



Aries (Galaxy Gladiators #22)

Author: *Alana Khan*

Category: Fantasy

Description: He's an admitted killer with a secret past.

She's the only woman who can save him.

In a ritual that forbids touch but demands intimacy, one accidental brush of skin could result in death.

Callie

I volunteered to save him without thinking twice.

Now I'm stuck in ancient redemption rituals with the brooding gladiator I've carefully avoided for five years.

The rules are simple:

live together

prove our bond is genuine

absolutely no touching

But as each intimate trial reveals the honorable male behind his walls, I'm facing an impossible truth:

The gladiator I thought cold and distant has been protecting me all along—from himself and the truth behind his so-called crime.

Aries

I don't deny I killed someone. I deserve death.

But Callie sees something in me worth saving—even as I push her away.

The rituals demand emotional intimacy.

The trials forbid even a single touch.

Every confession peels back my armor.

Every moment with her tempts me to risk everything.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter One

C allie

Aries walks into the Galaxy Warrior's dining hall and every conversation dies. Forks pause mid-air. Even the perpetual clatter of dishes goes silent. My fingers strangle my glass of iced drassah almost hard enough to leave marks.

I count the steps until he reaches the far corner table—his usual spot when our two ships dock together. Eight steps today. Sometimes it's seven, depending on how quickly he's trying to escape being in the same room with me.

The bitter-sweet aroma of the beverage fills my nose, grounding me in the present moment even as memories threaten to surface. Five years of carefully orchestrated avoidance have made me hyperaware of his presence, like a splinter I can't quite dig out.

We started avoiding each other the moment we overthrew our captors and won our freedom. That was five years ago.

At first, we were on the same ship—the original Warbird One—but even then, we managed to arrange our schedules so our paths rarely crossed.

When Captain Zar-Rynn split the crews between two ships a few years back, it seemed like a blessing.

I transferred to Captain Beast's Devil's Playground while Aries remained on what

became the Galaxy Warrior .

Different ships meant different missions, different schedules, different lives .

“Callie.” Shadow nudges my arm, his green, mechanical eye managing to look compassionate, mirroring the concern in his flesh-and-blood one as it focuses on my white-knuckled grip. “You’re going to crack that glass.”

Forcing my fingers to relax, a weak smile forms. “Just thinking about the upcoming games.” The lie slides out easily after years of practice. Years of perfecting this dance where Aries and I occupy the same spaces without acknowledging each other’s existence.

It’s been three months since both ships last docked together—unusual for us to spend this much time in proximity, but recent joint missions have required closer coordination.

The combined crews of the Galaxy Warrior and Devil’s Playground pack the Galaxy Warrior’s dining hall, their excited chatter about tomorrow’s gladiatorial games creating an electric atmosphere.

Familiar faces crowd around shared dishes—Shadow and Petra comparing fighting techniques with Beast and Aerie.

At the same time, Dr. Drayke expounds to anyone within earshot about a new cryogenic technique that can heal amputations at twice the normal speed.

“Did you see the odds on the Cestus matches?” Captain Beast asks, the golden rings that pierce the emerald skin on his straight nose catching the light as he leans forward. “They’re favoring the Anthen fighting team this year.”

“That’s because they haven’t seen our training sessions,” Petra counters, tossing her pink and blue striped hair. It had been brown for a while, but she must have grown tired of that. “Shadow’s been working on a new defensive stance that’s practically unbreakable.”

My attention keeps sliding to that corner table, though.

Aries sits alone, bronze skin gleaming under the harsh lights, those distinctive ram’s horns curling beside his face.

He’s bulked up since I last allowed myself to really look at him.

Apparently, the gladiator circuit has been good to him.

His movements are precise as he eats, measured, like everything about him—carefully controlled.

“Hey, communications officer!” Petra’s voice cuts through my wandering thoughts. “We need your expert opinion. Which betting pool has better odds—the paired fights or the free-for-alls?”

Grateful for the distraction, my focus shifts to the datapad she’s holding.

The familiar glow of numbers and statistics offers a safe haven from dangerous thoughts.

“The paired fights are showing three-to-one odds for top-ranked teams. Free-for-alls are more unpredictable, but the payouts are higher if you back the right fighters.”

“Of course, I’ll back the right fighters—ours.” Petra’s attention flicks meaningfully between me and the corner table, her expression softening with concern. “Speaking of

pairs...”

“Don’t.” The word comes out like the crack of a whip, earning curious glances from nearby crew members. “Please.”

She raises her hands in surrender, but the damage is done. The careful bubble of pretense ruptures as my memories flood back to the cell where it all began.

The forced mating program orchestrated by our slave masters.

The way Aries emotionally withdrew completely after our first do-or-die coupling, building walls so high they’ve never come down.

The days of captivity that followed, each of us retreating further into our own private hells.

Luckily, it didn’t last long. We staged an insurrection, overthrew the slavers, and have been traveling the galaxy ever since—using forged papers and stolen ships.

The scrape of Aries’ chair against the metal floor draws my attention. He always leaves exactly seventeen minutes after arriving, giving himself enough time to eat without risking actual interaction. Your timing’s getting sloppy , I think as he heads for the exit. Sixteen minutes today .

“You know,” Shadow says quietly once Aries is gone, his human eye reflecting genuine concern, “you two can’t keep this up forever. Especially not with both ships traveling and docking together often over the next few months.”

A hollow laugh escapes me. “Watch us. It works best when we travel on different ships, but we’ve gotten good at avoiding each other even when we’re in close quarters.”

The sad thing is, we have. It's become an art form, this elaborate avoidance.

The carefully timed meals, the coordinated training sessions that never overlap, the way we can be in the same room without ever meeting each other's eyes.

Sometimes I wonder if the crews enable it, adjusting their schedules to help maintain our careful distance.

"Tomorrow, we'll have to beam down early to planet Sanctorii.

The fighters' registration starts at 0700," Petra mentions, tapping her datapad.

The soft blue glow illuminates the worried crease between her brows.

"That's why everyone's turning in early tonight.

Have to get the whole team processed before the games can begin. "

My shoulders relax slightly. At least that's one awkward encounter that won't happen—my communication officer duties keep me busy and safely away from the weigh-in and biometrics area.

The knot in my stomach suggests the relief is temporary.

These games will go on for days—more if our gladiators advance through all their matches.

"It'll be fine," I say, more to convince myself than her. The ice in my drassah has melted, leaving what's left in my glass as watered down as my excuses for avoiding him.

Captain Zar-Rynn catches my eye from across the room, his lion-like features unreadable. The noble, supportive male has never pushed us about our situation, but sometimes I catch him watching us with something like sadness in those golden eyes. Like he knows something we don't.

But as I stare at my half-eaten dinner, something feels different. The air seems charged with an anticipation that has nothing to do with tomorrow's games. Like we're all just counting down to an explosion we can't prevent.

The question is: who's going to get caught in the blast zone when it finally happens?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Two

C allie

“Invalid registration. Security alert initiated.” The words cut through the registration hall like a blade, and I watch in horror as armed security forces emerge from hidden alcoves—more than seem necessary for a simple paperwork issue.

The security force’s polished black armor reflects the harsh overhead lights as they surround Aries at the biometrics area.

His expression remains carefully neutral as they bind his wrists with energy cuffs, but those amber eyes flash with something that looks like resignation. Like he’s been waiting for this moment.

The scent of metal and ozone from the energy cuffs mingles with the smell of dozens of species in the registration hall.

My fingers dig into the edge of the portable communications console where I’ve been monitoring the registration process.

I shouldn’t even be here—my duties don’t require it—but something drew me to this spot today, like a moth to a flame.

“What’s happening?” Captain Zar-Rynn demands, pushing through the crowd of waiting gladiators.

His golden fur bristles, tail lashing with agitation as he faces down the security team.

His fangs flash in the light, reminding me that despite his generally kind nature, he can tear someone to pieces, and doesn't need a weapon to do so .

The head security officer, a stern-faced female with pale-blue skin, consults her datapad.

The glow illuminates the harsh angles of her face as she speaks.

“This fighter is wanted on Garrox Prime for a Class One homicide. The charges were filed annums ago, but extradition was delayed while he remained in active slavery. Now that his current legal status has changed, Garrox Prime is demanding immediate transfer for execution. We'll check his biometrics again, but if the data doesn't change, the sentence is death. ”

The words hit like a physical blow. My fingers race across my datapad, already pulling up everything I can find about Garrox Prime's legal system.

Five years aboard these ships have taught me skills I never imagined needing back on Earth. What started as basic communication duties has expanded into research, analysis, and even combat training in the ludus .

I may have been a helpless tech support worker when the Urluts first abducted me, but now I can field-strip a weapon and decode encrypted transmissions in hundreds of languages.

The registration hall fades to background noise as information scrolls past, my heart pounding in sync with each new detail revealed.

“There must be some mistake,” Captain Beast argues, his massive green form

towering over the security detail. The golden rings in his nose glint as he steps forward, using his intimidating presence to full effect. “Aries has been with our crew for annums . He’s a legitimate fighter.”

“The DNA scan confirms his identity,” the officer states flatly. A subtle movement brings her team closer, hands hovering near their weapons. “He’s been living under an alias. His real name is—”

“Don’t.” Aries’ voice cuts through the chaos, quiet but firm. “Please.”

Something in his tone makes everyone fall silent. Even the security officers pause, perhaps sensing the weight of whatever’s coming next. The air feels thick with tension, like the moment before a storm breaks.

“I killed someone,” he continues, shoulders straight despite the restraints. The admission sends shockwaves through the gathered crews. In five years, he’s never spoken of his past. Never given any hint of what drove him to join the gladiator circuit.

I feel... nothing. It’s as though I’m outside my body, watching the scene from far away.

“Captain,” his voice remains steady, though something dark flickers behind his eyes, “I’m sorry for bringing this trouble to the crew.”

