



When She Wishes

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: Payton needs help on her farm. Heavily pregnant from a one-night-stand, she can't manage all the manual labor and is supposed to be on bedrest. An alien man from a cat-like warrior race arrives on her doorstep with an offer to work for room and board. Bodhrri will get to stay on the planet, and Payton will get an extra pair of hands to help out until her babies (yup, plural) are born. Tiny problem – he's the father of her unborn children and he had no idea until now she was pregnant. Is this a secret baby plot? (No, it's secret BABIES.)

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Chapter

One

BODHRRI

There's a knot in my throat as I pack my bag. I fold up my clothes, toss my data pad in after them, and add in my favorite mug. As a contracted worker, I don't have much to my name. It's easiest to be able to pack up and go at a moment's notice. At least, that's the line of thinking. But after fifteen years of bouncing around from job site to job site, I've found a place that it's keffing killing me to leave.

I'm in love with Risda III, and I can't stay.

My contract is over as of today, the dock expansion I and the rest of my crew were hired to work on finally completed. It's the first time I've ever been planet-side. I grew up on a station. Most of my jobs have been maintenance types on various other deep-space stations.

I never knew what I was missing. Planets have fresh air. And birds. And grasses. And stars at night.

I'm going to miss the stars more than anything.

Well, almost as much as the fresh air and the fact that my lungs feel clear here.

But I can't stay. Even if I had the credits to afford to abandon my job—I don't—Risda

III is a closed world. It belongs to some rich mesakkah lord who keeps humans and sets them up on land here. Like all the laborers, I've been told to avoid the humans. I've been mostly successful at it, too. Now I wish I was one, because I'd get to stay here forever.

There's not a lot of luck out in the universe for a praxiian that comes from a poor family house, though. I can't even honorably join the armed forces or try my luck as a gladiator, thanks to my piss-poor lungs. I spent my formative years in the lowest parts of a poorly-working space station, only to destroy my lungs before I reached an age to join the military. There's no chance for me to make my fortune, so I have to take what scraps the universe offers me. Normally I've made my peace with it. Easier to be at ease with your job when every place you go to is shit.

Hits different when you're sent to paradise and told you can't stay.

I drag my feet for as long as possible, but there's only so much time I can spend packing my bag. Then there's nothing to do but leave my small rented apartment and head into Risda III's one settlement to get my contract signed off and so I can get paid. I head out of the apartments for the last time and into the bright morning sunlight. I squint up at the sky, but it's endlessly blue with a few puffy clouds drifting overhead. No stars.

Damn. I really wanted to see the stars one last time. They always make me think of that woman and that one night. The human woman who told me all about stars and wishing. Never saw her again, but I think about her all the time. Wherever she is, I hope she's happy. I hope she loves this planet every bit as much as I do.

I head out, crossing through the small town that's sprung up just outside the space port. There's a small cluster of buildings that line one street, and not much else. That's how the lord thatowns this place prefers it, I'm told. I see a few humans walking about, but no one approaches me. Praxiians aren't popular on this planet. Kef, I think

most males of any species aren't popular on this planet. I've noticed that most of the residents here are female and human. Anyone not human has to be ready to show paperwork at any and all times, and I notice there's a Port custodian patrolling the street. His gaze lands on me and he watches me closely as I keep my head down and head for the custodian office to get my work contract stamped so I can get paid. I don't want to cause trouble here. It's the last thing I want. One of the things that's so appealing about Risda is how very peaceful it is.

More thoughts that should never come from a praxiian.

As I always do when I go into town, I scan the residents walking the street and peer into the buildings, looking for a familiar head of long blonde hair atop a very short female. I hate that I never caught her name, and I was hoping to talk to her one more time before I left. But today, like every other day, she's simply not here. Sometimes I wonder if I imagined her.

The custodian office is quiet this early in the morning. One custodian has a woman seated across from his desk, and another is busy typing something into his data pad. I wait for them to notice me, and when the second male looks up and spots me, he waves me over.

"How can I help you?" Custodian Sinath (according to his name plate) inquires.

I pull up my contract on my data pad and hold it out to him so they can sync.
"Completed work. I need a sign off."

"Of course."

I hold my hand out so he can check my identification chip against my records, and watch as he flicks through my contract. "I don't suppose that you're hiring? Here in the custodian office?"

He looks up at me in surprise. "We're actually stationed here by Homeworld."

"Ah." Figures. Explains why they're all mesakkah, too.

"You're looking for more work? I'm afraid I don't know of any construction companies on any of the stations?—"

"I actually would rather stay here," I interrupt. "I kinda love this planet."

He grins at me with understanding. "Beats station life, doesn't it?"

"By a parsec," I agree. He seems to be on the same page as me at least. "I don't suppose there's any way I could stay? Maybe work odd jobs? I won't cause trouble."

Sinath shakes his head. "I'm sorry. This is a human refugee planet only, by orders of Lord va'Rin. You could stay if someone married you, but unfortunately we don't have any postings for a husband at the moment."

The women here post for a husband? Human courtships are strange. I don't know that I could do that anyhow. Not when my thoughts are still filled with the star-watching blonde. "I see."

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He taps at his data pad and brightens. "There is a posting for a farm worker, though. I don't suppose you know anything about farming?"

I'm tempted to lie. "I do not..."

"Ah." Sinath's expression falls, as if he truly does want to help me.

"...but I'm good with bots and repairs. I've seen the farms here and most of them are ran by bots, right? Because the humans are not as sturdy as other aliens?"

He studies me thoughtfully and then picks up his data pad again. "This request is for someone— male or female, no preference—to assist with running a farm. The owner has a stable of young meat-stock and planted fields and needs help with daily chores and maintenance. She offers room and board and a small portion of the profits in exchange for work. Does that sound like you?"

I try not to get too excited. "It does. I can do all of that. I don't care where I sleep as long as I can see the stars."

"The profits might not come in for months yet and you might be sleeping in a barn," he warns. When I shrug, Sinath holds his data pad out again. "All right, I'm going to go over your records for vetting, as the farmer requested. Once we've established that you're not a criminal, I'll give you the coordinates and you can head over and meet your new boss. If she's not happy with you as an employee, though, your work pass will be revoked and you'll have to leave the planet, though. Those are the rules."

I hold my hand out again so he can scan it. "I'm a hard worker and can handle

anything they throw at me. Whoever it is, I'll make them happy."

An hour later, I'm following my data pad's chirping directions as I walk the fields on the outskirts of Port. The farm is surprisingly close to town, no more than a brisk half-hour walk away. Which is good for me, as I don't own an air-sled. I'd happily walk a road four times as long if I got to stay, though.

As I approach, it's obvious to me which of the farms is the one in need of assistance. I've been studying each farm as I pass by, and there's a cozy sameness to them. The plot of land is fenced off, with crops in one very large field and meat-stock wandering a second field near a uniform-sized barn. Each house is the same—a triad of domes clustered together to make a small dwelling with a path leading to the barn and an air-sled parked nearby. Most of the farms are tidy and neat, with bots patrolling the rows of crops.

Then I get to one farm that has knee-high weeds in the yard. The crops look ragged and spindly. I can see no bots. As I approach, I do see the meat-stock are in the pasture, but the pasture itself is churned and muddy, the water in the trough sludgy. There's a whirring sound I follow and find a bot stuck against a fence, one of its propellers broken. It bangs against the fencing over and over until I pull it free, and then look around a bit more. It's clear this farm is suffering from neglect, and it makes me wonder why. Is the owner sick? Wounded? Or do they simply not want to farm?

Does it even matter? They're offering me an opportunity to stay.

In a way, the chaos here on the farm is a good thing. It shows that this person needs my help. I might not know a lot about meat-stock or crops, but neither do most of the humans transplanted here. I have a data pad I can look information up on. Better yet, I'm excellent at repairing machines, and I can get these bots working smoothly. I bring that to the table, at least.

I power down the broken bot and head to the front of the house. No one's come out to greet me, a stranger wandering their property. As I approach the door, my nostrils flare and my whiskers twitch as I try to pick up other scents. I smell a female. Just a female. Human. There's no scent mark on the door that would claim her as someone's mate. Mesakkah don't mark a home (which I find bizarre and insulting to their females), but it's more likely that she's alone.

I knock on the door.

"Coming," calls a female in a human dialect. My translator automatically interprets it for me, but after almost a year of working on this planet, I've grown used to the slight pause as my brain registers the translation.

So I wait at the door.

And wait.

It seems to take the female a very long time to come to the door, to the point that I wonder if she's not coming at all. But then the door opens and as it does, the wafting, delicate, tempting scent of my dreams comes over me.

I stare at the tiny blonde female I've dreamed about for months now. She holds a pile of laundry in her arms, so big it practically dwarfs her, but it's the same woman from that night in the cantina. A little more tired and drawn, a little disheveled, but it's her. I'd know that keffing scent anywhere.

She stares back at me, her eyes wide. "Oh my god, it's you."

I gape, both thrilled and surprised. It seems like the stars are paying attention to my wishes after all. "I'm...here about the job."

"What? Oh—oh no. It can't be you!" The human woman sounds panicked at the thought.

My pride is wounded at her response. I've dreamed of seeing her again, of reuniting, and this wasn't how I pictured it would go. "I don't see why not? I'm strong. My paperwork was vetted by the custodians and I'm willing to work. I want the chance to stay on Risda. You won't find a harder worker than me."

"I just...it can't be you." Her expression turns desperate. "You're the reason I'm in this situation in the first place."

"Situation?" I repeat, not following. "What situation?"

She throws aside the laundry she's got piled into her arms, revealing a huge, pregnant belly. "That night in town? You...me...what we did..."

I just stare.

"I'm having a litter."

And she bursts into tears.

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Chapter

Two

PAYTON

Why is it that space is so very huge and yet the guy I'm trying to avoid is the one that showed up on my doorstep?

I try to keep from panicking, because panic makes me want to barf, and there are too many things that make me want to barf already. I have babies sitting on top of my organs, which is why everything feels just a breath away from being expelled from my body at any moment.

