sent both pleasure and pain rushing through me, the sensitivity almost too much to bear. Yet, the thought of coming and wasting all my life-giving essence outside of Artemis’s womb was even more unbearable, so I held on.

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I chased her through the hallways before eventually skidding to a halt when I lost sight of her. A moment later, movement from above clued me in to where she'd disappeared to and I found her glowing blue like a beautiful beacon beckoning me closer as she levitated on the ceiling.

'Come down, baby,' I called, my voice needy and breathless even to my own ears.

'Why don't you come up here?' she asked instead.

I frowned then decided she was right. If she wouldn't come down I would just have to meet her up there. I closed my eyes and focused, but the throbbing of my cock and the lubrication seeping from my tentacles that tingles along my shaft and dripped down my thighs made it impossible.

A sound of agonised defeat tore from my throat as I collapsed to my knees.

'Please.'

'Just a little further, Bromm. Just a little bit further and then you can put a baby in me, okay?' she placated, her offer appeasing me slightly, but not enough. My abdomen clenched, my orgasm approaching and I feared it would happen with or without me inside of her.

'No. Now. It has to be now.'

'Okay, baby,' she said, but she was moving away again. Panicked, I jumped back up to my feet, but I was too slow yet again. She shot down the hallway at a speed that

blurred her form and I struggled to track her. I took chase again, my lower tentacles working overtime to keep my overly sensitive cock from bouncing around and slapping against my me.

The world around me was a blur, the only clarity when I was focused on Artemis. I didn't see where she was taking me until it was too late, and I was suddenly restrained by multiple hands, my arms yanked behind me by someone with a strength that rivalled my own, and cold metal snapped around my wrists.

I snarled and writhed in their grip but the hands only tightened, sharp nails digging into my flesh and splitting open my skin. My lower tentacles joined in the fight, smacking away hands and squeezing arms as I struggled to make my way back to my love.

‘Arty! Please! I need to. It hurts. I have to. Don't do this!’

I was strapped down onto a solid surface before a sharp prick stabbed my neck, and then my eyes unfocused even more as I fell unconscious, my cock still straining as it reached for the only woman who could relieve it.

???

My entire body ached. I groaned as I woke, my vision blurry, ears ringing and brain foggy as I tried to piece together what was going on. I moved to rub the grit out of my eyes only to find my arms pinned into place.

‘Bromm...?’ Henrik's voice came from beside me, though he sounded more uncertain that I had ever heard him before.

‘Henrik? What's going on? What happened?’

‘You don’t remember?’

I shook my head no.

‘You tried to...’ he began, but then trailed off as if he didn’t want to tell me.

‘What happened, Henrik?’ I asked again, hard and demanding.

‘You attempted to assault Artemis,’ another voice I recognised drifted to me from somewhere else in the room. I couldn’t see where since I couldn’t even twist my head around to see.

My stomach dropped as I felt the blood rush from my head with dizzying speed.
‘What?’

‘The nanites,’ Henrik began slowly. ‘We believe we have discovered the reason for the transference. It seems Artemis’s nanites latched onto her desire to have children alongside her desire for you. You were raving about trying to impregnate her.’

‘Took a whole damn army to stop you, too,’ the other voice piped in, and it finally hit me who it belonged to.

‘Did I hurt her?’ I asked the Tornu that had claimed the position of her personal bodyguard whether she liked it or not. In this moment I was glad for it, though I’d never imagined I would become a threat to the woman we both loved.

‘No. She held you off, but you wouldn’t stop,’ he told me.

‘You weren’t yourself, Bromm,’ Henrik attempted to assure me, but there was nothing that could reassure me after I’d attempted to essentially rape the love of my life. How would I ever look her in the eye again? How could I ever trust myself

around her after this?

I felt a sudden kinship towards the Tornu that had once held a piece of Artemis's heart, and I suspected still did. If he felt like this after whatever had happened between them in the past, I suddenly understood him a whole lot better.

I heard more than saw the door open, light footsteps entering the room. My vision still wasn't much better than before and I was essentially blind, though I was glad that the ringing had finally died down and my head was clearing of fuzz.