“No!” Captain Zar-Rynn’s tail has stopped its agitated lashing, now hanging perfectly still. When he speaks again, his voice carries the quiet authority that once united two ships of escaped slaves into a family. “We’re not doing this. Not accepting this without a fight.”

The security team moves Aries toward the exit. Captain Beast steps forward, but

Aries shakes his head. “Don’t make this worse, brother.”

“The holding facility permits legal counsel,” the Sanctorii officer states, perhaps sensing the crew’s mounting tension. “You have three standard hours to arrange representation before processing begins.”

Captain Zar-Rynn’s glance sweeps over our assembled crew members. “Everyone back to the Galaxy Warrior . Now!”

The hurried trip back to our ship feels endless as I finally slip back into my body.

My chest feels as though it’s gripped in the jaws of a monster, each breath a struggle against the tightening vise.

The image of Aries in restraints, his face resigned to his fate, burns behind my eyelids every time I blink .

For five years, I’ve convinced myself I felt nothing for him except the desire to keep my distance, but the pain swirling in my gut tells a different story. Something buried deep—something I’ve refused to examine—claws its way to the surface now that his life hangs in the balance.

Crew members converse among themselves, theories and concerns mixing with memories of the years we’ve known Aries.

He’s never been particularly social, especially since the ships split a few years ago, but he’s always been there when needed.

Always fought alongside us, trained the newer gladiators with patient competence, and contributed his fair share of winnings to the collective fund.

He's not flashy like Captain Beast or unpredictable like Shadow, but he's methodical, reliable, the kind of warrior you want covering your back in a tight spot.

The Galaxy Warrior's familiar corridors eventually lead us to the dining hall, our gathering space. Captain Zar-Rynn takes his usual spot near the viewport, but remains standing. "First priority is legal representation. I'm releasing ship's funds to hire the best attorney on this planet."

"Captain," Shadow interjects, "the crew wants to contribute. He's one of us. "

Nods and murmurs of agreement ripple through the room. Within seconds, everyone has offered the maximum in their credit accounts. These people—this found family of former slaves and gladiators—we take care of our own.

"We need more than money," Dr. Drayke says, his blue eyes darkening with concern. "We need information. Garrox Prime's legal system, their criminal codes, anything that might help the attorney build a defense."

"I was an attorney back on Earth," Aerie reminds us. "It was a while ago, and I'm sure our legal systems are different as night and day. Let me try to find a skilled lawyer to represent Aries." She tucks her head over her pad and is scrolling faster than most people can read.

My fingers are already flying over my datapad.

"Well, I'm no lawyer, but I'm good at research.

It's how I knew to steer clear of the Mattis system.

Who knew there would be cannibals in a world that had ships that could travel at the speed of light?

I'll start researching everything I can find about Sanctorii's justice system.

Maybe there's something on this planet we can use. ”

“Three hours isn't much time,” Petra notes, her usual confident demeanor subdued.

“Then we'd better work fast.” Captain Zar-Rynn's tail curves in determination.

“Callie, great idea to focus on Sanctorii's legal codes.

Shadow, contact that attorney who helped us with the ship's registration issues last annum to see if they have any connections on Garrox Prime.

Beast, review everything you know about Aries' fighting history, anything that might be relevant.

The rest of you pool your resources and start reaching out to contacts.

Someone somewhere must know something about Garrox Prime's justice system that can help us. ”

As the crew disperses to their tasks, I catch Captain Zar-Rynn watching me with an unreadable expression. For a moment, it seems like he might say something, but instead he simply nods and turns away.

Settling into my workspace in the communications hub, I pull up everything I can find about Sanctorii's labyrinthine legal system. Their database is extensive, stretching back millennia. Somewhere in all this information, there has to be a way to save him.

There has to be.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Three

C allie

“Since learning of the arrest,” Captain Zar-Rynn interjects, “we’ve been mobilizing resources. Aerie is researching every legal angle, Shadow is liquidating non-essential cargo to fund legal fees, and Dr. Drayke has been studying rehabilitation programs across three sectors.”

His golden eyes hold fierce determination. “A few hoaras aren’t much time to prepare, but we don’t abandon family.”

A hologram blinks on in the room—the attorney Aerie found, the one who agreed to take the case at the last minute. When his image stabilizes, his expression looks grim.

“I’ve filed papers to delay the extradition, but...

they won’t hold up under scrutiny. I’ve done everything legally possible.

” The attorney’s hologram flickers as he spreads his hands in defeat.

His perfectly tailored suit and practiced sympathetic expression set my teeth on edge.

“Garrox Prime’s justice system doesn’t recognize extenuating circumstances in homicide cases. ”

Hope drains away as the crew absorbs his words. From my station in the

communications hub, rows of legal text blur before my eyes. There has to be something we've missed.

I don't know if I've ever felt this tired. Every inch of my body aches, and my thoughts are spinning. I refuse to give in to this mental fog. There has to be something that can help Aries.

"What about illegal possibilities?" Captain Beast demands to the room full of my closest friends. His dozens of tiny braids tremble as he lifts his chin defiantly. "We've got two ships, skilled fighters—"

"And get the whole crew executed?" Shadow cuts in. "Their orbital defenses would cut us to pieces before we reached atmosphere."

"So, we just give up?" Petra's voice cracks.

Her fingers twist in her pink and blue striped hair—a nervous habit I haven't seen since her early days aboard our ship.

"After everything we've been through? We've fought together, evaded the Feds together, killed that evil bastard Daneur Khour together.

Now what? We just roll over and play dead? "

Captain Zar-Rynn remains silent, his tail curved in a way that means he's thinking deeply. The attorney's hologram drones on about precedents and procedures, each word hammering another nail in Aries' coffin.

My research screen fills with yet another dead end when something catches my eye—a footnote in ancient text, barely legible.

“Wait,” I breathe, enlarging the text. “Wait, this is...” My fingers tremble as I have the computer double-check its translation of the archaic language.

“Callie?” Dr. Drayke moves closer, his blue skin reflecting the glow of my screen. “Did you find something?”

“Maybe.” The word comes out barely above a whisper as implications unfold. “It’s old. Really old. Sanctorii religious law from before their modern legal system. It’s called the Redemption Rites.”

The attorney’s hologram flickers as he elaborates. “We Sanctorans believe that true redemption requires a profound transformation of the soul—one that can only be achieved through genuine emotional connection. Our entire justice system is built on this principle.”

“Counselor,” Captain Zar-Rynn addresses the hologram, “could this work?”

The attorney blinks, his practiced expression slipping. “That’s... rarely invoked successfully. Perhaps a handful of attempts each century, with most ending in failure. It’s technically a valid law, but the requirements are so demanding that—”

“What requirements?” Captain Zar-Rynn demands, his tail straightening as he senses possibility.

“The Redemption Rites,” the attorney explains, consulting his files.

“A religious ceremony where a death sentence can be commuted if the condemned enters a genuine marriage bond with a galactic citizen of good standing. They must prove the relationship is real through a series of trials—ninety days of supervised isolation with increasingly intimate challenges.”

I cut in, my voice stronger as I read from my own research. “Physical intimacy is strictly regulated during the trials. They use Fractali judges. Their species can detect genuine emotional connection. And if the couple fails...” My throat tightens. “The sentence is carried out immediately.”

Silence falls as understanding ripples through the room.

“Most couples who attempt this are doing so out of desperation rather than genuine connection,” the attorney continues.

“The Fractali can detect the difference between authentic bonds and desperate arrangements. That’s why the failure rate is so high—not because the law is defunct, but because most who invoke it are trying to manipulate the system rather than prove genuine redemption. ”

“As the only unmated woman in our group, the only one with any connection to Aries...” I begin .

“Callie...” Vartan’s voice is gentle, but filled with concern. “Are you certain?”

“It’s not anyone’s decision but mine,” I say quietly, though my heart pounds.

The attorney’s hologram sputters for a moment, catching our attention and putting an end to this discussion as he shuffles through documents. “You need to consider how rigorous this will be. As I said, the Rites are extremely demanding—for ninety days.”

“Three months,” I murmur, more to myself than the room. “We managed weeks in that cell. At this point, what’s three months?”

“This isn’t the same thing at all,” Petra argues. “That was survival. This is—”

“This is survival, too.” My voice comes out stronger than I feel. “ His survival.”

My mind races through impossible scenarios—Aries executed while we watch helplessly, the crew fractured by his loss, me living with the knowledge I might have been able to prevent it.

The thought lodges like shrapnel in my chest. I barely recognize my own impulse to save him, this male I’ve carefully avoided for years, but something primal and certain within me rebels against letting him die.

“Callie.” Captain Zar-Rynn moves to stand before me, his golden eyes intent.

“No one would think less of you for not offering this. What happened when you and Aries were thrown together in that cell... must have been traumatic for you both to avoid each other so completely these past annums . This is an enormous commitment, and it would mean facing whatever happened back then.”

“I know.” The words feel small in the huge weight of this moment .

“And if you fail these trials—if you can’t convince them it’s real—they’ll execute him immediately. No appeals. No second chances.”

“I know that too.”

His tail flicks with concern. “Are you prepared for what this means?”

The question hangs in the air. I think of Aries facing execution, of our crew losing another member, of living with the knowledge that I could have prevented it.

“Because he’s one of us. And we don’t leave our people behind.

” The words come out fierce and certain.

“I’ve spent all these years believing he rejected me after we were thrown together in that cell.

If there’s even a chance I was wrong, that his coldness came from somewhere else entirely, I need to know the truth.

” I add, surprised to admit out loud that I’d been nursing that thought all this time.

“Besides, it’s only three months. We can fake it that long, right? ”

“The Rites can’t be faked,” the attorney interjects. “The trials are designed to reveal genuine connection. Many couples who were actually in love have failed.”