I can't stop crying, though. It's impossible once I get started, and it's not even his fault. It's just that I've been fighting against a rising tide for months now, and it feels as if it just closed over my head. So I sob and sob, and all the while, he stares at me with an increasingly panicked expression.

Well, he's right to panic. I've been panicking for months now.

When I got to Risda, I thought all my problems had been solved. Here I'd be safe from slavers, surrounded by other humans, and someone was even giving me a farm to boot. Not that I knew anything about farming, but I figured I'd learn by experience. Once I got the deed to my farm, I went to the cantina in Port to celebrate. I might have had a few too many alien beers and when I woke up, I was naked in a field, curled around an equally drunk cat-alien stranger that I'd been chatting with at the

bar. I chalked it up to a celebratory drunken hook-up and didn't think anything of it...

Until I got violently ill in the mornings. Went to the medic here in Port, found out I was pregnant.

Not just pregnant. Pregnant with triplets.

At age thirty-six.

That was months ago. Ever since then, it's been a struggle to stay on top of things on my farm. The chores are endless, and my belly has grown massively in a short period. I'm exhausted all the time. Last week, the doctor didn't like how fatigued I was and suggested I go on bed rest for a while. Bed rest...ha. But I'm worried that I'll hurt the babies if I work too hard, so I've been doing the bare minimum and hoping that one of the Port custodians would find me someone willing to work in exchange for room and board.

I should have specified "no drunken hook-ups apply."

"This is a mistake," I say through my weeping.

"Hush," he says, taking me by the arm and leading me back into the house. "Calm yourself. There is nothing that can be solved with tears and a dozen things that can be solved with good tea."

"Good...tea...?" I let him escort me over to my sofa, and sit down carefully, one hand going under the bulk of my belly. I grimace at the clothing I'd discarded on the floor, because that's now going to be a pain to pick up.

The stranger fluffs a pillow behind me and then tucks another against my side for me to lean against. He puts his hands up, indicating I should remain in place, and then

scoops up the laundry and sets it down on the nearest counter. Then he moves to my kitchen, finding my teapot and putting it on the stove.

I watch in silence as he digs through my cabinets, pulling out a small canister of herbal tea and sniffing it. He adds some to the teapot and floral scents immediately fill the air. "We'll get you settled and then I'll go," he says, his voice easy. "I didn't realize you had a mesakkah mate. He doesn't have to know about us and that night."

Mate? I stare at the cat-alien in my kitchen. He's handsome enough for an alien. I remember I thought that the night we met, too. He's got fuzzy orange hair-slash-fur and a long swishy tail. His face looks like a mixture of cat and human, with the bisected mouth and whiskers, and triangular ears jutting out of a thick mane of hair. I probably shouldn't find that sexy, but I do, along with his big body and even bigger hands. "I-I don't have a mate."

The stranger turns to me. "Then who is the father of your children?"

I sputter. How many people does he think I'm fucking? "You are! You're the only one I've slept with since I got here."

It's probably a mistake to point that out. His face lights up as if I've given him a gift. "I am a father?"

"Not yet, but soon." I rub my belly again.

"This...this is incredible." He stares at my stomach, and then at my face again. The tea kettle whistles and he immediately jumps into action, picking it up by the handle and then pouring me a cup (even as he strains out the tea bits). He adds a touch of honey from the canister I have on the counter, as if he knows my kitchen intimately already, and then brings the mug over to me. He holds it out reverently. "May I get your name, female?"

I grimace, because the awkwardness is just piling on top of itself right now, isn't it? "I never gave you my name?"

I don't point out that I don't know his, either.

The alien—a praxiiian, I think—gives me a thoughtful glance as I take the mug of hot tea from him. He squats in front of me, watching me intensely until I take a sip of tea. It's good. Very good. It's also not something I normally do for myself, because I don't think to go to tea when I'm feeling puny. I was always a coffee sort back home but nothing they have here compares. But tea? It's nice. I take another sip and it seems to please him that I'm drinking.

"What do you recall about that night?" he asks. "Because you were drinking quite a lot of ooli brew. We both were."

"Oh, I was," I agree. I hold the mug in front of me like a shield, trying to recall exactly what happened. "I was just...celebrating being on Risda. Getting a farm. Freedom. I didn't realize the beer was so strong and by then I didn't care. I remember meeting you and petting your whiskers..." And I vaguely remember petting other things, but I don't bring that up. "The next thing I recall is morning, and we were both naked in a field."

"That's it? That's all you remember?" He's appalled.

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Mortified, I nod.

“Ooli brew takes time to build a tolerance to. I thought the way you were drinking it...” His ears go flat. “I was too drunk to realize it was a dangerous situation for both of us.”

Great, so we were both plastered and made bad decisions.

He rubs his mouth again, his whiskers flicking as he does. I'm fascinated by that small movement. It's so alien and yet so human at the same time. Maybe I have a whisker fetish. Maybe that's why I jumped him that night. I'll never know because I don't remember squat. He clearly remembers some but not enough if he doesn't remember getting me pregnant.

The alien thinks for a moment longer and then opens his mouth to speak.

And I realize I have a lot that needs saying before we go any further.

"Before you say anything," I blurt out, "I'm not looking for a dad for my children. They're mine and I'm going to take care of them. I just need a hand with the farm while I'm on bed rest."

He looks stung at my words. "I would not presume to take your children from you. But I would be happy to take part in their lives if you will let me."

"We'll see. I need to think about it a while."

"Think all you like." He moves in and adjusts one of my pillows. "But I am here about the job first and foremost. I did not know it was you when I came out here, and that changes nothing. You need an assistant to handle working on the farm and someone to look after you while you're ill. Let me prove to you that I can be what you need."

I want to protest that I don't need anyone looking after me, but just one cup of tea has made me feel so much better. What would it be like if I had real help with everything that threatens to overwhelm me? "I just..."

"You sit there. You look tired. Are you hungry?" When I shake my head, he gets to his feet. "One of your bots was stuck in the fence. I'm going to go fix it and see what needs immediate action. I'll make a list of things and we'll go over it tonight and you can tell me what needs doing first. Sound good?"

The independent part of me wants to protest, but the babies shift in my stomach, pressing on my organs again, and I meekly nod. I'm so tired I could fall over, and the warm tea isn't helping. "I need to lie down for a while, and then I'll finish the laundry."

"Show me where your cleaning system is and I'll do it for you. I'll make dinner, too. You just drink your tea and then go sleep." He holds out his wrist communicator to me. "Do you have one of these? I can give you my identification and you can send me a message if you need anything."

"Somewhere," I say faintly. "I have one somewhere. It came with the house."

He nods and offers me a big, claw-tipped hand. "Do you need help getting up?"

God, do I ever. But I'm not ready to get up just yet so I shake my head. "I'm going to hang out here for a bit. And I can make dinner?—"

"I will," he says firmly. "We will not argue over this."

I frown at his bossiness. "You're a stranger?—"

"No, as of now, I am your hired assistant. I will handle all the work. Your job is to sleep and take care of yourself." He points a clawed finger at me. "And if you are worried, lock your door until you are comfortable with my presence. But I am registered here, and if anything happens to you, the custodians will be looking in my direction."

He's got a point. If I show up with so much as a scratch on my face, he'll be tossed in jail. And I've already known him...carnally. I guess I can trust him for today. "Okay." I rub my face. "I'm too tired to argue."

"You just rest. I am here now." He turns and heads for the door, then pauses and turns back around once more. He heads to my side and holds his hand out, palm up. When I eye him with curiosity, he jiggles his hand until I put mine in his. Then, he bends over our joined hands in a bow. "I did not give you my name. You can call me Bodhrri."

Oh shit. I'd forgotten all about names. It should be the most basic of information and yet we're doing this all backwards. "I'm Payton."

"Payton," he repeats and then nods. "I will remember."

Chapter

Three

PAYTON

I have the best intentions of getting up and finishing the laundry and then heading to

bed for a nap. I really do. It's just that when I finish my warm, delicious tea, I nod off. I jerk awake when I tip over, realizing I'm still on the couch, but it's so comfortable that I just curl on my side, still holding the empty mug, and snooze.

I wake up later that night to delicious scents and someone moving around in my kitchen. At some point, a blanket has been tucked over me, and my mug is gone. I sit up and am immediately rewarded with a series of flutters in my belly, like the babies in there are waking up, too. It's such a strange sensation to feel. On active days, it feels like I have eels fighting in my guts, but today it's just gentle movements, as if they're saying hello to me.

"Hello?" I mumble, shaking off the last vestiges of sleep.

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"Dinner is almost ready," the praxiiian in my kitchen calls out and then runs over to my side, a spatula in one hand. He holds the other out to me.

I take it this time, letting him help heave me to my feet. The babies in my stomach kick a protest but I ignore them and focus on the guy in front of me. He seems so very happy. Maybe that's why I fell for him. He looks as if nothing would ever bother him. "Bodhrri, right?"

His smile lights up the room. "And you are Payton. I haven't forgotten."

Smiling back, I head to the bathroom to freshen up. When I emerge, he's setting the table with two plates of steaming noodles, mixed with a bit of veg and meat. He pulls out a chair for me and pours me another cup of hot tea after I sit, and then my stomach growls so loud that we both hear it.

"Is that one of the babies?" he asks.

I snort. "No, it's just me being ravenous. Dinner looks amazing, by the way."

"I used what you had on hand. I can go into Port tomorrow and see what's new or fresh at the store."

Nodding, I take a huge bite of noodles. I normally love going to Port to wander about and see what the baker has, along with anything new at the store. But ever since my stomach grew exponentially, it's felt like a lot more work. As we eat, Bodhrri talks about the state of my farm. The crops haven't been weeded for a while because the weeding bot needs an update. The watering bot has a leak, and only the seeding bot is

working properly. The meat-stock are all young and healthy but need scheduled inoculations, along with a rotation of the pasture. Their water tank needs cleaning, and the more he tells me, the guiltier I feel that I've let so many things slide.

"I am not telling you this to shame you," he says, reading my expression. "I am telling you to sell my worth to you. To show that you need me around."