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‘You’re awake,’ Artemis said, and my cock was rock hard in an instant, straining against whatever had been placed over my lap, because it was that moment when I realised I was completely bare from the groin down.

My breathing became laboured as I was hit with the most intense urge to release my seed deep inside of her, and I finally understood what they were talking about.

I was no longer in control of my body, and even now as I tried desperately to hold onto any semblance of my own will, I could feel it slipping away like water in a sieve.

‘Please,’ I begged.

‘What do I do?’ I heard her ask, her voice like its own caress over my aching cock, but it still wasn’t enough. I needed her hot channel squeezing me, milking me dry.

I needed her belly round with our child.

‘Fuck him, Arty. Giving into his body’s desires – and the nanites – might be the only way to bring him back.’

‘We don’t have time for this,’ she argued, and I whimpered with impatient yearning. Why wasn’t she already impaled on me?

‘I don’t see any other choice.’

A feminine sigh wrapped around me, almost matching my desire but not quite. ‘Fine.

Can we have some privacy this time, please?’

‘Of course. We’ll be right outside.’

Two pairs of feet stomped their way through the door before it closed behind them, shutting me in with the woman that needed to be clenching down on my shaft already. Thankfully, she didn’t make me wait long. A rustle of fabric assured me that she was undressing, and then naked flesh met mine as she climbed on top of me. Her core was raised just beyond my reach, though she emanated a heat that both assuaged some of my pain and simultaneously made it a hundred times worse.

I gazed up at her beautiful, heart-shaped face with all the love I could muster, my hips fighting against my restraints so I could shove all the way inside her with one thrust. Instead, deep brown eyes so dark in this light they were almost black gazed down upon me with concern, and then her lips touched mine as she finally, blessedly sank down onto my rigid cock. My tentacles, already weeping with lubricant that tingled as it made contact with my hot, needy flesh, immediately latched onto her hips, holding her in place as she gyrated against me. The friction was just as delicious as her tongue against mine as we rocked together, hips flush against the other’s.

Unable to move due to the restraints, I was helpless beneath her ministrations as she took full advantage of my plight. Deft fingers tweaked and flicked at my nipples, tugging on them gently at first until she was pulling them so hard I felt she might tear them straight off my chest. The action drew a deep, vibrating moan from my chest, the pain only adding to the pleasure of our lovemaking.

‘I love you,’ I breathed into her mouth.

‘I love you too, Bromm. Always.’

Her words were the last little push I needed for my balls to draw up as come gushed

from my tip. Her body devoured spurt after spurt, the ongoing stream of semen no match for the way her greedy cunt guzzled it all up.

The effect was immediate. As my come was drained from my balls directly into Arty's uterus, so was the hazy sheet that had covered my sight. Clarity hit me like a slap in the face, and I stared up at the woman I loved, horror filling every inch of my being.

'I... I'm so sorry. I didn't... I don't...Fuck!'

My cock still buried as deep as it could go inside her, she grabbed my face in both of her hands and pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead, my cheeks, the tip of my nose, and finally my lips.

'You have nothing to apologise for, baby. If anything, it's just another thing to add to the list for why we hate The Program. They created the nanites. You did nothing wrong.'

'I tried torape you,' I cried, tears streaming from my eyes and blurring my vision yet again. I let them. I deserved to be blind.

'No, Bromm. You didn't. The nanites did, but it seemed they've been appeased.'

'For how long?' I whispered, unable to get more of my voice out through the growing lump in my throat.

'Baby, if all I need to do is fuck you to fix this, then I'm not hard done by. My concern isn't about me, it's about you. How are you feeling now?'

My eyes stung as tears threatened to break free, but I refused to let them. This wasn't about me, no matter what she said. I could no longer trust myself around her without

risking the nanites attempting to hurt her through me. I was no longer a safe space for her, and that killed me.

‘Bromm,’ she snapped, tilting my chin up so our eyes could connect again. Through my own watery sheen I noticed hers were also glazed with emotion. ‘I want you to hear me. I do not blame you. You have done nothing wrong. Nothing. I love you, and that hasn’t changed. Now answer my question. How are you feeling now?’

‘Better,’ I croaked.