“Then we’ll have to make it real,” I say, with more confidence than I feel. “Or real enough to pass their tests.”

“The isolation is complete,” the attorney adds. “No contact with crew, family, or friends. Just the two of you and the Redemption Committee observers. They are a separate race from the Sanctorii. They have powerful perceptive abilities.”

Shadow makes a frustrated sound. “This is insane. There has to be another way.”

“Is there?” I challenge, gesturing to the useless attorney’s hologram. “Because it sounds like our options are this or watching him die.”

My voice catches on the last word, the reality of what’s at stake hitting me like a sledgehammer.

For all our careful avoidance, all our history, I can’t reconcile the thought of a

universe without Aries in it.

Whatever happened between us in that cell, whatever walls he built—none of it matters against the finality of death.

I've survived slave traders, a revolution, and long, dangerous years on the run, but I realize now I'm not strong enough to survive knowing I could have saved him and didn't try.

"The holding facility requires an answer in thirty standard minutes," the attorney reminds us. "If you're truly considering this, I'll need to rush to prepare the documentation."

Captain Zar-Rynn's tail lashes in decision. "Prepare them. But first, Callie needs to speak with Aries." His gaze meets mine. "He has to agree to this. And you need to be very sure about what you're offering."

My legs feel unsteady as I stand. "Where are they holding him?"

"I'll take you," Petra offers quietly. "I studied the map, but we should run."

As we head for the door, Captain Zar-Rynn's voice stops me. "Callie. Whatever happened in that cell... whatever made you both retreat so far from each other... Are you sure you can face that?"

Looking back at the concerned faces of my crew—my family—I manage a weak smile. "I guess we're about to find out because I'm not willing to face the alternative."

The truth of those words settles into my bones. Since we fought and won our freedom, I've run from whatever broke between Aries and me. Now I'm running

straight toward it, toward him, toward demons I've carefully avoided—and there's a strange relief in that.

I don't know what awaits us in those three months of isolation, don't know if I can build something real with someone who once hurt me so deeply with his withdrawal.

But I do know, with a sudden clarity that startles me, that I'd rather face those demons than live with the certainty of his death on my conscience. Some choices aren't choices at all.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Four

A ries

The holding cell's bars press in close, reminding me of another cell from annums ago. At least this time I'm alone. No one else will suffer for my mistakes.

Footsteps echo down the corridor—three sets, one hesitant, one determined, and the solid step of the guard. They stop outside my cell. The energy barrier shimmers, distorting the figures beyond it until the guard adjusts the visual settings.

Callie.

She looks smaller than I remember, though it's only been a day since I last carefully avoided her in the dining hall. Petra hovers protectively behind her, pink and blue hair creating a sharp contrast against the metallic bars.

"Ten standard minutes," the guard announces, adjusting the barrier to allow sound while maintaining containment.

My throat tightens. This isn't part of the usual routine—our elaborate dance of avoidance perfected over five annums . She shouldn't be here. Doesn't need to see this. My time is almost up.

"You should not have come. I told the attorney this." The words scrape out formal and rough.

Behind the familiar barriers I've built, something cracks at the sight of her—my careful walls threatening to crumble when I need them most. She represents everything I don't deserve, everything I've spent years convincing myself I can't have.

When was the last time I spoke directly to her? That night in the cell, when I made my choice to protect her the only way I knew how—by becoming someone she couldn't possibly want?

"Strange." Her voice softens, a blend of disbelief and sorrow threading through it. "After all this time keeping our distance, I never imagined I'd be standing here, watching you face death for a past you've never spoken of."

A bitter laugh escapes before I can stop it. This was always coming. It just took longer than expected.

"We found a way out." She steps closer to the barrier, close enough that I can see the subtle trembling in her hands. "A legal way."

"Callie..." Petra starts, but Callie cuts her off with a sharp gesture.

"There's an old religious law on this planet.

It's so strong it overrides extradition to other planets.

It's called the Redemption Rites. A death sentence can be commuted through marriage to a galactic citizen of good standing.

"The words tumble out fast, like she's afraid she'll lose her nerve if she slows down.

"Three months of supervised trials to prove the relationship is genuine. If we pass—"

“No!” I thunder, as though I have the right to give her an order. The thought of trapping her in another cell, forcing her into another unwanted bond... “Absolutely not. When the attorney explained this, I told him to tell you not to come.”

“It’s not your decision.”

“No one else carries this but me!” Rising from the narrow bunk, I force myself to meet her eyes for the first time in annums . They’re still that impossible shade of green that haunted my dreams after we were separated. “You don’t owe me anything, Callie. Especially not this.”

“This isn’t about owing anyone anything.” Her chin lifts in that stubborn way I remember from before—before everything went wrong. “This is about not letting one of our crew die when there’s another option.”

“An option that traps you for three months with someone you can barely stand to be in the same room with?” The words taste like acid. “I won’t do that to you. Not again.”

Her sharp intake of breath tells me I’ve hit a nerve. Good. Better she hate me than suffer through three months of forced proximity. Besides, whatever these Redemption Rites are looking for, I won’t pass. I am not redeemable.

“You don’t get to make that choice for me.” Her voice drops lower, meant for my ears alone. “Not this time.”

The echo of our shared past hangs between us. All the choices I made, thinking I was protecting her. All the walls I built, thinking they would keep her safe.

“The trials aren’t easy,” I try again. “The attorney just came in and explained them. If we fail—”

“Then you die anyway.” She presses her palm against the barrier, sending ripples through the energy field. “But if we succeed, you live. Isn’t that worth trying?”

“Not at the cost of your freedom. I’ve done enough damage.” My hands clench at my sides, fighting the urge to mirror her gesture, though flesh cannot touch through the protective barrier.

“The person I killed—” My voice cracks. “You don’t know what happened.”

“No, I don’t. Because you’ve never told anyone.” Her eyes search mine. “But I know you. Five years fighting beside you, watching you train younger gladiators, seeing how you protect the crew even while keeping your distance. Whatever happened, whatever you did... you’re not the same person anymore.”

“Callie.” My voice comes out barely above a whisper. “Please don’t do this. I did the deed. I will pay the price. You should remain an innocent bystander and not get caught up in my mistakes.”

“Give me a better reason than ‘I’m not worth it’ and I’ll walk away right now.

” The challenge in her voice cuts through my defenses.

“Tell me you truly don’t want to live. Tell me you deserve to die for whatever happened.

No! Don’t just tell me, Aries.” I believe this is the first time she’s said my name in five annums . “Make me believe it.”

The words stick in my throat. Because the truth is, I don’t want to die.

Not anymore. Not since finding a place among this makeshift family of former slaves

and gladiators.

Not since watching Callie build a life for herself despite everything that happened in that cell.

Not since I've dreamed of her at night while avoiding her during the day—for annums .

“Time's up.” The guard's voice startles us both.

“The attorney needs an answer soon,” Callie says quickly. “We've asked him to draw up the forms. Just... think about it? Please?”

I watch her walk away, Petra's arm around her shoulders. The cell feels colder somehow, emptier. My reflection stares back from the barrier's surface—a blurry killer who ran from justice, a slave who fought for freedom, a coward who pushed away the one person who might have understood.

The worst part is, she's right. I don't want to die. But the thought of spending three months trying to convince everyone—including ourselves—that there could be something real between us...

The memory of that cell rises unbidden. The way she looked at me before I made my choice. The trust I betrayed, thinking I was protecting her. The walls I built that somehow became a prison for us both .

Three months to either fix what I broke or lose everything.

Maybe that's exactly what I deserve.

Chapter Five

C allie

The ceremonial robe refuses to cooperate. It's intricate, clearly requiring two people to fasten it. Frustration builds as another attempt to secure the back panel fails.

"Here, let me..." Aries' voice comes from behind, closer than he's been in years. His hands hover near the fabric, not quite touching. "If you'll permit me?"

My throat tightens. "Yes. Thank you." My voice is so stiff, an observer might think I wasn't a willing participant.

The brush of his fingers against the thick brocade sends a shiver through me.

The fabric rustles as he works, each careful movement deliberate, like he's defusing an explosive rather than helping with clothing.

The sweet-spicy scent of him—so familiar from that long-ago cell—makes my head spin as intimate pictures flash unbidden in my mind.

"These ceremonial garments are rather complex," he murmurs, breaking the heavy silence. His voice sounds rough, although he's forcing casualness.

Each brush of his fingers against the fabric sends electricity racing across my skin.

"The Redemption Committee representative said the complexity is intentional.

Something about the couple having to work together from the very beginning. ”

A soft exhale that might be a laugh. “They’re not subtle with their symbolism, are they?”

“About as subtle as being told we have to dress each other for our own wedding.” The word ‘wedding’ hangs in the air between us, making everything feel suddenly, painfully real.

His hands pause at my shoulder. “Callie, are you absolutely certain—”

“Don’t.” As I turn to face him, the gold brocade robe swishes around my ankles. “We’ve been through this. The forms are signed. The Committee is waiting. This is happening.”

His amber eyes search mine, something raw and vulnerable flickering in their depths. The ceremonial robe he wears—all severe lines and metallic threading—makes him look like some ancient warrior-prince. The ram’s horns curling beside his face complete the fantastical effect.

A minute slips by as memories of my older sister’s wedding pull me back in time.

Barely thirteen then, I watched her in awe — a radiant bride in her twenties.

My mind had spun grand visions of my own wedding day, a white dress flowing as I walked down the aisle toward a handsome man who gazed at me the way Travis looked at Megan.

Shaking the thought away, I refuse to dwell on how far this sham of a ceremony is from those childhood dreams. Being abducted into space, living like a pirate, and reciting vows in another language to a horned male from another planet never

factored into those fantasies.

At least one thing remains the same — there's no denying he's handsome.