I've decided that already. I decided it the moment he put this huge platter of food down in front of me. The dinner is delicious, and before I know it, I've cleaned my plate. I set my fork down, resisting the urge to ask for more food, and sip my tea instead. "I want you to stay. Not just to do the work, which I appreciate and will happily pay for, but because you and I need to figure out how we go forward."

Bodhrri nods, his gaze sliding to my rounded belly, which even now juts out an obscene amount. "May I ask...how many you are having?"

It's a fair question, and one that he should absolutely be asking. "I was told that there are three babies, but because of how tightly they're in there, there might even be a fourth one." I shift in my seat, my back aching. "Is that a normal thing with your people? Praxiiians?"

He shakes his head, his eyes wide. "I know multiple births happen occasionally but I do not think they're that common."

Figures. I'd heard stories from other women about how they'd been genetically tampered with when captured as slaves, with the aliens making them extremely fertile to increase their value. When I heard I was having multiples, I wondered if that was the case. I guess I know now. "Seems like we are just lucky."

"It's the stars," he says in a soft, reverent voice. "They are granting my wishes."

"The stars?" I stare at him, flummoxed. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't remember our conversation? From that night?" At my expression, he guesses my answer and continues. "I see. Well, you had told me that your people wish upon stars. That if you see one falling from the sky, you are to make a wish and it will be granted. I have been watching the stars every night since that night, hoping for more of them to fall while I observe."

I talked about that? I've always mentioned wishing on a star in the past, but I didn't realize I said anything to him. I've been obsessed with how bright the stars are here on Risda, too. Before my belly got huge, I'd pull a chair out into the front yard and just sit and watch the gorgeous nighttime skies for hours. "Oh. Have you seen a lot of falling stars?"

"Just the night we were together." Bodhrri looks thrilled. "But that was enough."

"And what did you wish for?"

For a moment, he seems bashful. "An opportunity to stay. This planet is...wondrous. I hardly ever cough anymore."

"Cough?" I ask, a prickle of alarm rising inside me. Please, dear god, do not let it be something genetic and I have several of his children growing inside me. "Are you ill?"

Bodhrri shakes his head. "Lung damage. I grew up in a part of the station that had poor air filtration. The air here helps my breathing a great deal."

That's...sad. I'm relieved that it's not something the babies can catch, though. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It has nothing to do with you, and it is nothing the stars can fix." He smiles again, the look on his face so boyish and full of excitement at the prospect of staying here that it makes me feel warm inside.

It also makes me wonder. He seems so young sometimes. It's something about his smiles... "Can I ask how old you are?"

"Does it matter?"

"I don't suppose." I shrug. "I'm thirty-six."

"I am ten years younger than you, then."

"Oh lord."

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"Is that bad?"

Yes. It's terrible. I'm a cougar. A knocked-up cougar. Worst of all, I'm still finding him attractive despite knowing this and being excessively pregnant. But it's like the bigger my belly gets, the bigger my libido gets. I'm thinking of him like a partner, and that's dangerous. He's literally just showed back up on my doorstep today. I need to remember that. "I was just...curious. That's all."

He just grins at me as he picks up his plate. "I don't mind, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't!"

Chapter

Four

PAYTON

In the space of a week, having Bodhrri around has proven to be both the best and the worst thing to happen to me.

The good—he's turned my farm around. While I've slept more than I could have imagined and remained in bed for most of the day, he's repaired all the bots, cleaned up the barn, and is running a borrowed fencing bot to make another pasture to put the cattle in. I didn't fence off much of the land when I acquired this place, because I could only get the fencing robot for one day before it had to be returned. I figured

there'd be more time. Now everything is running smoothly thanks to Bodhrri and his long hours of work.

And that's just outside. Inside, he's cleaned up the kitchen and filled the pantry with all kinds of goodies from the store in town. He's brought me cookies from the baker in town and while they're not fantastic cookies, I eat every single one of them in a sitting. Bodhrri spends his credits to make sure I'm well stocked and says he'll just bill me later. He makes me every meal and constantly presses mugs of hot tea into my hands. He's always there to puff a pillow up at my side or behind my back, and he's done the laundry and swept the floors to boot.

I feel useless.

It's been amazing.

I didn't realize that having someone to help out would bring such immediate stress relief. Of course, Bodhrri's taking care of more than the farm. He's taking care of me, too, and I know it's because I'm carrying his babies. No other farmhand would do half as much. It makes me feel guilty, but he hasn't asked about taking a more active role in their lives once they're born.

God. I can't even imagine what it's going to be like trying to run a farm with three (possibly four) infants in my hands. That's a problem for the future, though. I need to get through the pregnancy first.

If having Bodhrri around doesn't kill me, that is.

Because having him take care of me? Having him handle the farm? It's turning me on in the craziest sorts of ways. If he shows up and his mane is tousled or there's a streak of mud in his fur...? Hot. If his coveralls tighten as he reaches for something? Hot. If he leans over me and fluffs my pillow and I catch a whiff of his scent? Hot. So hot.

Shoving mugs of tea into my hands? It's the stuff fantasies are made of.

I didn't think that having an employee here to handle the farm work would mean I'd spend the rest of my pregnancy in perpetual horniness. Am I uncomfortable and ungainly? Yes. Does my libido care? It does not. It has apparently decided that I need sex and that Bodhrri is the solution to all my problems.

I don't act on it, of course. I don't act on any of it.

But I have lots and lots of dirty thoughts.

Like today. Earlier he made me a breakfast of veggie pancakes (which sounds gross but were actually amazing), changed out the blankets on the bed so he could wash them, and right now he's tucking me in so I can have a mid-morning nap.

He bends over me and I notice a piece of straw sticking out of his thick, yellow-orange mane. I absently pick it out and hold it up in the air.

Bodhrri's tail twitches and he gives me a sheepish look. "There's not great facilities for bathing in the barn."

Oh, of course there's not. I'm not trying to shame him. I'm just fascinated by his nearness and my brain misfired. "I wasn't...I didn't mean..."

"I know. I just wanted to explain." Bodhrri gives me another cheerful smile. "Which leads into my next question—can I borrow your shower? If it won't bother you to have me in there, of course. If it does, I'll make do."

"You can absolutely borrow my shower. You don't even have to ask." I clasp my hands on the bedsheets, feeling like the worst hostess ever. "I didn't even think about the facilities in the barn. Are you...is it comfortable?"

"I have slept in much worse situations on far less pleasant jobs. Do not worry one bit about it." With a swish of his long tail, he turns and heads for the linen trunk in the corner of my bedroom. "I'll make sure and wash all the towels once I'm done, too."

"Take a break at some point," I joke feebly, gesturing at my body. "Wallow a bit. Like I am."

His expression turns absolutely serious. "You are taking care of yourself and our children. There is no job more important."

I nod meekly, wishing I knew how to talk to him comfortably. To gush out all of the thoughts and feelings I've been having for the last few months, and how those feelings have been amplified in all new directions now that he's here. But I just pick at the bedsheets and feel awkward.

"If you need anything, you come to me, yes? It is my great joy to do this for you, Payton. I hope you realize that."

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I hope he realizes I'm probably going to rub one out while he's in the shower.

Chapter

Five

BODHRRI

I am glad she allows me to use her shower. She is trusting and kind, my Payton. Which is good, because it means I get the opportunity to mark the lavatory area. I marked the front door days ago. Soon, I will mark the bedroom, and then it will be well established that Payton is claimed and no one will ever think to touch her...because she belongs to me.

While I do need a shower, it is not the most pressing thing on my mind. Instead, it is declaring Payton and our children as mine. I undress and step into the shower cubicle and then take myself in hand, stroking with rough, practiced drags over my cock. I picture Payton as I come, my hand pressed to the tile as I spray my seed and my scent all over the walls. I do this twice more, hitting different spots each time, before I get down to the business of getting clean. I scrub my skin, noting that the bath soaps smell like her—floral and sweet—and for once, I like the scented cleaners because it means I can carry her smell with me as I go about my day.

Once I'm clean, I rinse the shower walls off, watching my seed trickle down the drain. Doesn't matter. Any praxiiian who dared to come into her home would smell my presence here, just as they'd smell me on her doorstep. It's a praxiiian tradition—to mark the home and territory of a female they are courting.

And I absolutely intend upon courting Payton. Haven't the stars brought her to me, just as I asked? The fact that she is carrying my children just feels like a present on top of things. But I must go slow. I do not want to scare her off, and I don't know a lot about human courting rituals. I have to let her set the pace of things.

For now, I will simply take care of her. I will tend to her farm and clean her home. I will make sure she does not push herself too hard and that she gets naps. I will feed her good, nutritious meals. Perhaps that will be enough to tell her that I could be a good mate to her.

I wrap a towel around my hips. It's human sized, so it doesn't cover much, but I make the attempt anyhow. I exit the lavatory and immediately the scent of feminine arousal hits my lungs. I pause, sniff deep, and turn, incredulous, towards her bedroom. She's been touching herself.

She's been touching herself while I've been touching myself. I wait outside her door, wondering if she's going to invite me in. If she's going to tell me that she's attracted to me and we can forget all about this careful dancing about. When she doesn't speak up, I prick my ears, straining to hear her.

A gentle snore comes from the other side of the door.

I smile despite my disappointment. Payton may be interested, but I need to remember that she is leading the way on this, and that she is very pregnant. She might not be ready for any sort of relationship until after the babies are born.

I can wait. I adjust myself under the towel and then head to the laundry machines to pull out fresh clothing.

Chapter

PAYTON

Having Bodhrri here is utter bliss. In the space of a month, he's gotten the farm into shape and somehow made himself indispensable to me. He took over all the chores for a while, but as the doctor eases me off bed rest now that my fatigue is improving, I'm trying to do more around the house. I have to fight Bodhrri to let me do anything, though. It turns into a game between us—I'll start making dinner and he'll take the utensils from me. I'll gather laundry, only to discover that he's hidden the basket when I turn my back.

"Your job is simply to grow the children," he tells me. "I can do everything else."