‘Good. I’m going to release you now, okay?’

I inhaled sharply, panic settling itself beside the self-loathing and I shook my head rapidly. ‘No, don’t.’

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‘You’re not going to hurt me, baby. I promise.’

‘You can’t know that,’ I argued.

‘I can, and I do. There’s nothing you can do to me that hasn’t already been done before, and there isn’t a moment where I won’t consent to you, do you hear me? You have my eternal, unwavering consent.’

‘But-‘

‘No, Bromm. There isn’t anything left to say about it. You didn’t hurt me, you were never going to, and I’m not complaining about needing to fuck you to make you feel better.’

‘Why are you so sure?’ I asked her.

‘I have spent my entire life being tortured both physically, mentally, and emotionally. Things were done to me that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy, and I’ve also been forced to do things to others I wish I could take back, but I can’t. I’m not a good person, Bromm, even if I wouldn’t call myself a bad person either. I’ve had to do terrible things just to survive, and I would do them again in a heartbeat. Our lives are not so black and white, especially with the nanites coursing through our veins and altering the very core of our beings.’

‘You have shown me grace on countless occasions, and now it’s time for me to do the same for you. Please don’t let this weigh you down. We’ve figure out a way to stop it, even if it turns out to be temporary, but looking back isn’t going to fix things. The

only thing we can do is look to the future, support each other, and I'm telling you now, you're stuck with me. I'm not leaving you over something that was out of your control, so no moping, got it?'

I choked on a disbelieving laugh, my love for this woman swelling to heights I could never had imagined existed. 'Okay. No moping.'

She grinned at me before swinging her leg around and de-straddling me. My lower tentacles stroked down the naked flesh of her thighs before curling back up at the base of my shaft that slid from her wet heat with a slick pop.

'Good. About time we got that cleared up. Dave Junior's been scratching at the door since I left him outside,' she teased.

My eyes widened with alarm. 'Oh, shit. He's not gonna try to eat me now, is he?'

She shrugged nonchalantly, though I was feeling anything but. 'Probably not, but make sure you're not alone with him just in case.'

I huffed another disbelieving laugh. 'Right.'

She unlocked my restraints, freeing my limbs from their cage, and then tossed me a fresh jumpsuit as she redonned her own. One glance down at my half naked body and it was clear what had happened.

'Come on, baby. We've still got work to do,' she said once we were covered again and opened the door. Dave Junior bounding in to place himself protectively in front of her. My chest clenched with guilt, but she told him off and he obeyed her order to move aside.

Dave Junior may have been walking on her other side, but he still managed to crane

his neck around her to level me with his best warning glare. I was going to have to do damage control with the beast too, it seemed.

We were met with a crowd of our friends as we exited the room. Tormik was closest since he was guarding the door, but Henrik leaned casually against the wall beside him. Cadmus and Reece were eyeing me with concern while Addy threw herself on me, her arms wrapping tightly around my larger frame with a strength that should not have been possible with someone so small.

Xander chuckled as he pried her from me and patted me on the shoulder. 'You've got to stop scaring us like that, Bromm. You good now?'

I cleared my throat uncomfortably while I shifted my weight from foot to foot. 'Um, well I'm not feeling like a raging lunatic at the moment, so I guess so.'

'Glad to have you back,' he said, then was apparently done with the conversation because he turned his back to me to address Artemis. 'You need to get back to the other ship, Captain. We need to disconnect the ships before you enter the asteroid field.'

'Of course,' she said, grabbing my hand and tugging me along behind her. 'We'll see you on the other si-'

'Captain!' a voice shouted as feet booted feet stampeded down the hallway. It was a harried looking, Tarren, of all people, who turned the corner. His wild-eyed gaze and mussed hair, like he'd been anxiously running his fingers through it drew me up short. Something was wrong.

'What is it?' she asked him, her voice hard.

'You need to see this. And you, sir,' he gestured to Xander.

‘See what?’ Addy asked, stepping protectively in front of her lover. It was a strange sight, what with her head only coming up to his waist, but I knew she was more than capable of disposing of anyone who dared try to attack him. Not that I believe Tarren was going to attack. No, he seemed far more likely to faint from the way the blood had dropped from his sheet-white face.