“Your turn,” I say, gesturing to the unfastened panels at his shoulders. “Unless you'd prefer to walk down the aisle with your robe falling off.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw, but he turns, presenting his back. The powerful muscles there bunch under bronze skin as I work with the fastenings. Five years of carefully maintained distance dissolve with each necessary touch .

“The Committee explained the hand-feeding ritual?” he asks, his voice carefully neutral.

“Yes.” My fingers fumble with a particularly stubborn clasp. “We take turns feeding each other ceremonial foods while maintaining eye contact. Supposed to represent trust and nurturing or something equally on-the-nose...” And totally impossible.

“And you're comfortable with this choice? This level of... intimacy?”

His word choice makes me pause. “Are you?”

He doesn't answer immediately. When he does, his voice is low. “I am not comfortable with any of this. But not because...” A frustrated sound escapes him. “Not for the reasons you probably think.”

Really? We're starting this challenging endeavor with the expectation that I need to read his mind? Before I can ask what he means, a chime sounds. Time to begin.

The ceremony hall is smaller than expected, its ancient stone walls lined with floating orbs that cast everything in soft golden light.

The three Redemption Committee members, crystalline beings of the Fractali species, stand in a semicircle around a raised platform, their faceted forms catching the golden light and scattering it into shimmering rainbow prisms.

Unlike the flowing, organic Sanctorii with their translucent blue skin and liquid mercury hair, these beings appear to be made of living diamond.

Their bodies shift and reshape constantly, geometric patterns flowing like water made of light.

Where faces should be, there is little that is humanoid except for multi-faceted orbs that must be eyes.

When they speak, the sound emanates from multiple points within their crystalline matrix.

“Approach,” the central figure intones, their multilayered voice a hallmark of their hive-mind species .

Each step feels momentous, like we’re walking toward something far bigger than a simple ceremony.

Aries moves beside me, his presence both familiar and strange.

How many times have we strategized battles together?

How many shared meals and holidays of a dozen species?

Yet this feels more intimate than any of those moments.

“Kneel.”

The stone is cold through the ceremonial robes as we face each other on the platform.

This close, I can see the subtle flecks of gold in his stunning amber eyes, the tiny scar above his left eyebrow I never noticed before.

I wonder when he got it, what gladiatorial match, what dangerous undertaking that happened as I studiously avoided him.

“Before we proceed,” the central Committee member announces, their multilayered voice holding ancient authority, “you must understand why these Rites exist.”

The Fractali’s crystalline form shifts and refracts light as they speak.

“Our species has watched as countless civilizations rose and fell.”

Another Fractali begins talking where the other left off.

“Those that practice true redemption—transformation through genuine connection—survive and thrive. Those that rely solely on punishment and vengeance destroy themselves within centuries. Your case will either validate this principle or demonstrate its limits, influencing justice systems across the galaxy.”

Their faceted eyes shift colors as they continue. “We do not seek to deny justice, but to prove that authentic love can heal even the most broken souls.”

It looks each of us in the eyes, then continues, “The Redemption Rites begin with sustenance freely given and received,” the Committee speaker continues. “Who offers first?”

“I do.” The words come out steady, though I’m trembling on the inside.

A server approaches with a tray of small, jewel-toned fruits, glistening with moisture as though freshly picked, alongside a decorative container of thick, amber honey that catches the light, and ceremonial bread that gives off a warm, yeasty aroma.

“Remember,” another Committee member adds, “you must maintain eye contact throughout. Brief physical contact is allowed. This represents the trust and openness required for true redemption.”

Picking up a piece of violet fruit, I raise my hand to Aries’ lips. The deep plum color contrasts with his bronze skin as my fingers hover before him. His gaze locks with mine as he takes the offering, the brush of his mouth against my fingers sending electricity arcing up my arm.

His lips are softer than I remember, warm and surprisingly gentle for someone so powerful. When they part, the tip of his tongue grazes my fingertips, leaving a trail of heat that makes my skin tingle long after the contact ends. The unexpected intimacy of it makes my breath catch.

The fruit’s sweet scent fills the air, but it’s nothing compared to the heat building in his eyes.

Something molten and primal flickers there, breaking through his careful control.

His eyes darken from amber to a deep gold, pupils expanding until only a thin ring of color remains.

My pulse quickens in response, my heartbeat a thundering rhythm I’m certain he can hear in such close quarters.

His turn comes next. Large, careful hands select a piece of bread, his movements deliberate as his fingers tear off a perfect morsel.

He dips it in honey, and I watch, transfixed, as golden droplets cling to the bread and threaten to fall before he catches them with a practiced twisting motion. He brings it to my lips.

The moment stretches, heavy with unspoken words and emotions.

I can feel the warmth radiating from his skin, smell the faint spice-and-sun scent that is uniquely his.

As the bread touches my mouth, my lips part instinctively.

The honey hits my tongue first—sweet and floral—followed by the bread's hearty texture.

His thumb brushes my bottom lip, seemingly by accident, and a small sound escapes me before I can stop it.

His pupils dilate at the noise, his nostrils flaring slightly as he inhales sharply.

Back and forth we go, each offering becoming more charged than the last. A piece of golden fruit leaves sticky sweetness on my fingers, juice running down to my wrist in a thin rivulet, which he chases with his tongue before I can pull away, his gaze never leaving mine as he takes his time, the heat of his mouth leaving my skin feeling branded.

In some perverse form of retaliation, I let my lips brush his knuckles as I accept the next morsel, deliberately allowing them to linger as I take the food, my teeth grazing his skin ever so slightly.

I watch as a shudder subtly runs through him, a muscle in his jaw tightening as he fights for control.

By the time we reach the seventh exchange, the ritual has become something else entirely—a dance of desire conducted through fleeting touches and burning looks.

When he feeds me a honey-dipped berry, I allow the sweetness to linger on my lips before slowly catching a drop with the tip of my tongue.

His breathing grows audibly heavier, his massive chest rising and falling in a rhythm that matches the pulse I can see beating at the base of his throat.

By the final exchange, we're both breathing harder, the air between us charged with electricity.

The simple ritual transformed into something far more sensual than either of us expected.

My hands tremble as I offer the last piece of fruit, a deep red berry that stains my fingertips like blood.

His hands aren't entirely steady either as he accepts it, his fingers briefly encircling my wrist before releasing it, maintaining that searing eye contact that makes me feel as though it's not the food, but me that's being devoured.

"The physical bond is sealed," the Committee speaker declares. "Now begins the spiritual joining. "

They circle us, chanting in a language that bypasses my translator chip. The floating orbs vibrate in rhythm with their words, casting strange shadows.

"For the duration of the Rites, physical intimacy is prohibited," one member states. "Your connection must be built on deeper foundations before the physical may be explored."

The tension in Aries' shoulders eases slightly at these words. Something twists in my chest—relief? Disappointment? Both?

“Know that these trials cannot be falsified. Our species exists partially in the psychic realm—we perceive emotional resonance as clearly as you see light. Deception is impossible, but the heart's evolution remains its own mystery.”

Another member continues, although their voices sound exactly the same. “Many have tried to deceive us—their failures were... immediate and final. True redemption requires true connection.” Their multilayered voice holds no room for doubt.

My eyes fly wide as my stomach bottoms out.

They couldn't have shared that information before we completed the bond?

“Powerful perceptive abilities” sounded like they were really good at reading body language and facial clues.

Now that we've committed ourselves, they tell us they'll be able to psychically suss out if we're truly committed? Truly in love ?

What have we gotten ourselves into?

“You will be escorted to your assigned dwelling,” another adds.

“From this moment, all contact with others is forbidden unless explicitly approved. You have ninety days to prove your bond genuine through the completion of assigned trials. Failure means death for Aries Dravek Zavalon. Success means life and freedom to choose your path forward.”

He motions for us to rise. “As we said, our telepathic abilities allow us to sense

genuine emotional connections. The energy fields we generate can detect physical contact at the molecular level. These cottages exist in a dimensional pocket where we monitor all activities through quantum resonance. Attempting to manipulate or deceive the trials will result in immediate detection.”

“Now, you will face your future together.”

We turn toward the door that will lead to our shared isolation. Ninety days to convince everyone, including ourselves, that this is real. Ninety days to either heal what broke between us or watch him die.

The memory of those boar-faced Urlut guards shoving food through the cell bars feels distant now, belonging to a different lifetime. A different us. Back then, we could barely look at each other as we ate our meager rations. Now...

“This isn’t going to be like that cell,” he says suddenly, as if reading my thoughts. His voice is rough with emotion. “I won’t—” He breaks off, swallowing hard. “I am not that person anymore.”

“Neither am I.”

The door opens, revealing a path that will either lead to his redemption or his execution. To the healing of old wounds or the creation of new ones. The lingering sweetness of honey and fruit mingles with the spicy scent of his skin, making my head spin with possibilities and fears.

Together, we step through.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Six

C allie

“Stone walls. Climbing vines. Windows drunk on golden sunlight. Our new prison looks like something from a fairy tale—if fairy tales included psychological warfare and forced proximity. Also? This isn’t just a tiny house, it’s almost microscopic.”

“Home sweet home,” I mutter, following the Redemption Committee member up the winding path. Aries walks beside me, his tightly controlled irritation a constant reminder of what we’ve committed to.

“The dwelling is designed to prevent physical and emotional distance,” our guide explains, their multilayered voice echoing slightly.

The Sanctorii invited the Fractali to oversee their Redemption Rites centuries ago, after their own empathic abilities—which manifest as visible emotional auras—proved too merciful for fair judgment.

The Fractali’s crystalline nature allows them to perceive truth without the emotional interference that compromises Sanctorii objectivity.

“The Redemption Committee consists of three Fractali,” the central figure explains, their crystalline forms catching the morning light.

“For routine observations and daily check-ins, one member will attend. For major trials and significant announcements, all three will be present. The importance of our

full presence indicates the gravity of the moment.”