It's hard to fight with that. It's not as if I'm dying to put fresh hay in the barn or I really love cleaning my floorboards. Sometimes I get restless, though, so Bodhrri bought a bunch of scraps from the tailor in town so I can make blankets and tiny clothes out of the castoffs. I spend most nights sewing baby clothes that look more like sacks with a gathered end, because I know how big human babies are, but I have no idea how big praxiian babies are.

My stomach is not a good guideline, because it's ridiculously enormous and seems to double in size every time I look in the mirror. My hips have been spreading, and my back hurts as I struggle to carry the weight of my belly in front of me. I've made a sling that goes around my neck and under my belly to try and give it some support, but then my neck just ends up hurting. So...I sit a lot. I sit a lot and drool over Bodhrri as he takes care of me and the house, and I feel like a creep because I'm as big as a planet with babies and yet I've never been so turned on in my life.

It doesn't help that Bodhrri's everything I wanted in a partner. He's warm and caring. I love talking to him. Love just hearing about his day. His sense of humor matches

mine. He loves a good cup of tea, fresh air, and morning sunrises. He approaches every day with enthusiasm, and even the smallest of chores make him happy because he's here on Risda. I know just how he feels. This planet is a gift, and I have yet to take it for granted. It's his enthusiasm for life that I find as appealing as the rest of him. I try to come up with things I don't like about him and...I can't. I don't even mind that he's fuzzy and has different, cat-like features. That's just who he is. He's affectionate and funny, and I just...I'm obsessed.

Call it hormones, call it whatever, all I know is that I think about him constantly.

I don't do anything about it, of course. I'm heavily pregnant and I've never felt less sexy. I worry that my attraction to him is one-sided. He might be humoring me because he wants to stay on the planet, and the thought of him playing along makes my pride shrivel. So I say nothing.

I do feel guilty he sleeps in the barn, though. My house is small and there's very little room, but I'm pretty sure I can squeeze a cot for him in the living area. I need to ask him to move inside. I just haven't come up with the right way to phrase it yet. I think about this all day, and I don't know how to bring it up without it feeling like the creepy older woman is hitting on him. I don't want to chase him off because I need his help desperately.

That night, I decide I need to bring up a change in circumstances. It's unfair to make him sleep in the barn any longer, and I toy with the idea all through dinner. Do I casually bring it up? Have a sit-down conversation and make it a big deal so he doesn't think I'm hitting on him? What?

I'm quiet through dinner, waiting for the perfect moment to bring things up as he eagerly discusses the repairs the barn needs for the upcoming colder weather. I toy with my noodles, nodding assent.

Bodhrri reaches over and puts his hand on mine, startling me. "Are you well? Is your stomach bothering you?"

"Hm? Oh no, I'm fine."

"But you are not eating. And you are very quiet. Are you feeling all right?" His expression is one of pure worry.

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Me, I can't concentrate on anything but that big, warm hand covering mine. I want to grab his fingers and hold his hand tightly. I want to drag his hand over me and use it to do filthy things to my body. I chicken out, though. "I'm just having a craving for pickles. That's all."

Bodhrri's expression brightens, as if I've said just the thing that pleases him most. "It is a lucky day, then. Guess what they had in stock at the store in Port?"

I gasp, my mouth watering. "No! Pickles?"

He nods. "The farm that makes them brought back a fresh batch, so I bought all of them."

I moan with excitement, pressing my hands to my mouth. "Youdid?"

"I did," he agrees, smug with pleasure.

I could kiss him right now. Pickles and tart things have been a huge craving of mine over the last few weeks, and every time I go into Port, there's never much to choose from. A week ago I found a jar of pickled vegetables for sale, but it was the last one. I tried to pace myself but ended up eating the entire thing in the space of a day. My mouth keeps watering and I have the urge to cry out of sheer happiness. "You didn't have to, Bodhrri."

"Of course I did. You crave it, and I will make it happen." He gets to his feet and heads to the kitchen pantry, and I see several jars of pickled veggies stockpiled, and the sight fills me with glee. He pulls one jar out and returns to my side, opening it and

holding it out for me. "You should lack for nothing."

"You're spoiling me," I say, taking a spear of pickled root and crunching on it. Oh god, it's the best thing ever. I exclaim again and devour the entire thing while he watches me, eyes warm.

But then his expression changes and he tilts his head, eyeing my legs. "Where are your shoes? Your feet are bare."

I pluck another pickle from the jar and bite down, closing my eyes in pure bliss. It's not the same as an earth pickle, but gosh it's close. "Feet are swollen today. My shoes don't fit."

Bodhrri makes an unhappy noise. "You should have said something."

Opening my eyes, I glance up at him as I polish off the second pickle. "Why? The doctor said it's normal. Happens to a lot of pregnant ladies." I know because I sent a comm to him the first time it happened to me and he reassured me that everything was fine.

"Would it help if you elevated them?" he asks, concern written all over his feline features.

I genuinely have no idea if it would or not, but I hate to see the worry on his face. "It can't hurt, I imagine."

Bodhrri gestures that I should stand. "Get up. Let us make you comfortable on the couch. You can eat more pickles there."

Well, I don't need more convincing for that. I let him help me stand and we move to the couch. He brings the jar of pickles and sets it on the little table next to my end of

the couch. Then he sits on the other end and indicates I should bring my feet to him. Is he...serious? "What are you doing?" I ask. "You said I should elevate them, right?"

"Yes, but I can rub them, too. Try to get your blood flowing. I thought it might be helpful. Would it bother you?"

Mutely, I shake my head and eat another pickle. Would it bother me? Absolutely not. Will it turn me on an insane amount? I mean...probably. "It's not necessary..."

"I would love to rub your feet," Bodhrri says. "I love taking care of you and the children."

He's not real. This all has to be a hallucination, a fever dream brought on by pickles and pregnancy. Because Bodhrri seems too good to be true. What man loves to dote on his very pregnant employer who is puffing up by the day? I should take advantage of this, I realize, but I feel shy. "What if my feet are ugly?"

"I am not judging them for their beauty. I am going to rub them to ease you."

I sigh, because he's right and I'm just being silly. "Okay, fine." Gingerly, I lift one foot into the air and hold it out to him.

"By the stars!" He recoils in horror.

I jerk back, just in time to see him grinning, and then I give his arm a shove with my bare, swollen foot. "You jerk! That's not funny!"

"It's kind of funny," he says, laughing.

I'm laughing, too, because it's broken the weird tension we've had between us. "I told you human feet are ugly," I retort, and put my other foot in his lap, too. "And mine

are swollen to boot."

"How can you tell they're ugly if you can't see them?" he teases, and I chuckle all over again. He takes one foot in his hands and caresses it, then begins to rub.

And I melt like a puddle of goo. I suck in a breath as he drags his fingers over my swollen arch and kneads it gently. I didn't realize that they were aching, but his touch makes my foot feel so much better. Or maybe it's that I'm now irrevocably turned on and everything needs touching. I bite back a moan as he strokes my foot and lightly skims his thumb down my sole. "Feel better?" he asks. "Or do you have suggestions for how I should touch you?"

Yes, between my thighs and with your tongue, I think. Instead of saying this, I mutely shake my head.

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He gives me another pleased smile and continues to rub my feet—first one, and then the other. I drift between boneless joy and horny arousal, broken only by a massive shifting in my stomach. It's as if all three babies decide they need to switch positions at once, and I'm kicked and elbowed and prodded from within while they fight each other for dominance. I wince and spread my hands on my belly as if that will somehow help the situation. I give Bodhrri a wry look. "I think they're jealous of the attention my feet are getting."

Bodhrri stares at my belly with intense fascination, and I realize I've never asked him if he wanted to listen or to touch my belly. It's such a human thing to immediately ask—and some people don't even ask. They just plaster their hands on your belly like it's community property. Happened to me the last time I went into town. Maybe it's not a thing with his people and he doesn't know how to ask.

Somehow this is easier to talk about than living quarters. I gesture at my belly. "Did you want to touch? To feel them moving?"

His eyes go wide. His whiskers twitch, and he gazes down at my body, sprawled on the couch. His fingers squeeze my feet lightly. "You...don't mind?"

"Not if it's you, no. I figured you might be interested in hearing them move around, especially since they're part of you." I bite my lip the moment the words come out, because I've been deliberately avoiding referring to them as "ours" so he doesn't get ideas. But as time goes on, I get more comfortable with the idea of Bodhrri being in their lives...and being in mine. "You probably can't hear their heartbeats or anything, but when they're active like this, you'll be able to tell they're moving around."

The triangular ears atop his head swivel forward and he nods once, moving my feet over the side of the couch and onto the floor again. A moment later, a big hand slides over my tunic, and he caresses my belly through the thin material of my clothing.

It takes everything I have not to moan aloud.

"Hello, children," he whispers, rubbing my belly like he did my feet. It's a soft, comforting touch, but it's also turning me on like crazy. His gaze is locked on my abdomen.

I hold still, hoping that one of the babies will move so he can feel it. Nothing happens for a long moment, and then I'm jabbed in the side by a foot or an elbow. "Ow!"

Bodhrri jerks back in surprise, pulling his hand away. "I felt that!"

"So did I." I wince, rubbing the sore spot. "Some days they're more vicious than others."

"Have you thought of names?" he asks. He hesitates, then lightly puts his hand on my belly once more. "Do you know what they are?"

I shake my head. "I didn't want to go in with preconceived notions of having a boy or three if it turns out they're all girls. They'll show up and I'll love them all the same, no matter what gender."

He lifts his head and smiles at me. "It will be a day full of surprises."

"I like to think so." I love how reverent he is as his hands trace over my belly, as if he's worried he's going to somehow disturb them. "I haven't thought about names, either. I figured I'd cross that bridge when I get there."

Bodhrri's expression falls. "Names are very important to praxiian families."

An uncomfortable silence falls over the room. Am I supposed to say something? "Ah," I eventually say, because I'm not sure how I'm supposed to react. Is he offended that I don't have names picked out? Is he wanting to name them after praxiian peoples? Or is there something else going on? "You don't say."