‘We’ve received a transmission on the bridge. A video.’

‘A video of what?’

He hesitated, his eyes darting nervously to Xander before scanning the rest of us for any indication we would attack him for relaying this message. His eyes lingered a little longer on Reece, though he quickly averted them to level them back on Artemis.

‘Hostages, Captain. The pirates... They have hostages.’

CHAPTER 25

Artemis

We hurried down the unfamiliar corridors and rode up an elevator that was at least three times the size of our own, which allowed us all to fit inside a lot more comfortably and we didn't have to take multiple trips to get everyone to the top deck.

When we entered the bridge I was struck speechless by the most ridiculously high-tech room I had ever seen on a ship. Rather than a hologram displaying our surroundings outside the ship, the walls were large screens with coloured, lifelike depictions of that gave the illusion that the room was made up entirely of windows. There were no physical consoles but rather holographic buttons that floated around us individually as soon as we entered, giving each of us access to the ship's controls. The space was vast and open, no objects or pieces of furniture taking up space. Instead, chairs levitated independently as if there was no gravity, allowing more freedom for manoeuvring amongst one another.

I was sure I would uncover even more advanced gadgets if I looked, but I wasn't here for that. Disappointment panged in my chest, but I brushed it off, disgust replacing all other emotions as I took in the fact that these assholes were hoarding so many technological advancements to themselves when things like this could make the Intergalactic Union so much more accessible to so many people. The chairs alone could provide mobility to those who couldn't walk, yet I didn't even need to ask to know that they would remain under the scope of The Program and their military counterparts. The extent of their greed was almost a physical blow to the rest of us.

My revulsion grew as I took in the people dotted around the room. Lined up along the walls were an array of soldiers and scientists alike in various degrees of consciousness, all of them bound, a few of them bruised and bloody. Those were the ones that had put up a fight, then, but we would have to watch out for all of them. Underestimating the enemy never worked in anyone's favour.

I scanned the faces and froze when I caught sight of three I recognised, one of them more intimately than all the others. Demari's soulless eyes were already boring holes into my face as I waltzed into the room like I owned the place. Well, I technically did now, though that little secret would remain for as long as we could keep it hidden. I smirked at him. Their oversight was our winning card.

He scowled at my smugness, likely assuming I was gloating over their defeat. Truthfully, hijacking their ship was easier and quicker than I thought it would be, but I wasn't ready to let my guard down. Not here, not ever. There was no saying what tricks these bastards held up their sleeves, which was why I was pleased to see guards from my own crew keeping a close watch on them.

I tore my eyes away from the man responsible for making my entire life hell to inspect the unconscious woman beside him. Colonel Granger was indeed frail and malnourished, dark bruising circling her eyes indicative of the stress she'd been under for stars only knew how long. Her weight loss could have been from the same cause or from mistreatment by The Program. My bet was a little bit of both. Her hair was also cause for alarm, the strands no longer lush and smooth but stringy, greasy, and more grey than I recalled from our last encounter only a few days ago.

I wasn't too sad about it, however, when my gaze moved onto the next woman. She was also unconscious but seemed to be in significantly better health than Granger. I recognised her as the scientist that had stood beside Demari during our escape from Nova Station. Her face was slack as she slept, the wrinkles lining her features smoothed out without the presence of her scowl. She looked almost peaceful, though

I was sure that would change when she eventually woke. I hadn't had any personal experiences with her before, so I didn't know how she would react to being stripped of her power and her freedom, but I was almost eager to find out. Would she scream and fight, throwing a tantrum to get her way? I doubted it. No, she seemed more like the type to seethe silently, patiently awaiting her moment to strike back.

A finger tapped me on my right shoulder and I jerked away before I realised it was just Henrik.

'Can I get back to the other ship, Captain? I'm not sure I'm needed for this.'

'He should stay, too. They should all stay,' Tarren argued, and my curiosity swelled alongside the dread that had settled low in my gut.

'Stay for now, Henrik. Just in case,' I told him, and he nodded his acquiescence, moving back to take his position beside Cadmus, but the latter stepped forward to take the empty spot to my left. Bromm was on my right kept there only by our connected hands. For that reason I wasn't willing to let go.