He opens the door and motions us inside.

“You will find this abode encourages natural interaction through proximity.”

That’s one way of putting it. The main room can’t be more than twenty feet across, with a small kitchen area, a sitting space, and what looks like a meditation corner with cushions. A narrow archway leads to what must be the bedroom.

One bedroom. Of course.

“Physical contact outside prescribed rituals results in marks against your progress. Three marks means failure.”

And failure means they drag Aries to the execution chamber within the hour. The Fractali have never granted clemency to those who attempt to deceive their sacred process. Ever.

The Committee member’s crystalline form shifts, catching the light. “These trials were designed to reveal the truth of the heart. For those who have earned death, only genuine transformation through love can grant redemption. We do not merely seek compliance—we seek the rebirth of a soul.”

Aries and I have said nothing more intimate than “pass the salt” in five years. Now we have ninety days to prove we love each other? We don’t even like each other, nor do we know each other. And the stakes couldn’t be higher. This male’s life is on the line.

“Your first task begins at sunrise,” the Committee member continues, setting a thick book on the small table. “The Manual of Customs contains all required daily rituals

and practices. Failure to complete any ritual results in a mark against your progress.”

My throat tightens at the reminder of what failure means. Aries shifts beside me, his elbow brushing me in what might be reassurance .

“Questions?” The Committee member’s multifaceted eyes reflect the dying sunlight.

“No, I think we’re—” I start, but Aries cuts in.

“The bedroom arrangement. You mentioned specific sleeping requirements?”

“Yes. You must share the bed.” My heart skips several beats. Even after all this time, sweat pops onto my upper lip when I think we might be forced to have sex in this trial. “However, physical intimacy is prohibited. The barrier provided must remain between you at all times.”

Does it make me a bad person that relief floods through me at this reprieve?

We follow as they step into the room and gesture to what looks like a long, thin pillow running down the center of the bed. It’s the width of my hand.

“That’s supposed to keep us separate?” The panicked words slip out before I can stop them.

“The barrier is symbolic rather than physical. Like many aspects of the Rites, its power lies in your commitment to honoring it.” Their tone suggests they’ve given this speech before.

“Now, please review the first chapter of the Manual before retiring. Your morning ritual begins precisely at sunrise.”

With that, they glide out, leaving us alone in our new home. The silence feels heavy with everything we're not saying.

"Well," I finally manage, "should we see what delightful surprises await us in the Manual?"

Aries moves to the table, his ceremonial robe rustling. We're still in our wedding clothes, I realize. Still carrying the lingering sweetness of honey and fruit from the surprisingly sensual feeding ritual .

"'Chapter One: Daily Observances'," he reads, his deep voice steady despite the situation. "'The day begins with the Greeting of Unity...'"

Stepping closer, I peer around him—careful not to touch him.

"'Partners must touch foreheads while speaking the traditional morning blessing,'" I read aloud. "'This connection symbolizes the joining of minds and spirits.'"

"It gets better," he says dryly. "'Following the morning greeting, partners shall assist each other in grooming rituals. This includes hair brushing and braiding, symbolizing the care and attention required for a lasting bond.'"

A startled laugh escapes me. "They want us to braid each other's hair? Your horns might make that interesting."

His lips twitch. "I'm more concerned about achieving that forehead touch around them."

"We'll figure it out. We've faced worse challenges."

His expression sobers. "Callie..."

“Don’t.” I’m no fool. At some point, we’ll have to discuss our history; the air is thick with it. Now isn’t the time, though. I turn to explore the cottage, though I think I’ve already discovered the highlights. “We’re here. We’re doing this. No more second-guessing.”

The kitchen is well-stocked but tiny, with barely enough counter space for one person to work. The meditation corner holds two cushions positioned face-to-face, close enough that our knees would touch if we sat there.

“The bathroom off our bedroom is proportionate to everything else,” Aries calls from the other room. “Not sure I’ll fit in the shower or the tub. ”

“Of course it’s small,” I mutter. Everything is designed to force proximity, to prevent the physical and emotional distance we’ve maintained for years.

The bedroom proves equally challenging. Besides the symbolically divided bed, there’s a small dresser and a bench where we’re supposed to sit for the hair-braiding ritual. A large window looks out over a garden that would be charming if I weren’t so overwhelmed by everything else.

“We should change,” I say, spotting our bags near the dresser. “Get out of these ceremonial robes before—”

The words die as I realize the implications. We’ll have to help each other with the fastenings again.

“I’ll wait in the other room while you change,” Aries offers quietly. “Just... call when you need help with the back panels.”

He disappears through the archway, leaving me alone with my racing thoughts. The robe feels heavier now, weighted with everything this day has meant... and

everything still to come.

“Ready,” I call after changing everything I can reach.

His footsteps approach slowly, deliberately. The floorboards creak beneath his weight, each step measured and purposeful. My pulse quickens as he draws near, the air between us charged with unspoken tension.

Large, careful hands make quick work of the fastenings, his fingers brushing against my bare skin with feather-light precision. Each point of contact—knuckles grazing my spine, fingertips ghosting across my shoulder blades—sends electricity skittering across my skin.

I bite my lip to stifle a gasp as his warm breath fans against my neck, so close I can almost taste the spicy-sweet scent. The ceremonial silk beneath the thick brocade slides against my heated flesh as he works, the caress of fabric somehow more intimate than nakedness .

More unsettling than the touch is my unexpected response to it.

My body betrays me with each fastening undone—nipples tightening beneath my slip, skin flushing with warmth that pools low in my belly.

This simple, necessary task shouldn’t feel so forbidden, so delicious.

Yet here I stand, trembling slightly as his deft fingers work their way down my back, each touch igniting sensations I’ve denied for five long years.

“Your turn,” I manage, proud of how steady my voice sounds.

We switch places, maintaining careful distance as I help with his robe. The bulging

muscles of his back shift under my fingers.

“All done,” I say quickly, stepping back. “I’ll just...”

“Callie.” His voice stops me at the archway. “About the sleeping arrangements...”

“It’s fine. We’re both adults. We can handle this.” The words come out with more confidence than I feel. “Besides, it’s better than that cell, right? No bars, and this bed is more than twice as wide as... the other one.”

His sharp intake of breath makes me realize what I’ve said. We never talk about the cell. Never acknowledge those weeks of forced proximity, careful distance, and the Urluts’ commands to “complete the act.”

“Right,” he says finally. “Better than the cell.”

The Manual sits accusingly on the table, reminding us of tomorrow’s tasks. Meditation cushions wait in their corner, positioned for forced intimacy. The bedroom beckons with its slim pillow positioned in the exact middle of the mattress.

“Actually...” I hate to admit I’ve got cold feet, but we’re in this tiny house together, with psychic beings monitoring us. We have no choice but to join each other in bed. “We should sleep,” I say quickly. “This has been one of the worst days of my life.”

Did I really say that when Aries was sentenced to death a few hours ago? How selfish of me. And I said the quiet part out loud—that this is the worst day of my life because I had to marry him.

“Right.” His expression sours. “Early morning tomorrow.” He runs a hand through his hair, looking as shaken as I feel. “Sleep.”

The bed awaits, promising a long night of hyperawareness and careful distance. Just like old times, I think wryly. Except nothing about this feels like old times, and I'm not exactly sure why.

Sleep comes fitfully, interrupted by the strange sounds of the cottage settling and Aries' steady breathing on the other side of the barrier. Just as exhaustion finally pulls me under, a sharp sound jerks me awake.

"No... can't let them..." Aries thrashes against his side of the barrier, his voice rough with anguish. "Kren, I'm sorry... had to stop... hurting you..."

"Aries?" Sitting up carefully to maintain proper distance, my heart pounds at his obvious distress. "Wake up."

"Can't watch anymore... Kren... please..."

"Aries!" Louder this time, fighting the urge to reach across the barrier and shake him awake.

His eyes snap open, pupils dilated in the semi-darkness. For a moment, he seems lost between nightmare and reality. "Callie?"

"You were dreaming." The words come out gentle despite my racing heart. "Something about... Kren?"

His breath catches. In the dim moonlight filtering through the window, I can see him struggling to rebuild his walls. "My brother," he says finally, the words barely audible. "I had to... he was suffering, and I... "

The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken pain.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” Rolling away to face the wall, his voice turns flat. “It was just a dream.”

But we both know it wasn’t just a dream. And as I lie awake listening to his carefully controlled breathing, I wonder what impossible choice he had to make regarding his brother—and how it led him to face execution on Garrox Prime.

Dawn eventually creeps in, finding us both pretending to sleep while questions multiply in the growing light.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Seven

A ries

Every shift of the mattress, every quiet breath from Callie's side of the bed, has kept me acutely aware of her presence. The symbolic barrier between us feels inadequate.

Memories of yesterday's wedding ceremony flash unbidden—the way her fingers trembled as she fed me those honey-sweet fruits, the soft gasp she made when my thumb grazed her lower lip.

Forcing those thoughts away, my focus returns to our current predicament: the morning ritual that requires even more intimacy than yesterday's ceremony.

“Morning,” Callie murmurs, the word slightly slurred from sleep. The domesticity of the moment makes me squeeze my eyes shut against the wave of images that bombards me of things I've imagined over the annums .

“Morning.” Sitting up carefully, the barrier pillow bunches between us. “Ready for our first ritual?”

Her quiet laugh holds no humor. “Does it matter if we're ready?”

No. The Redemption Committee doesn't care about readiness. They care about results, about proving this marriage is real enough to save my life. The weight of that responsibility sits heavy as we make our way to the meditation corner.

The cushions face each other, positioned so our knees will touch when seated.

Callie tugs at her sleep tunic, and I force myself to look away from where the thin fabric clings to her curves.

This is already challenging enough without acknowledging how beautiful she looks with sleep-mussed hair, flushed cheeks, and hardening nipples visible through the white silk.