He pulls his hands away and seems disappointed to do so. He almost reaches for me again, then folds his hands in his lap. It bothers me that he's depriving himself when he clearly wants more of this, so I grab his hand and put it back on my side, where I can feel a baby twitching and moving around. "Tell me more about the name stuff."

"Praxiian houses are about honor and worth. My house was not much to begin with, but I was cast out when I was a child because of my lungs. My people value strength, and if one does not have credits, it is expected that those in the house will join the military to earn honors or enter into a slavery contract to bring wealth to the family name."

I blanch, because that sounds awful. "Is it bad that I don't know that I want my children to have praxiian names, then?"

He looks up at me, his smile wry. "It is not because I was cast out from my house for my poor lungs. I have no name to pass them anyhow. Even if I did, I am not sure I would want them burdened with it."

"Absolutely not," I agree. "We'll pick the names for our children together and they can decide who they want to be. And can I just say that your lungs don't sound that bad?" There's a low raspiness to his voice, but I find that sexy more than anything. "Your people are assholes if they tossed you out just because of a little congestion."

"It is very bad in recycled air," he says. "I cannot catch my breath on station. I end up

sleeping with an oxygen mask, and the tanks can get costly."

Another reason he wants to stay. It's not just me and the babies, it's his health. I feel guilty, and I'm not sure why. I want him to stay, too. "Bodhrri..."

My side moves, as if one of the babies is turning over. I wince at the pinch in my side, but it lessens after a few moments. Bodhrri's hand remains and intense fascination is writ all over his face. "Fascinating. Can you tell them apart from their movements? I am eager to learn their personalities."

Sometimes I like to imagine that the one that kicks me in all my organs is a tough, feisty boy...but it might just be a girl who's sick of everyone's shit. Either is a possibility, and both make me smile. "No. It just feels like there's a crowd in there, pushing aside my innards to carve room for themselves."

The laugh that erupts from him is both surprise and delight. "Amazing. It is incredible how your small body can carry so much. Praxiians are not small infants."

"Neither are some human babies," I say. "But yeah, the body adapts. It's been a lot of change for me."

Bodhrri strokes my belly again, his fingers dancing over my tunic, and I'm tempted to squeeze my thighs tightly together. "Anything else I can help with? Any...needs?"

The way he says it feels deliberate. Obvious. Does he realize how aroused I am? That every touch of his fingers on my belly makes me imagine them lower? That I touch myself to thoughts of him every night before bed? That I don't know how I'm going to manage to make it through this pregnancy without having sex with him if he's around every day? I bite my lip, holding back the torrent of words that want to flood out of me.

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Bodhrri traces a circle on my belly, and the sound of him purring fills the air.

"I'm horny all the time," I blurt out. Fuck it. I'm already pregnant with a billion babies on an alien planet. I'm not sure the universe has much more to throw at me. What's the worst that can happen? "So...there's that."

"I would like to help you with that, Payton." He leans in, and his purring grows deeper. "In fact, I would be honored..."

Chapter

Seven

BODHRRI

Finally.

I've been smelling Payton's arousal for weeks now, and it's been driving me wild. Every day, I'd enter the house and be hit with a wall of her sweet perfume. I've jerked off in the barn (and in the lavatory) more times than I care to think about it, all because her scent is so intoxicating that it's leaving me in a perpetual state of need.

Thank kef she's finally said something.

But she still looks shy and her scent has a hint of nervousness to it. That won't do. I rub her belly gently, since she seems to enjoy that. "Tell me more about your needs, my Payton."

"Oh..." Her gaze drops to my mouth and she shifts on the couch, as if her discomfort with the bluntness of my question makes her want to leave the room. "I just...what I said. Some pregnant women get turned on. I've heard it's normal."

"Of course it's normal," I soothe. "You are pregnant, not dead."

"Yes, but we're still strangers, aren't we?"

"Do you feel like a stranger? I don't." I reach out and caress her cheek. "I feel like I know you quite well."

She scoots closer to me, tilting her face towards mine, and then pauses. "Do your people kiss?"

Good, we are past the questioning. "I hope so, as you and I have kissed before."

Payton looks alarmed. "We did? Shit. I don't remember."

"You were very drunk. Ooli brew is powerful."

Her expression turns to misery. "I feel like such a jerk. I don't remember anything about that night and I wish I did. Apparently I'm a real fun time."

I chuckle, rubbing her belly lightly again. "Do not feel like a jerk." Whatever that is. "Our antics that night made these children, and I am very thankful for that."

She leans against my shoulder and gazes up at me as I continue to rub her belly with small, caressing circles. "So what else did I do that night that I don't recall?"

"You have nothing to worry over." I think at one point she'd picked up a clod of dirt and cried over it, but that will just embarrass her more so it will remain my secret. I

won't tell her about how often she touched my face or demanded I purr for her. How she played with my whiskers and booped my nose and then gushed effusively about how big my cock was. How it had been so long since she'd had sex. She'd stroked my tail as if it was the most erotic thing she'd ever encountered and then had climbed atop me like a wild creature. We'd fucked, flopped onto our backs and stared up at the stars, and then had fucked twice more before dawn, each time pausing to point out the stars falling in the skies around us.

Payton looks suspicious of my answer. "So you say. You're the one with the memories of that night."

I lean in and rub my nose against hers, enjoying her scent and the softness of her skin. "And if it was anything terrible, would I be here now? Eager to touch you?"

"Oh," she breathes, and then her arms go around my neck. She presses her mouth to mine in a kiss, and this one is far more experienced and pleasant than the sloppy, enthusiastic ones she gave me that night. Not that I didn't like those—I'd been fascinated by the erotic nature of using tongues against one another. This is even better, though. Kissing Payton is more than just tongues colliding—it's the soft taste of her, the whimpers she makes as we come together, the scent and feel of her. This moment is utterly addictive, and I love most of all that she reached for me.

I nip at her lower lip before pulling away and focusing on her face. "Is this all right?"

She nods, her eyes shining, pupils dilated.

"Can I keep touching you?"

Payton nods again.

She reaches for me, and I capture her hand, nuzzling against her palm. "Me touching

you," I point out. "Just let me enjoy this."

"I can't touch you?"

"You can...next time. Tonight, it is about your needs." Because I need to go slow with her. I don't want to be too intense right away, because I have memories of that night and she does not. I need to ease her into being fully comfortable with me. Once she trusts that I will be everything she needs in a sex partner, then it can be time for my pleasure, too.

She leans back and licks her pink lips, flushed from our kissing. In fact, her entire lower face is flushed from where it has rubbed against mine, which is adorably charming. "So I just, what, starfish and let you take care of me?"

"If you like." I'll ask what a starfish is later.

I reach up and caress her cheek, brushing it with my knuckles. She closes her eyes and leans into my caress, and I remember this from before. That I couldn't touch her enough. That she seemed absolutely starved for affection. I want to give her everything she desires. So I take my time, running my hands over her body, exploring her over her clothing with gentle caresses and light strokes. Her arousal perfume fills the air, and my cock fills my trou, but I keep my focus on her needs. I cup one heavy teat in my hand and it spills over my fingers. Her nipple is hard against my palm and I adjust my hand so I can rub that hard peak with my thumb.

That elicits a much bigger response from her than the small sighs and hums. Payton whimpers, trying to move closer to me again, her lips parting. I bend over her, mindful of the protruding belly between us, and kiss her mouth lightly even as I work her teat. "Feel good?"

She whines her response, sucking eagerly on my tongue.

I tug on her nipple and her kisses become urgent, her arousal scent thicker. "Can I touch you lower?" I ask her, abandoning her teat to stroke the leg closest to me. In response, she spreads her thighs for me.

Beautiful. Perfect.

Lifting up the lightweight skirt of her long tunic, I slide my hand under the fabric and press against her cunt. I know from before that she has a triangle of soft fur here between her thighs, and I'm not surprised to find it completely soaked with her need. With gentle fingers, I press into her folds, seeking out the spots she'd more or less demanded that I touch that night. I find her clit—the small pearl of flesh that is so very sensitive—and swirl my finger around it.

Payton's fingers dig into my mane and she sucks in a loud breath.

"Too much?" I ask, reveling in her response.

Mutely, she shakes her head and pulls me in for another kiss. This one is less teasing and more of just her putting her hot, hungry mouth on mine, but I don't mind. I like that she's losing control. I stroke through her slippery folds, making sure to keep my thumb teasing against her clit as I seek her core. My claws are retracted, my fingertips blunt, and when I find the opening to her core, Payton moans with need.

I stroke a finger into her. She's tight and warm and wet and so keffing good, just as good as I remembered. I crook the finger I have inside her to search for the textured spot on her inner walls and I know when I've found it. Payton squeals aloud and practically pulls out a double handful of my mane. She quivers all over, her mouth open against mine as I tease that secret spot deep inside her.

She comes, and it's a thing of beauty. Her thighs tighten around my hand and she lets out a sobbing breath as she clenches all around me. Her cunt squeezes my finger in a vise, but I don't let up, not until I'm positive that she's spent. When I pull my hand free from her thighs, it's drenched with her juices, and I can't resist licking my fingers clean. "Delicious."

Payton whimpers, still spent.

I move in and press a kiss to her forehead. "I'll make you some tea."

A tired laugh bubbles out of her as I get up, and she gives me a dazed look. "You...that was incredible. How did you know how to do that?"

In the kitchen, I fill the teapot with water and put it on the hot pad. "What do you mean? We had sex, Payton. That is how you became pregnant."

"Not sex," she says, struggling to sit up. I head back to her side and help her get comfortable, pulling her dress back down around her knees and then fluffing her pillows. Payton reaches absently for me, trailing her fingers through the fur on my arms. I return to the kitchen, as if she's reluctant to let me go, and I purr low in my belly. "The thing," she says. "With your fingers. Inside me. How did you know to do that?"

"You told me about it," I remind her. "In fact, you yelled instructions in my ear until I got it right that night we were together."

She's silent. I pour her tea and when I look over, her hands are over her face.

"Are you well?" I ask, bringing her favorite mug.

"I am utterly mortified, thanks for asking."