I addressed Tarren. 'Okay, show us this video.'

He nodded towards a woman I didn't recognise, but she was wearing one of the black jumpsuits from our ship so she was clearly one of us. She lifted a finger and tapped on the holographic buttons in front of her until a small blue light popped up. She pinched it between her thumb and forefinger and then widened them until it was large enough to see a small, compressed image. Her other hand rose to repeat the action on a grander scale and then she chucked it at the walls. While most of the screens maintained their other functions, one wall was overtaken by the image of a man of ambiguous descent draped in jewels that jangled together whenever he moved. They adorned his fingers, his neck, both wrists and arms, up and down his ears, clumps of his hair, and even his teeth.

Flanking him were two similar-looking men, also glinting with an array of multicoloured jewels and precious metals, though the first man clearly had more. A symbol of status perhaps? Either way, I knew what these men were.

Pirates.

The leader spoke with a deep, hoarse voice that spoke of how much he had abused his throat and his lungs with recreational smoke. ‘Good even’n’, good sirs.’ He grinned, revealing diamond-encrusted teeth set in gold that looked more like they were rotting than expensively bedazzled. ‘’Ere’s tha’ vid ya’ll request’d. Got a bunch o’ screamers, ‘ere, sirs. Pretty ones, too. ‘Ope ya’ll don’ mind if we ‘as a li’le nibble.’

I felt my face twist with repulsion as I watched him, but when he moved away from the video the outline of his erect cock strained against his pants as a dark spot formed at the tip, precum seeping through the thin fabric. Whatever was happening, he was getting off on it.

‘Ugh, fuck. That’s just nasty,’ Addy gagged as he moved away from the camera, hands cupping his junk as he adjusted it inside his pants.

The image shook as the perspective changed like someone was behind the camera and moving it to point at something else. That something else turned out to be a roughly chiselled rock tunnel stacked full of cages of differing sizes. Each cage contained multiple people. From young children to the elderly, it clearly didn’t matter to these bastards who they stuffed inside them, but I was shocked to see more than the kids. I shouldn’t have been, since Tarren had claimed the pirates were holding hostages.

Their features were difficult to distinguish beneath the thick layer of grime coating their skin and matting their hair. The huddled together inside their cramped prisons, holding onto one another both with fear and likely an attempt to keep warm for they

were also completely stripped naked, not a stitch of clothing or blankets in sight.

But what the camera was truly focusing on was the single woman chained up in the centre of the room, the only hostage still retaining their covered state. Unfortunately, she was dangling from the ceiling by her wrists that were encased in shackles, the chains leading to hooks embedded in the rock. Below, her ankles were also shackled much the same way to the floor. The effect was that she was restrained into a star-like position, stretched so thin she wouldn't be able to move without dislocating a limb.

She may have been covered in clothes, but they were threadbare and torn, most of it hanging in shorn strips from her beaten and bloody form. Blood dripped from wounds I could tell were made from a variety of weapons. There were cuts made from knives, welts and slashes clearly caused by a whip, and even chunks of her hair were missing, torn from her head so hard that pieces of her scalp had come loose with it.

A whip snapped and a moment later the woman's back bowed, a scream tearing from her throat, hoarse and pained. Another snap, another scream. They seemed to get bored of that pretty quickly, however, because the leader stepped back into the frame, slowly prowling closer as the woman whimpered and begged.

'Please, no. Please, don't. Please, I'm begging you. Don't do this. Please let me go. I swear I won't tell. No, stop. Please, no!'

The sound of fabric rendering echoed throughout the room with her pleas, and the piece of shit on screen chuckled darkly. 'You beg so good, precious. Your tears make me so hard. I can't wait t' make ya scream for help. No one's comin' to save you, precious girl.'

I winced at the pet name, the same one the very man whose eyes I could still feel burning holes into my back used on me. I couldn't stop my reaction even if I'd tried, and both Bromm and Cadmus stiffened beside me as they recognised it as well, each

of them squeezing my hands reassuringly.