“So...” She settles onto her cushion. “Forehead touch first, then the blessing?”

Nodding, I lean forward slowly, angling my head so my horns don’t crash against her. The first brush of her skin against mine sends heat racing through my body. Her sharp intake of breath suggests she feels it, too.

“The blessing,” she reminds us both, though her voice wavers.

“With the rising sun,” we begin together, the traditional words feeling weighted with meaning, “we greet this day as one spirit in two forms.”

Her skin burns against mine as we continue the blessing. My hands clench against my thighs, fighting the urge to touch her properly. Wait. Properly? And just how would that be?

“May our hearts beat in harmony.”

“May our souls dance in unity.”

“From dawn to dusk, we walk as one.”

The required three breaths after the blessing feel endless. Her scent fills my

lungs—something floral mixed with sleep-warmth that makes my head spin. When we finally separate, her pupils are dilated, making the green of her eyes even more vibrant.

“Hair ritual next?” My throat is dry as arena sand.

She nods, retrieving the brushes from the dresser. “Should I do you first? Since yours might be more... complicated.”

My lips twitch despite everything. The horns do present certain logistical challenges.

We move to the padded bench by the window, morning light streaming across the small space.

The first touch of the brush through my hair sends unexpected pleasure down my spine and straight to my cock, which tents the silk of my crimson sleep pants. I’m glad she’s positioned behind me.

“I should warn you,” she says, “I don’t have much experience with this.”

“It’s fine.” The gentle strokes continue, careful around my horns. Her fingers accidentally brush my neck, sending tides of pleasure rolling across my skin.

Her touch is feather light but leaves trails of fire in its wake.

Each brush of her fingers near the sensitive areas around my horns sends sparks of awareness through my body.

That area has always been sensitive, and when her fingers accidentally graze them, my hands grip the crimson satin to keep from reaching for her.

My species' horns are erogenous zones—something she thankfully didn't discover in that fetid cell, possibly because I always took her from behind. Now, her innocent, mandatory touches are slowly driving me mad.

“Your turn,” I manage once she finishes, my voice embarrassingly hoarse. We switch positions, and I stare at her golden hair, suddenly uncertain. The last time I touched her this intimately was in that cell, when everything went horribly, irrevocably wrong.

“You can touch me.” Her voice is soft. “It's part of the ritual.”

Right. The ritual. Not real intimacy—just another requirement to fulfill so she can save my miserable life. The reminder helps steady my hands as I brush. Her hair feels like silk, falling through my fingers like a waterfall. A small sound escapes her at the first stroke.

“That feels nice,” she murmurs, then seems to catch herself. “You're surprisingly good at this. ”

My hands momentarily pause as memories surface of the gladiator ludus . Of caring for injured fighters, helping them maintain some dignity despite our circumstances. Of learning these small gestures of comfort that were sometimes all we could offer each other when someone lay dying.

“Had practice,” I say simply. “In the ludus . It was... something I could do. To help.”

Working quickly but carefully, I weave her hair into an intricate pattern Petra once braided into Callie's silken hair.

I watched from afar, noticing how it made her eyes seem impossibly greener.

My fingers brush her neck occasionally, and each time she shivers in a way that makes my jaw clench with restraint.

The intimacy of the moment feels dangerous.

“Almost done,” I murmur. “Just need something to...”

She passes back a leather tie without looking, our fingers brushing in the exchange. More electricity, more awareness that I shouldn’t acknowledge.

“There.” Sitting back, I watch as she reaches up to feel the results. The sight of her fingertips tracing the pattern I created makes my heart swell.

Morning light catches her hair, making it glow like honey as she turns to face me. “Thank you.”

The gratitude in her voice undoes me somehow. “Callie, I—”

A chime interrupts whatever foolish thing I might have said. The Committee’s morning check-in.

“We should...” She stands quickly, grabs a tunic and runs into the refresher to change. Calling out the partially shut door, she says, “They’ll want to verify we completed the rituals.”

“Right.” Rising more slowly, I force my body to respond to my commands. To rebuild the walls that seem to crumble more with each intimate moment. “Wouldn’t want to fail on our first day. ”

The Committee’s daily representative materializes, their multifaceted eyes seem to miss nothing. My still-racing pulse. The way Callie and I can’t quite look at each

other. The charged atmosphere between us.

“The morning rituals are complete,” they intone. “You may proceed with your day. Remember, evening meditation begins at sunset.”

They fade away, leaving us alone with everything we’re not saying. Everything we might have said if that chime hadn’t interrupted us.

“So,” Callie says brightly, clearly trying to dispel the tension, “I suppose we should eat something.”

“The Committee stocked the kitchen well,” I observe, grateful for the distraction. The tiny space forces us to maneuver carefully around each other as we explore the supplies. Every near-brush of contact feels charged after the intimacy of the morning rituals.

“Look at this,” she says, opening a cabinet.

“Drassah beans. Real ones, not the synthetic kind.” Her eyes light up at the discovery of the beverage we’ve all grown addicted to during our time in space.

The Earth women love it, say it tastes like their coffee back on their home planet, only less bitter.

“I’ll make it,” I offer quickly, remembering her disastrous attempt on the ship that had Captain Beast spitting out what he claimed tasted like engine coolant. “You could...” My eyes scan the kitchen, looking for a safe task. “Handle the fruit?”

She laughs, the sound both surprising and welcome. “I’m not completely helpless in the kitchen anymore, you know. But fine—I’ll admit my limitations with drassah.”

Working together in the small space creates a strange sort of awareness, different from the formal rituals, but somehow more challenging. We develop a careful dance of movement, always mindful of each other's presence, never quite touching but constantly in each other's orbit .

“We should review the evening meditation requirements,” she suggests as we settle at the small table with our breakfast. “Make sure we're prepared.”

The Manual sits between us, a silent reminder of why we're here—although we're both conscious of how high the stakes are if we fail. Opening it reveals more intimate rituals we'll have to navigate, more moments that will test the careful walls we've built over the last annums .

Eighty-nine days left to convince everyone this is real. The problem is, I'm starting to wonder if we're the ones who need convincing. And I am not sure which possibility terrifies me more—failing these trials or succeeding at them.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Eight

C allie

The Truth Mirror gleams in the afternoon light, its ornate frame seeming to mock us as we sit before it on the edge of our bed.

According to the Manual, this weekly ritual requires us to maintain eye contact through the mirror while sharing progressively deeper truths.

No looking away. No deflection. No lies.

“The first truth must relate to your current feelings. Partners take turns building on revelations.” The Manual’s words blur as my pulse hammers against my throat. Five years of careful avoidance, and now they want emotional honesty?

Aries shifts beside me, our hips touching. His reflection shows the tension in his jaw, the vein leaping on his cheek. “And we have to maintain eye contact with each other in the mirror the entire time?”

“Until the ritual is complete.” My fingers trace the Manual’s worn pages. “Three truths each, minimum.”

His gaze meets mine in the mirror, and my breath catches at the intensity there. Even in reflection, his amber eyes hold power.

“Ladies first?” he offers, the formality not quite hiding his discomfort .

Taking a deep breath, I search for a truth that won't leave me too exposed. "I'm worried about failing these trials." Simple. Safe. True.

"Not good enough," a disembodied voice announces—the Truth Mirror itself, apparently. "Deeper truth required."

Aries' reflection shows surprise that matches my own. The Mirror is sentient? No one mentioned that particular detail.

"Fine." Frustration makes me bolder. "I'm terrified of failing these trials because I couldn't bear watching you die, knowing I might have prevented it."

The Mirror hums with approval. Aries' pupils dilate slightly, but he maintains eye contact as required.

"Your turn," I prompt when he remains silent.

"I'm angry," he starts, then quickly amends as the Mirror starts to protest, "I'm angry that you're trapped in this situation because of my past mistakes. That you felt obligated to offer this sacrifice."

"Truth accepted," the Mirror intones. "Continue the exchange."

The admission hangs between us, making the next truth harder to voice. "I don't feel trapped," I say softly. "I feel... confused. Because parts of this—parts of our morning ritual—felt..."

"Felt?" he prompts when I hesitate.

"Natural," I finish. "Like maybe we've been doing everything wrong these past five years."

The Mirror's approving noise is almost smug. Aries' reflection shows something raw and vulnerable before he masks it.

"I dream about the cell," he says abruptly. "Not the bad parts, but... but the moments before. Before I..."

The Mirror's gilded frame vibrates expectantly, demanding more.

"Before I built the walls," he continues roughly. "When I still let myself feel..."

"Feel what?" The words slip out before I can stop them.

His eyes close briefly—a violation of the ritual that makes the Mirror hum in warning. When they open, there's something almost desperate in them.

"Hope," he grits out. "I let myself feel hope. That maybe, despite the horrible circumstances, we might..."

The Mirror accepts this truth, saving him from finishing the thought. My turn again, and my heart pounds so hard I'm sure he must hear it.

"Sometimes I resent you," I say, watching his reflection flinch.

"Not for withdrawing—I understood that. We were all traumatized, all coping however we could. I hate you for maintaining the distance even after we were free. For making me feel like those weeks in the cell showed you deep parts of me, and you rejected what I revealed."

"Truth deeply given," the Mirror announces, sounding pleased. "Final exchange."

Aries' hands clench where they rest on his thighs. "I never hated you," he says, voice

raw. “I hated myself. For being weak enough to let our masters put you in that position. For not finding another way. For wanting you even after I promised myself I wouldn’t...”

The Mirror thrums with satisfaction, but I barely notice. “Want me?”

“Ritual complete,” it announces with satisfaction, then goes silent.

We sit there, still watching each other’s reflection, the weight of our revelations settling around us. The muscle in his cheek is vibrating nonstop as the late afternoon light paints everything in shades of gold and shadow, making the moment feel somehow separate from reality.