I chuckle at her reaction. So very modest. "There is no need for mortification. You directing me helped me immensely. I would have been far more embarrassed if I'd been unable to please you."

"You pleased me," she says, even as she takes the cup of tea from me. "My toes might never uncurl."

It is a small compliment, but one that fills me with pride. I am seeing to her needs—all of them. For me, it is no longer about just wanting to stay here on this planet. It is about wanting to stay with her. With my children. If she left for a space station, I would follow despite the havoc it would wreak on my lungs, simply because I need to be with her. "Drink your tea and then I will help you clean up and get to bed," I tell her. "You look tired."

She smiles up at me, her eyelids heavy, and I can't resist stroking my knuckle over her cheek. Go slow, I remind myself. Don't scare her away. But when she gestures at the couch and indicates I should sit with her while she drinks, I sink down next to her and pull her close. She leans against me, her musky scent lingering in the air and mingled with notes of tea. "You and your tea."

"Tea is soothing. Breathing in the steam helped my lungs when they hurt," I say, running my fingers through her hair. "After a while, it just became a thing. It makes me feel better. Tell me you don't feel better after a nice warm mug."

"It's just...thoughtful." Payton takes another sip. "I'm not used to being taken care of, not before you got here. I was a slave for so long and even back on Earth, no one took care of me. I was the one that did all the work. It's taking some adjusting."

"I enjoy doing things for you."

"Because you want to stay here on this planet," she teases.

"At first that was why, yes." I say the words slowly, because I don't want her to feel pressured. "But I like taking care of you, because I am taking care of our children, too."

"Right. The children."

It feels like the wrong thing to say. Like I've messed things up somehow. I would take care of her even if there were no children, but confessing that feels like I would be putting too much pressure on her too soon. So I say nothing, simply rub her arm. "I should return to the barn. The new pen should be finished tomorrow and I want to make sure the bots are programmed to bring the meat-stock to the new location."

I get to my feet, but Payton grabs my arm before I can leave. "Wait."

I glance down at her. "Yes?"

"You could sleep in the house." Payton gazes up at me, her cheeks still flushed from our touching. "Seems wrong to have you in the barn. It can't be comfortable."

It's not, but it's what I agreed to. "I will sleep wherever you want me to sleep. It's fine."

"It's not fine." She shakes her head, and I notice she does not let go of my hand. I curl

my fingers around her wrist, holding her tight as she continues. "You can sleep in the house."

"Are you sure you want that?"

Payton seems shy as she responds. "You could sleep on the couch...or you could sleep with me. Though there might be more room on the couch."

She waves the mug at her belly.

An invitation to her bed—even if it's just to sleep—fills me with joy. "I would love to bed with you."

Her smile of response is sweet and she quickly gulps down the rest of her hot tea, then holds the mug out to me. "Help me up?"

I do, and then we head to the lavatory. I'm eager to wash her but she insists she can do it herself, so I pace in the hallway. I don't know what to do with myself. This isn't my house, so it's not like I can just kick off my shoes and relax while she bathes. I need to get my cues from her, first. If she's uncomfortable, even in the slightest, I'll head back to the barn.

But Payton eventually emerges, and she smells like soap, and it makes my cock jerk in response, because that's hersoap. I've used it a dozen times but this is the first time I've smelled it on her skin. Incredible. The purring in my chest starts and I quickly tamp it down again.

She wears a shorter dress, this one soft and flowing and tents out around her large belly. Her hand supports the underside of it as she gives a sleepy yawn, her cheeks flushed. "Do you mind taking the right side of the bed? I have to sleep on my left side."

"Whatever side you do not want."

"Great." She climbs into bed.

I tuck the blankets around her, then peel off my boots and clothing, folding them neatly and setting them on a nearby trunk. I hesitate before getting into bed. "Do you mind if I sleep naked?"

"Mmm. At this point the cat's out of the bag, right? So to speak." Her words are soft and drowsy.

Still I hesitate. "Is...that a yes?"

"I don't mind." She reaches behind her and pats the bed. "Come on. You can be the big spoon."

I know what a spoon is, as I've seen them in her kitchen. Pleased, I climb into bed with her and she immediately pulls me against her, nestling our bodies together, her back to my front. She adjusts my arm, setting it on the lower slope of her belly, and I could swear I feel a flutter inside.

All is quiet. I wait for her to say something. The quiet is strange for me. The barn has meat-stock, and they're never silent. There's always shuffling and snorting. The apartments I lived in before this were full of rowdy crew who loved to get noisy and gamble in their time off, so never quiet then, either. And on station? Quiet is a mere fantasy. The stillness in Payton's bedroom is nice, if unnerving. Should we talk about this day, perhaps? About our changing relationship?

"I marked your door," I whisper. "I hope that is all right."

She makes a soft, sleepy sound that seems positive.

Encouraged, I draw little circles on her belly as my thoughts race ahead. If she doesn't mind that I have declared my intent, perhaps we should move things forward. I wait for her to comment on this—or anything else—but the silence gets to me. Eventually, I speak up again. "Will you be able to sleep like this?" I ask. "Are you comfortable?"

A small, whuffing snore is my answer. Payton is already asleep.

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I smile at that. Of course she is. She has been well-pleasured and is in the arms of her mate. Content, I relax and fall to sleep, too.

Chapter

Eight

One Week Later

PAYTON

"Do you have the blankets?" I call out, struggling to put my bloated foot into my slipper. I lean on the bed and wriggle my foot in the shoe, but my heel doesn't want to go in. I shove a little harder. "And the pillows?"

"All taken care of," Bodhrri calls back from the living room. "I will take them outside right now and then I'll come back and help you with your slippers."

How did he know...? I sit on the edge of the bed, panting, and lift my foot into the air until I can see it. It looks like a sausage with toes. I snort to myself. How did he know? He's got eyes. They're as puffy as the rest of me. I went to the doctor this week and Bodhrri accompanied me. I'm in perfect health and so are the babies, so it's likely just water retention. But shoes have been difficult.

Honestly...that's been the only difficult thing this week. The rest has been an absolute dream.

Bodhrri has more or less moved in. He's slept curled up against me every night, and I've never slept better. Having him in bed with me makes me feel safe and secure, and it's not uncomfortable even though his body is much larger than mine. We shower together, we dine together, I nap while he works on the farm, and then I get to work on baby clothes in the afternoon while he does even more work outside. I want to do more now that I'm less tired, but Bodhrri insists that I rest up, that there will always be more to do and I should take care of myself.

Our evenings are lazier, after all the work for the day has been done. We read a book together— a really old one from Earth called *The Last Days of Pompeii*—and we talk. We clean the kitchen and prep food for the next day. Bodhrri saw a hand-made checkerboard in the store and bought it, and we've been playing checkers together, too.

Tonight? We're going to lie outside on blankets and pillows and stargaze. Bodhrri loves the night sky.

For now, though, I'll wait inside for him. I yawn and lie down on the bed, sleepily combing my fingers through my hair and wondering if I should put panties on. Nah. He'll just peel them off of me. The thought makes me smile, because the last week has also been full of touching and kissing, and lots and lots of below-the-waist petting. I'm as greedy for him as he is for me, and neither of us can pass by the other without grabbing or squeezing something. I'm fascinated with his cock, and last night I lay on my side as he stretched out in front of me, and I toyed with his cock until his ears were flat and his whiskers quivered.

It was fun. So much fun. I was nervous about having him around at first, but I've never felt so in sync with another person. We like the same foods, laugh at the same corny jokes, and love to touch one another. I'm even starting to crave the tea he's constantly pouring down my throat. I have to admit it's relaxing to snuggle with a warm cup. Maybe I'll suggest we drink some while we look at the stars...

I jerk awake when there's a knock at the front door. Did I fall asleep? I roll in bed until I can sit up, and swipe my fingers over my mouth for drool. "Bodhrri?"

The knock comes again and I stand up, putting a hand to my lower back as I head for the door. Is he feeling weird about coming inside? Maybe his hands are full.

When I open the door, however, it's not Bodhrri that's on the other side.

"May I come in?" Custodian Sinath asks, all politeness.

The custodians of Port seem to be one part cop, one part social worker (despite the name that makes me think of janitors). They wear dark-colored, form-fitting military uniforms and all of them are mesakkah—the blue, horned aliens. I've met them all and Sinath is one of the younger ones, and normally he's got a friendly smile on his face. Not today. Today he seems...somber.

And that scares the shit out of me.

I stare at him in surprise, frozen. "Is something wrong? Where's Bodhrri?" A horrible thought occurs to me and my entire body clenches up in fear. "Oh god, is he hurt?"

Custodian Sinath puts up a hand. "Nothing is wrong. I believe he is around the side of the house. However, it is you I wanted to speak with."

I let out a breath and resist the urge to burst into tears—or punch Custodian Sinath, for all that he has a baby face and is probably a lot younger than me. "Don't fucking scare me like that."

"I'm not trying to scare you. I'm here to check on the situation. It's customary to follow up when an off-planet employee is living with a resident here. We check in

monthly to ensure that our residents are safe and to remind the employees to stay in line." He gives me a concerned look. "We track our townspeople by the credits spent and you haven't been using your credits in town. Are you being held captive?"

I sputter. "What? No! I was just in to visit the doctor this week." I put a hand under my large belly and gesture. "For obvious reasons."

"Yet you are not purchasing supplies in town?"

"I told Bodhrri he could use my credits," I say, confused. "He's been doing the shopping. Maybe he's not?"

"Perhaps." Sinath doesn't sound convinced. His expression is gentle. "Please know that we can get rid of your employee at any time for you. You don't have to see him ever again. Say the word and we'll send him off-planet. Your safety is our biggest concern. I hope you know that."

"I hope you know that I'm very fine and very happy," I retort. "Bodhrri is doing a wonderful job! He takes good care of me!"

"Good," Sinath says, pulling out his data pad. "I'll note that in my report. And if I don't see you between now and then, I'll return in a month to give things another check."

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He nods at me and then turns and heads away, the setting sun glinting on his metallic-looking horns. I watch him get into his air-sled, and it takes a moment for me to realize I'm shaking with fear.