The woman attempted to pull away as the pirate dropped his pants to the floor and stepped out, his cock bent at an odd angle as it pointed in her direction. Its head was bulbous and an angry purple colour, the tip glistening with thick, milky precum. He stepped closer and she tried to pull away, but she was stuck. That didn't stop her though when his hands napped out to dig his fingers into her bare breasts, one of the only parts of her body that hadn't already been decimated by their abuse.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:01 am

When he rubbed his cock against her core she let out an anguished scream, the sound burning with fury and injustice. She pulled even harder against her restraints, but they were too strong for her to break. Instead, a sickening pop sounded as both arms were yanked from their sockets, her shoulders now disfigured as her screams turned into agonised cries.

And then, with a malicious laugh, the evil son of a bitch drove himself home with one thrust, pinning her onto him while tears steadily tracked down her cheeks and her cried petered off. She'd passed out, but the fucker kept thrusting, grunting into her neck before he bit down and marked her with his teeth. When he pulled away, his lips were painted red with her blood that dripped down his chin, and his tongue lapped it up, grinning lecherously at the camera.

A child whimpered in the background and that was what finally broke me.

'Turn it off,' I ordered, my voice deceptively quiet despite my inner turmoil.

'Captain, it's not over...' Tarren began, but I cut him off.

'I said, turn it off.'

'The end is important, Captain. Why don't I just skip it?' he offered instead.

My nostril flared, a small show of my distress leaking through. 'Fine.'

The video skipped to a part that focused solely on the pirate again. There were various sounds of anger from my crew, but I ignored them to listen to what this

fucker apparently needed to say.

‘Alexander Hironimus. Stand down, or your sister ‘ere gets more of my seed, and this time it’ll be down ‘er throat and up ‘er ass,’ he laughed maniacally.

‘What...’ Xander breathed out, horror and terror bleeding through his expression as the video panned back to the beaten, unconscious woman still dangling from the chains. The camera moved closer to give us a clear view of her entire body starting from her toes, all of which were broken, moving up her legs to a bloodied centre, the skin of her torso peeled back grotesquely in too many places to count, lingering on her dislocated shoulders, until it finally came to rest on her face.

‘No...’ Xander choked out. ‘No, please, no.’

I took a closer look at the woman and though I couldn’t see much past the swelling on her face distorting her features, I could picture what she’d look like beneath it all. The image was a familiar one, to more than just me and Xander. She was a famous singer whose songs I heard on a regular basis throughout the Intergalactic Union. This woman was Amarantha Hironimus, Xander’s younger sister.

The man in question bellowed out a roar of pure rage and turned his agonised fury on the line-up of our enemies against the wall. I watched as his eyes clashed with Demari’s, his face twisted into a primal sort of wrath that promised retribution as he stomped over to the scientist that had caused us all some sort of pain and suffering and planted his fist in his face. Over and over he wailed on him, beating him down into the floor while those around him woke up at the ruckus and tried to scuttle out of the way.

‘It’s still not over, Captain,’ Tarren informed me sullenly, the emotion one I never thought I’d see from him.

I turned away from where Xander moved onto the next scientist and began

pummelling them one after the other, Addy hovering nearby as she watched on carefully with tears tracking down her cheeks. My attention moved back to the screen where the video was still playing, only it wasn't Amarantha that was in frame now. Instead, the camera panned over the dirty faces of those in the cages. One by one my fellow friends and crew members gasped in horror as they recognised their loved ones.

Reece crashed to his knees when the camera settled on an emaciated Terran woman clutching desperately, fearfully, to a Yu'Rom male, two words a mere whisper on his lips. 'Ma... Pa...'

It dawned on me then. We had believed that their loved ones were safe from The Program if we didn't contact them. It was why Urman moped about most days since he was unable to contact his fiancé and missed her dearly. The same could be said for the others, but we had been so wrong.

The Program had abducted their loved ones and were holding them as leverage to ensure our compliance. But as I took in the wet cheeks and laboured breaths of my friends I was sure of one thing.

They still believed they had us by the balls, but they'd fucked up. They had no idea we were coming for them, and they were going to wish they'd never been born before we were done with them.

It was time to rain hell on our enemies and stamp them out once and for all.

To be continued...