“Aries...” I turn toward him, but he stands abruptly.

“We should prepare for evening meditation,” he says stiffly.

“Aries, stop.” I stop myself from trying to catch his arm as he tries to retreat. “You can’t just confess something like that and then pretend it was nothing.”

“It was part of the ritual.” His walls are visibly rebuilding right in front of my eyes. “Nothing more.”

“The Mirror requires truth,” I remind him. “You can’t lie during the ritual.”

“Truth is complicated,” he says, not meeting my eyes now that the Mirror’s compulsion is lifted. “What I felt then... it doesn’t matter now.”

“Doesn’t it?” Taking a step closer, I watch him tense. “Because this morning, when you were brushing my hair, it seemed like maybe...”

“Do not!” The word comes out sharp. “Please. We can’t ...”

“Can’t what? Talk about this? Feel this?” Another step closer. “Why not?”

His laugh holds no humor. “Because in eighty-eight days, this ends. One way or another. Either I die, or...”

“Or?”

“Or we succeed, and you’re free to walk away. Back to your life. Back to pretending none of this ever happened.”

The bitterness in his voice takes me by surprise. “Is that what you think I want?”

“It doesn’t matter what either of us wants,” he says quietly. “What matters is surviving the trials. Nothing else. ”

“And if surviving means being honest about what’s between us?”

He looks at me then, something fierce and protective in his expression. “Then we’ll be honest enough to pass the trials. But no more than that. I won’t trap you in something just to save my life.”

“What if I want something real?”

The words hang in the air between us, shocking us both. Before he can respond, the familiar chime announces a Committee member’s arrival.

“Evening meditation begins in ten standard minutes,” the member intones. “Please prepare yourselves.”

They shimmer out of sight, leaving us with the weight of everything we've said—and everything we haven't.

"We should..." Aries gestures vaguely toward the meditation corner.

"Yeah." My voice comes out thin and reedy. "We should."

As we take our positions on the cushions, knees touching as required, I can't help but wonder how many more truths will these trials force us to face? And what will we do with them once they're spoken?

The Truth Mirror gleams in the fading light, as if laughing at our attempts to maintain a careful distance while everything around us conspires to bring us closer. Eighty-eight days left to either face our truths or die trying.

Right now, I'm not sure which option terrifies me more.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Nine

C allie

The next day passes according to the Manual's prescribed routine—morning meditation, hair braiding that feels more intimate each time Aries' fingers work through my hair, shared meals where we're learning to read each other's expressions across our small table.

But underneath the familiar rhythm, tension builds as we both know the relatively easy daily expectations are going to increase in complexity.

Evening meditation brings its own challenges as we sit knee-to-knee, sharing the breathing exercises that require us to synchronize our movements. Each shared breath feels weighted with anticipation and dread.

Hours pass in relative quiet afterward—we share a simple dinner, both lost in thought about what the Mirror revealed yesterday. The weight of our confessions hangs between us, not uncomfortable but significant.

The Committee member arrives before we can retreat to our usual careful distance. Their faceted eyes gleam with an unsettling intensity.

“Tomorrow you will participate in the Harvest Festival. The Unity Cord trial will test your ability to work together while maintaining prescribed distance through traditional challenges.”

My stomach drops. A public trial .

After they wink out, like mist in the sun, the silence feels suffocating. I've gotten used to the relative safety of our cottage. The thought of going out in public on a planet that was so ready to extradite Aries to Garrox Prime for his death sentence terrifies me.

"We don't have to do this," he says quietly. "We could refuse the public trial, find another way to—"

"No." The single word comes out so loud it might as well have been a shotgun blast. "I've been in space long enough to know that my fear doesn't rule me."

His expression holds pride at my resolve. "You're right. We'll face whatever comes."

Sleep will be impossible tonight, but as I lie here listening to his carefully controlled breathing, I can't stop my mind from racing. Tomorrow we'll be exposed to hostile crowds again, performing under scrutiny with our lives hanging in the balance. At least we'll face it together.

Chapter Ten

A ries

The harvest festival hits like a shock. After days of quiet in our cottage, the noise and color feel like too much all at once.

Lights strung overhead sway in shifting patterns, throwing shadows over the packed crowd.

The air's thick with the scent of roasted meat, sweet pastries, cut hay, and late-season blooms—loud smells for a loud night.

“Remember,” the Committee member intones, their multifaceted eyes reflecting the festival lights, “you must complete three traditional challenges while bound by the Unity Cord. Physical contact is permitted only where the cord connects you. Failure to maintain proper distance elsewhere results in a mark against your progress.”

The Unity Cord is deceptively simple—a length of shimmering rope that binds us wrist-to-wrist, leaving about two feet of space between us.

“Your first challenge awaits at the Weaver’s Dance,” they continue. “Then the Harvest Race, and finally the Trial of Trust. You have until the first moon rises to complete all three.”

They ghost from view, leaving us alone in the crowd. Callie’s hair glows like honey in the festival lights, twisted into another intricate braid that my fingers created this

morning .

The memory of her soft sounds as I worked makes my hands itch to touch her again. How is it that I avoided her for annums and now, after only a few days crowded into our little cottage, I yearn for her?

“So,” she says brightly, clearly trying to dispel the tension, “Weaver’s Dance?”

“Might as well.” Following the flow of the crowd, we quickly discover the first challenge of simply walking while bound together. Our natural gaits don’t quite match, leading to several stumbles before we find a rhythm.

“Sorry,” she mutters after the third time we nearly trip. “I’m not usually this clumsy.”

“It’s not you,” I assure her. “We just need to...” Adapting my longer stride to match hers, I find the perfect synchronization. “There. Better?”

Her answering smile does something dangerous to my chest. “Much. Though I’m a little worried about what this Weaver’s Dance entails.”

The dance area comes into view—pairs of people moving in intricate patterns while somehow weaving ribbons into complex designs between them. As we watch, one couple creates a perfect star pattern, earning applause from the gathered crowd.

“That doesn’t look so bad,” Callie says uncertainly. “Just some basic weaving while we dance. How hard can it be?”

Very hard, as it turns out. Our first attempt ends with both of us hopelessly tangled in the ribbons, earning good-natured laughter from the onlookers. The Unity Cord doesn’t help. It limits our movement and forces constant awareness of each other’s space.

“Maybe if we...” Callie starts untangling us, careful not to touch me. “What if you lead with your left instead of right? Then I could...”

Working together, we eventually manage a simple pattern.

The dance itself requires us to mirror each other’s movements, maintaining eye contact while weaving the ribbons between us.

Each turn brings us tantalizingly close before we move to the edge of the Unity Cord’s bounds, so we don’t break the rules.

“You’re actually pretty good at this,” she says during one such near-brush, her cheeks flushed from exertion. The scent of her—clean sweat and something floral—makes my head spin.

“Had some practice,” I admit, guiding us through another turn. “Childhood dance lessons which actually proved helpful in my gladiator training. Turns out it helps with balance and coordination in the arena.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “You never mentioned that before.”

“Never came up.” Another turn, another near-touch. “Besides, not many opportunities for conversation when we’re avoiding each other on different ships.”

The words slip out before I can stop them. Her rhythm falters slightly, but she recovers quickly. “No, I suppose not.”

Working together, we eventually create a passable butterfly pattern with the ribbons. Not perfect, but enough to satisfy the requirements. As we exit the dance area, a chime signals the completion of the first challenge.

“Two more to go,” Callie says, consulting the festival map with our bound hands. “The Harvest Race is next—looks like some kind of obstacle course through the fields.”

The course proves both more challenging and more amusing than expected. We have to navigate hay bales, crossed logs, and various farming implements while staying connected by the cord. Each obstacle requires careful coordination and communication.

“Left,” Callie calls as we balance on a narrow beam. “No, my left! ”

“Same thing,” I grunt, adjusting my step to match hers. “We’re facing the same direction.”

“Well, excuse me for trying to be specific,” she retorts, but there’s laughter in her voice. “Duck!”

I drop just in time to avoid a swinging hay bale, pulling her down with me through the Unity Cord’s connection. We end up on opposite sides of a hay pile, the cord stretched taut between us, both breathing hard from the close call.

For a moment, we’re separated by only the width of the hay bale, close enough that I can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest, smell her light floral scent mixed with exertion. The Unity Cord vibrates between us like a plucked string, our synchronized breathing the only sound.

“That was close,” she breathes, her eyes locked on mine across the golden barrier.

“Too close,” I agree, my voice rough. The urge to reach around the hay bale, to close that final gap between us, is almost overwhelming.

“We should...” She swallows hard, making no move to increase the distance the cord allows.

“The next obstacle,” I finish, though neither of us moves immediately. The moment stretches, heavy with awareness and the maddening restriction of being so close yet unable to touch.

“We should...” My voice comes out rough. “The next obstacle...”

“Right.” She straightens quickly, creating proper distance. “Can’t fail now.”

Working together, we eventually complete the course, learning to anticipate each other’s movements, to communicate with gestures and quick glances rather than words. By the end, we’re moving almost as one person, the Unity Cord more guide than restraint .

The final challenge—the Trial of Trust—turns out to be deceptively simple. One partner must guide the other, blindfolded, through a maze-like garden while collecting specific flowers. The trick is that only the blindfolded person can pick the flowers, relying completely on their partner’s guidance.

“I’ll wear the blindfold,” Callie offers. “You’re good at giving directions.”

I am not sure whether this is a veiled insult or not.

The soft lavender cloth covers her eyes, leaving her completely dependent on my guidance. The Unity Cord takes on new significance as I lead her through the garden, describing each flower’s location and characteristics.

“Slightly to your left,” I murmur, watching her fingers brush the petals. “The stem is thorny, so be careful. Cup your hand around the bloom first, then slide down to find a

safe grip point.”