Bodhrri isn't safe here because he's an employee. They're looking for an excuse to get rid of him. Not out of malice, but out of concern for my safety. He could be gone in a flash. What if a neighbor decides she doesn't want a cat alien working in my fields? Would they get rid of him to please her?

I need to sit down.

Trembling, I make my way to the sofa and collapse. The happy little world we've been building feels as if it's crashing down around me. I don't want Bodhrri to leave. I don't want him to live in fear, either. I'd hate the thought of him worrying that one wrong move will get him sent back to a station, that his coughing will start again and his lungs will fill up. I want him to feel as safe and secure as I do.

But...how?

I take deep breaths, trying to still my panic. Sagging against the couch, I'm barely aware of my surroundings. My head is throbbing. I just need to talk to Bodhrri. See if we're on the same page with things. We've got to be able to figure this out between the two of us. Even if he doesn't want to be with me romantically, we can still be partners. We can raise our kids together.

Except he hasn't really brought up being a dad. Sure, he touches my belly and takes care of me, but he's careful not to mention the babies. Realizing that sets me in a

whole new panic. What if he wants to head out the moment they're born? Find a new job? What if I'm the only one imagining us as a cozy family?

Is it too late to panic? Because I'm panicking.

"Payton?" Bodhrri calls from outside as I stare off into space. "Who was here? I saw a sled fly off."

"I'm inside," I call out, and try to get up from the sofa. My belly is so big that I'm not able to get to my feet, though. "I need help getting up!"

He laughs even as he opens the door and comes inside. The sound is so bright and full of sunshine that I immediately panic all over again and blurt the first thing that comes to mind. "What if we got married?"

"Right now?" Bodhrri gives me a confused look even as he extends his hand and stands over me. He helps me to my feet, his hands lingering as he rubs my shoulders. "I thought we were going to watch the stars?"

"Oh, no, I guess we can watch the stars," I fumble through the words, my thoughts racing. "But maybe we could get married tomorrow. Or the day after. Whatever you feel like?"

The big alien frowns down at me, cupping my cheek. "Are you well? You look fevered. You're breathing fast, too."

"I'm fine. I just...I might be freaking out a bit."

"You are not freaking in?" he teases, because he finds our strange sayings funny.

Normally I'd laugh. Normally I'd think it's adorable that he's trying to charmingly

mock my slang. But I can't stop thinking about Custodian Sinath and how casually he offered to remove Bodhrri from the planet. All I have to do is wave a hand and he could begone. "Bodhrri, a custodian was here."

His expression remains puzzled. "Did he say something distressing to you?"

"He said if I wasn't happy with you as my employee, he could make you leave."

Bodhrri nods, still not getting it. "And...?"

"That's bad!"

"For me, perhaps. But I am glad they have such rules in place. It reminds me that you are safe here no matter what." He brushes a lock of my hair back from my face. "I like that they look out for you."

"But who's looking out for you?"

His mouth tugs up on one side and he's quiet.

Well, fuck all that. I grab him by his collar and pull him down toward me. At least, that's what I intend to do. The reality is that I'm short, and I more or less just grab fistfuls of his tunic front. "Do you want to marry me? Yes or no?"

He doesn't answer.

I shake his tunic a little more. "It's not a hard question."

"My answer would be yes, except you are not asking me for the right reasons."

"I am growing multiple children in my belly," I point out. "The right reasons flew out

the door months ago."

His expression grows sad. "You know I will care for you and support you however you need. Even if I'm forced off planet, I would send you credits so you could take care of our children."

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I want to shake him even harder, because this keeps getting worse the more I speak. "I don't want that. I don't need a wallet, Bodhrri. I need a friend. A partner. I can raise these babies alone. It won't be easy or fun, but I know I can do it. What I want is someone to complain with when the days are hard. I want someone that reminds me to eat when I forget. I want someone that listens to my day and sympathizes at the bad parts, and I want to do all this for someone else, too. I want someone I can curl up with, and someone that will shoulder some of the burden. I want a partner." I shake him again, just for good measure. "I want a lover. More than anything, I just want you. Not because you're the dad or because you're a good farmer, but because you make me smile and laugh, and I feel so seen and loved and taken care of when I'm with you. I might be holding myself together, but I know that when I'm with you, it's okay to fall apart a little, and I hope you feel the same. I hope that if you're having an off day, you come to me because you love me and want to share your burden. I hope if your lungs bother you that you let me take care of you. I hope you share your joys with me because you care for me, and not because you feel you have to."

He stares down at me in surprise.

"So. That's why I'm asking you to marry me." I release his tunic and clear my throat. I smooth my hand down his now-wrinkled front. "Sorry if I didn't explain it better."

"That...was beautiful, Payton." He cups my face in his big hands, his thumbs stroking my cheeks. "Do you truly feel that way?"

"I do. I didn't realize I was lonely until you arrived and made me realize what I'd been missing." I lean against him, holding one of his hands to my face. "Like I said, I'd be fine without you. I'd manage. But when I'm with you, everything's brighter and better,

and that's the world I want."

Bodhrri doesn't kiss me or smile back. His triangular ears flick and he sighs. "You do not realize what you are asking. I am an honorless praxiiian who has been removed from his family's house. I have served no military service. I have no wealth and no good name. I bring nothing to a mate."

"Funny, I don't recall wishing for any of that stuff when I wished on a star," I joke.

His eyes light up. "What did you wish for that night?"

"I honestly don't remember," I say, and I hate that his expression falls. "But I'll go outside right now and wait to find another shooting star if that's what'll convince you. I'm happy with you, Bodhrri. I'm falling in love with you. When I think about the next fifty or a hundred years of life, I see myself with you, and I love the idea. I'm not terrified or lonely at the thought of spending the rest of my life here on a strange planet because you're here. I want to make this thing real between us. Not because you're the father of my babies, but because I adore you."

He studies my face, and his whiskers twitch. Bodhrri leans in and presses a chaste kiss to my mouth. "Then let's do it."

"Really?"

"Yes, but not tonight. Tonight, the stars are beautiful and I want to share them with you."

My heart swells. "I think that sounds lovely."

Holding hands, we head outside. Around the back of the house, near one of the fenced-in fields, Bodhrri has set up a charming nest for us. Blankets are spread out on

the thick grass and every single pillow I own must be out here, because he knows I have difficulty laying down flat with my ungainly stomach. There's a tray next to the blankets, and it's got snacks and drinks on it. I'm less interested in that, though. I'm wanting the man at my side.

"Help me down?" I ask him as we approach our cozy nest.

Bodhrri kneels on the blankets and helps me get down next to him and then spends the next ten minutes adjusting and fluffing pillows around me (and under me) until he's certain I'm comfortable. Then he curls up next to me, our heads together, and we stare up at the twilight sky. "Hmm. You said the stars were beautiful," I tease, "but I only see a few out so far."

"They were beautiful last night. They will be again tonight. Patience."

"I wonder if there's anything we can do while we're waiting for the sky to grow darker," I muse, and take his hand. I pull it to my lips and nibble on his fingertip.

A low purr drifts through the air. "What did you have in mind?"

"You. Me. This blanket. Lots of pillows. Sex."

He groans. "Yes?"

"Oh, yes."

"It won't harm the children?"

"Not in the slightest. We'll probably have to limit our positions because of my belly, but I'm willing to get creative if you are. What do you think?"

His answer is his hungry mouth on mine.

I fall against him, leaning into his kiss. Every time his mouth brushes mine somehow feels better than the last, and I'm excited to think that we can share these kisses for the rest of our lives. To think that I get to nibble on his mouth and hear his gasps of pleasure, that he'll slide his tongue alongside mine and we'll both be overcome. I curl my fingers into the thick, bushy mane on his head and lose myself in his touch, because I'm safe here. I know that in Bodhrri's arms there'll be pleasure and security and affection and nothing else.

"My beautiful mate," he murmurs between kisses. "To think that I am worthy of such a gift. It feels like a dream."

I slide my hand down his front, heading for his cock. "You make it sound like I'm a prize. I'm older than you. I'm pregnant. Most men would run screaming the other way."

"Then I am very glad I am not most men."

God, so am I. I run my fingers over the thick outline of his cock, rubbing him through his clothing. "Most men aren't built like this, either."

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"Another reason I am very glad I am not most men," he purrs, his hand sliding between my thighs. "Let me touch you."

"Only if I get to touch you, too." I gaze up at him, adoring, as I work his cock through his clothing, dragging over the sensitive, prominent head. The fabric over the tip is growing damp, and I'm tempted to demand that he stand up and get naked for me...except his hand is between my thighs, stroking and teasing me at the same time, and I'm not ready to give that up. Not yet.

I whimper with pleasure as his hand toys through my folds, spreading my wetness. My body makes slick sounds as he touches me, and I moan even as I continue to work him, pumping and pulling as best I can through the confines of the clothing. He circles my clit and I gasp, pressing my head against his chest.

"Love it when you make those sounds for me, my Payton," he murmurs. "I want to feel you come apart on my fingers."

"Wait," I breathe, lifting my head even as he strokes into my body. "I want you inside me when I come this time."

His eyes gleam in the growing darkness. "Yes?"

"Yes." I pluck at his tunic. "Let's get naked."

"You won't be cold?"

"Fuck the cold. I'll have a big, loving praxiian to keep me warm."

He groans, his hand sliding away from between my thighs and he clutches me against him, as if he never wants to let me go. I have to admit, I never want him to let me go, either. We linger in this moment, and then he tugs on my dress. "Let's get this off you."

I've never been so happy to get undressed.

Chapter

Nine

PAYTON

It takes some finagling to get our clothes off, because everything I do is awkward with my advancing pregnancy. Bodhrri helps me along, and then I sprawl on the pillows, admiring, as he stands up and strips off his clothing. I've seen him naked repeatedly in the past month, and I never tire of the sight of his lean, furred body, the big arms and shoulders, and the tapered waist that leads down to the most impressive cock I've ever put my mouth on. Does he look all that human? Less and less to me with every day. Does it matter to me? Not in the slightest.

Our children won't be completely human, either, and I love them with all my heart and soul already.

Bodhrri settles his long body next to mine, stroking his fingers over my bare skin. His gaze is admiring and makes me feel gorgeous. Doesn't matter the stretch marks or the swelling feet or the fact that my boobs have grown exponentially. He looks at me as if I'm the most delicious dessert that he can't wait to devour. "Tell me how to do this," he says. "What way is comfortable for you?"

"All fours, I think," and I can't resist reaching for his cock again, just because it juts

out as if it's dying to be petted a little more. "And some pillows to support my belly."

He groans, pumping into my hand once, and then pulls away. The kiss he gives me is hungry and savage, and then he's crawling around on the blankets, gathering the pillows closer. He holds a hand out to me and with his help, I get on hands and knees, and then he's carefully tucking pillows under me, taking the weight off my middle. "Better?"

I nod, supported on a small mountain of pillows. I imagine myself more like the snow capping Mount Fiji instead of a sexy woman waiting for her lover to cover her, but I know Bodhrri doesn't care. I can see the heat in his eyes.

"I like you this way," he purrs, and he moves towards my backside, his hand trailing over my hip. "Look at these flanks in the air for me. So plump and perfect and just begging for my mouth to be between them."

I bite down on my knuckle, stifling a whimper at the thought.

"Just a taste," he says to me. "Then I'll be inside you."

As if I'm going to protest? No, please, don't lick my needy pussy? A hungry sound rips free from my throat as he lowers his head and his tongue strokes through my crease from behind. I clutch the pillow closest to me as a lifeline as he buries his face between my legs and hungrily laps at me. His tongue is ever so slightly raspy, sending my nerve endings into overdrive, and I squeal aloud with every dip into my core. "Now, please," I manage. "Want you inside me. Now."

Bodhrri's hands move over my hips hungrily, but he gives my backside one last quick kiss and then straightens. He steps between my spread thighs, and I can feel his big body adjusting against mine. He drags his cock over my backside, teasing the tip over my sensitive skin and making me wild with need. I all but come up off the pillows

when he finally settles himself against the entrance to my body, notching his cock at my opening and then pressing in ever so slightly. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes."

He pushes in, just a bit more. "And now?"

I moan like a starving woman. "Keep going."

He chuckles, and the sound makes my toes curl with delight. Then he presses in deeper, stretching me around him, and I lose my breath entirely. It's been so long since I've had sex that I've forgotten how good it can feel when a big cock invades your body. My hands draw into fists as if I can somehow fight the onslaught of sensations as he sinks in. Breathing? Forget it. I'll breathe when I'm dead. Right now everything in me needs to focus on how good he feels.

Bodhrri sighs with bone-deep contentment and strokes a hand over my lower back. "You feel so good. Still comfortable?"

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I manage a nod, little shockwaves pulsing through my body with every twitch he makes. "Feels amazing, Bodhrri."

"Can I move?" He gives his hips a little surge to punctuate his question.

My tongue nearly glues itself to the roof of my mouth. "Yes. Do it."

He chuckles at my insistence, but that chuckle turns into a hiss when he draws back and plunges in, sinking deeper. Then there's not much chatting as we struggle to find a rhythm. Or at least, I do. My movements feel awkward and ungainly, and so I'm grateful when he pins my hips and holds me in place as he fucks the daylights out of me. Bodhrri moves over me, hammering into my body with his cock and driving home, and I've never felt anything so good. I whine with each stroke, until I sound as if I'm a scratched vinyl record stuck in the same place, skipping over and over again.

I lose myself in the sensations for a time, but when my knees start to hurt, I decide to help things along. I lean on my front, my hand stealing to my breast. My nipples have been incredibly sensitive since getting pregnant, and just touching one makes my entire body clench up. "Oh god."

Bodhrri makes a pained sound over me, as if he feels my cunt squeeze around his cock. His movements speed up, and his purring changes to a low, delicious growl. I keep teasing my nipple as the tension builds, and then I'm climaxing around him, every muscle in my body locked in an earth-rending orgasm that seems to go on forever. Bodhrri's growls become stronger and his thrusts harder as he seeks his own release.

Then he's coming, and his big body quakes against mine, his fingers digging into my hips as he pins me in place. My name is a wheezed pair of syllables before he makes a guttural sound and shudders. He's careful not to fall over me, his hands stroking my hips with little touches over and over again while we both come down.

"I need to roll over," I tell him, panting.

He pulls from my body immediately, and I want to protest at the sudden bereft feeling. I liked being filled up by him. But then he's helping me get comfortable on pillows and tucking the biggest ones against my side so my belly is supported. His fingers move over me, caressing, and Bodhrri looks me over with a mixture of pride and contentment. "Wait here. I'll get wet towels."

"I'll be here," I joke, because I don't think I could get up even if I wanted to. My bones are noodles in the best way.

Bodhrri dumps the carafe of water onto one of the cloth napkins he brought out and cleans me gently, then cleans himself off. He tosses it into the grass once he's done and then flops onto his back next to me in the nest of pillows, his fur sticking to my slightly sweaty skin. "That was amazing, just so you know."

"I'm pretty happy with how it turned out," I agree, lifting my hand towards his. He snags my fingers and twines his with mine, and my joy feels as if it's going to bubble over. I gaze up at the night sky, catching my breath, and notice the stars are out now. "Look up."

As I say it, a star shoots across the glittering sky, full of planets and rings and nebulae and all kinds of colors you wouldn't see back on Earth. We both exclaim at the same time, pointing.

"Make a wish," Bodhrri says.

That's an easy one. "I wish for all of our moments to be as good as this one."

"They will be," he says, all confidence.

I think he's right.

Epilogue

BODHRRI

When I thought about our children being born, I did not realize that all of them would wake up at the same time in the middle of the night, all demanding to be fed. This makes things tricky as my poor mate only has two breasts and we have four very small babies. It means that we both take two of them, and I bottle-feed the two less fussy ones while Payton holds the other two and feeds them.

It's been less than a week and I can already tell the personalities of our babies apart, just from the way they feed. Our oldest, Bram, is the biggest. He drinks the most and tackles his bottle with vigor, and as long as there is a nipple in his mouth, he does not fuss.

The next two are also boys, Marak and Aylex. Marak is active, watching everything as he feeds, and he squirms the entire time as if he does not want to waste a moment. Aylex is the fighter of my boys. He bites. Everything. Both of them refuse to take the bottle and scream like they are being murdered unless Payton holds them. She feeds them both when they rouse.

The tiniest one, our surprise baby, is our daughter. Her name is Estrella, which is a human word for "star." She is so delicate and dainty that sometimes it frightens me, yet she is sweet and easygoing as her mother.

Four children, incredibly enough. It is a mind-boggling amount, and yet I would not

trade a single one of them for anything. I do not care about missing sleep, or the fact that I have worn the same clothing for the last three days. All I care about is that they are healthy, and they are here with us.

I hold one bottle while I pick up Bram, who is already finished. I cradle him against my shoulder, jiggling in the hopes of a burp and nothing more. Estrella is still nursing her bottle, so I hold it propped up and glance over at my mate. Payton sleeps upright in our bed, her mouth open slightly. She has a sleeping baby on each breast, their tiny fists curled against her skin, and the picture they make hurts my heart with how achingly perfect it is. I will let them sleep a while longer, I decide.

Bram kicks his legs against me, and I adjust my grip. It's not easy to burp one baby while feeding another, but I am getting the hang of things. He whimpers and I press a kiss to his soft, round head. He does not have my ears. Estrella does, and she also has the tiniest little claws. All three boys have my tail and their manes are the same bright orange that mine is. "Hush, my son," I whisper. "Let your mother rest and I will tell you a story."

As if he can understand me, Bram calms. Estrella finishes her bottle and I pick her up, carefully maneuvering until they are both upright against my chest, and I pray to all the gods in the universe that there is no spit up, because I forgot a towel. It is unimportant at the moment, I decide. My tunic already needs washing.

"There was once a young male who grew up on a small, old station called Alos, off of Praxii Minor. The station was very old and its systems breaking down, so every day when the boy took a breath, it hurt his chest. His health suffered and when it came time for him to contribute to his family, as all honorable praxiian third sons do, he could not. Because he could not take deep breaths, the military would not have him. His parents tried to sell him into honorable slavery, but no one wanted a slave with bad lungs. He was removed from his family and shamed and left to fend for himself. He grew up unloved and unwanted and took odd jobs to make ends meet."

Bram whimpers against my chest. Estrella just leans against me, her big eyes wide and unblinking.

I give them both a little bounce and then continue, my voice low and soothing. "The male survived. He grew up, moving from station to station, but all of them hurt his lungs. The rooms he could afford were always in the cheapest parts of the station, where the air quality was the worst. He was resigned to never being able to draw a deep breath, never being happy. And then one day, his crew was assigned to a distant, privately owned planet to help expand a space port. He'd never been to a planet, but the pay was decent and he was curious. There were a lot of rules of conduct for this job, but he didn't mind. And when he got to Risda III, it was like the permanent fist around his lungs disappeared. His coughing stopped. He could take deep breaths of natural air. It didn't hurt to breathe anymore. He thought this place was paradise...and then he met a pretty female, and heknewit was paradise."

Against my shoulder, Bram burps politely. A small burp, so I know he has more in him. I continue.

"This female was a different species than him. She was short and loud and very drunk, but she was beautiful and wise. She pointed at the stars and told him that when they fall from thesky, you make a wish and you get everything you want. He thought for a moment, and when it came time to wish, he wished for this planet, with this beautiful female. He wished for every day to be spent in the sunshine, with the happy, loud female at his side. He wished for a family with her, one without praxiian rules. One where their children would be welcome to stay as long as they liked, and where they would be valued no matter how strong or weak their lungs were. Where they would be loved and happy all their days."

Estrella lets out a long, loud belch, startling me.

Bram spits up against my chest, then looks up at me, distressed.

I chuckle and go to clean us all up. "We'll finish this story another time, but just so you both know, my wish came true. All of it at once."

Shooting stars were very potent things.