She follows my instructions perfectly, adding another flower to our collection. The trust she’s showing, allowing me to guide her while she’s vulnerable, makes my chest tighten. After everything that happened in that cell, everything that came after...

“You’re very good at this,” she says softly as we navigate another turn. “Making me feel safe even when I can’t see.”

The words hit like a physical blow. “Callie...”

“I know,” she cuts in. “We’re not talking about it. Just... just guide me to the next flower.”

Working together, we complete our collection just as the first moon rises. “We make a good team,” she says softly, her words surprisingly natural.

“We always did,” I reply. “Even in that cell, even when everything was horrible, we found ways to protect each other.”

This isn’t hate anymore. To be honest, it was never hate. It’s something far more dangerous—and far more precious.

The Committee member takes form to verify our success, then vanishes again, leaving us alone in the lamp-lit garden.

“Can I...” She gestures to the blindfold with our bound hands.

“Here.” Reaching up with my free hand, I carefully untie the cloth. Her eyes blink open, adjusting to the light. This close, I can see the tiny flecks of gold in the green, the slight dilation of her pupils as she focuses on me.

“We did it.” The relief is obvious in her voice. “All three challenges.”

“We did.” Something shifts in the air between us, heavy with possibility. The Unity Cord seems to quiver with our matched heartbeats.

A distant chime breaks the moment. “That’s the signal to return,” she says quickly, stepping back to the proper distance. “We should...”

“Yeah.”

The walk back to our cottage is silent but charged with new awareness.

The Unity Cord has taught us a dangerous lesson—how well we can move together, anticipate each other’s needs, trust each other’s guidance.

When it’s removed, the ghost of that connection will remain, another layer of intimacy these trials keep forcing upon us.

Keeping proper distance feels harder with each passing day. And we’ve barely started.

Chapter Eleven

A ries

“Stop humming.” Sharp words slice through our tiny cottage before I can catch them. The Manual swims before my eyes—weeks of forced proximity finally fraying my last nerve.

“Sorry.” Callie’s voice is clipped. She stops humming, but her fingers keep tapping against the table, sending tiny vibrations through the wood that set my teeth on edge.

After weeks in this tiny cottage, every small habit has become magnified. The way she hums while reading. How she never quite closes cabinet doors. The soft sounds she makes in her sleep that drive me crazy on the other side of that inadequate barrier pillow.

“Could you...” Gesturing at her tapping fingers, I try to keep my tone neutral. “I’m trying to concentrate.”

I couldn’t read or write when we overcame our masters and set off to fly across the galaxy to take control of our own fates. I can read fine now, thanks to Brianna’s teaching, but I need my full concentration .

Callie’s hand stills, but tension radiates from her rigid posture. “Heaven forbid I disturb your very important reading of instructions we’ve already memorized.”

“They change daily,” I remind her, though we both know that’s not really the issue.

“And mistakes cost us marks.”

And three marks cost me my life. But I don't say that. She's doing me a favor, I remind myself.

“Right. Because you're so concerned about precision.” The bitterness in her voice makes me look up sharply. “That's why you spent ten standard minutes adjusting the barrier pillow last night. For precision.”

Heat floods my face at the memory. I had indeed fussed with the pillow, but only because her sleep-sounds were making it impossible to maintain proper distance. Not that I can explain that without making everything worse.

“The barrier is important,” I say stiffly. “The rules—”

“The rules!” She stands abruptly, pacing the small space. “Always the rules with you. Don't touch, don't talk about feelings unless we're staring into that freaking mirror, don't acknowledge that maybe there's something happening here...”

“Callie—”

“No!” Whirling to face me, her eyes flash with anger and something else that makes odd, confusing emotions ripple through me. “I'm tired of pretending. Tired of dancing around each other in this tiny space, following all these rules while ignoring the elephant in the room.”

“I don't know what an elephant is but I understand what you're implying, so what elephant would that be?” My own temper rises to meet hers. “The fact that we're trapped here? That your misplaced sense of obligation—”

“Obligation?” She laughs, but there's no humor in it. “Is that what you think this is?”

That I'm just fulfilling some duty to one of the crew?"

"Isn't it?" Standing to face her, I force myself to maintain proper distance despite every instinct screaming at me to move closer. "You've made it clear how much you hate being trapped here with someone you can barely stand to be around."

"I never said that!"

"You didn't have to! Five annums of avoiding me made it pretty clear how you felt."

"How I felt?" Her voice cracks. "You're the one who pushed me away! Who built those walls so high I couldn't even see if the person I knew was still in there somewhere."

Before I can respond, a chime cuts through the tension. The Committee member arrives, their multifaceted eyes taking in our confrontational poses.

"Conflict has arisen," they intone. "The Resolution Ritual must be performed."

"Now?" Callie's voice holds equal parts frustration and disbelief.

"Now." They gesture to the meditation corner. "Please assume the position."

The "position" turns out to be sitting back-to-back, close enough to feel each other's heat but not quite touching. The ritual requires sharing our deepest fears about the conflict while maintaining this almost-contact.

"You may not separate until resolution is achieved. Failure to achieve satisfactory resolution will result in a mark against you," the Committee member adds before fading away .

Silence stretches between us, broken only by our slightly ragged breathing. The heat of Callie's back radiates against mine, making it hard to focus.

"This is ridiculous," she mutters. "We're adults. We shouldn't need—"

"I'm afraid of wanting you." The words escape before I can stop them, shocking us both into silence. The ritual compels truth, much like the Mirror did, but this feels more intimate somehow. More raw, but somewhat easier when I don't have to look into her eyes and see her reaction, her rejection.

Her sharp intake of breath is the only indication she heard me. After a moment, she admits, "I'm afraid of not being wanted."

The confession hits like a physical blow. Pictures flash through my mind of what we shared in that cell. Her naked skin illuminated red from the glow of the exit lights, the forced copulation that became something I yearned for all day, the scent of her, the taste...

"Callie—"

"In that cell," she continues quietly, "before you withdrew completely... I thought maybe we had something real. Something that transcended the horrible circumstances. Then you just... disappeared behind those walls you erected. Harder than stone. And I've spent five years wondering what I did wrong."

"You didn't..." My throat tightens. "It wasn't you. I thought I was protecting you."

"From what?"

"From me ." The words scratch out, painful and true. "I am not..." I shake my head, gritting my teeth so tightly I fear they'll crack. But I have to say it.

“I am not falsely accused. You didn’t sacrifice your freedom for an innocent man. I’m a...”

I have never said it out loud. Ever. I can go months at a time without even thinking the word. But not now.

“I’m a killer , Callie. I was protecting you from developing feelings for a killer . You deserved better than being forced to mate with someone like that.” And now here we are, bound together in this unbearable situation in this fucking tiny cottage, sleeping in the same narrow fucking bed.

Her silence feels weighted with understanding. “So you withdrew. Made yourself cold and distant so I wouldn’t...”

“So you wouldn’t feel obligated. Wouldn’t try to make something real out of a situation that was forced upon us both.”

“And now?” She shifts slightly, her shoulders brushing mine. “Are you still trying to protect me?”

The question hangs in the air between us. “I am trying to protect us both,” I admit finally. “Because in seventy-six days, this ends. And I cannot... I cannot let myself hope for more than that.”

“What if I want more?”

Though she said it so quietly I almost didn’t hear her, my body vibrates with the weight of her words. It’s all I can do to keep from breaking the rules, turning around, gripping her shoulders, and peering into her eyes to read the truth of her emotions.

“Callie...” Her name is torn from my throat as if by a grappling hook.

She can't possibly know what she's saying, but I dare not say that. I've been around these human women for long enough to know she'd happily put a knife to my throat for suggesting she doesn't know her own mind.

"Listen." She turns slightly, though the ritual position prevents us from seeing each other's faces. "I know you think you're protecting me, but what if you're just hurting us both? What if these trials are giving us a chance to fix what broke in that cell?"

"And if we fail?"

"Then we fail knowing we tried for something real ." Her voice softens. "Isn't that better than spending the next two and a half months pretending we don't feel anything?"

The truth ritual compels honesty, even when it terrifies me. "I don't know if I'm strong enough to survive losing you twice."

Her hand finds mine where it rests on the floor between us. She avoids contact, but the space between our fingers is as slim as a piece of paper. The almost-contact sends awareness shooting up my arm. "Then don't lose me. Let me in instead of pushing me away."

The Committee member manifests before I can respond. "Resolution achieved," they announce. "You may separate."

We turn to face each other, both a little raw from the revelations. The tiny space between us feels charged with possibility and fear.

"So," she says softly, "what now?"

"Now..." Looking at her in the fading daylight, something shifts in my chest. "Now

we try for something real. Whatever that means.”

Her smile is like a sunrise after a storm. “Whatever that means,” she agrees.

The Committee member fades away, leaving us with new understanding and even more dangerous hope. For the first time, I wonder if the Committee has been rooting for us all along, despite their neutral facade.

The rules about physical contact still apply—we can’t act on this fragile new honesty with touch. But somehow that makes it more powerful, this conscious choice to be emotionally intimate while maintaining physical distance.

As we prepare for evening meditation, the cottage feels different. Smaller, yet somehow less confining. The space between us holds possibility instead of carefully maintained barriers.

Seventy-six days left to either build something real or watch it crumble. The stakes feel higher now that we’re both acknowledging what we stand to lose.

Chapter Twelve

C allie

“You have shown progress in emotional honesty,” the Committee member announces during our morning check-in. “This merits a reward.”

My gaze meets Aries’ across our small breakfast table. This is the first mention of rewards rather than requirements or punishments in over two weeks of trials. Before either of us can ask, a small crystalline container materializes on the table between us.

Something inside emits a soft, pulsing glow.

“This is a shimmerling ,” the Committee member explains.

“A companion creature that responds to emotional energy. Its care will require cooperation and harmony between you. More importantly, it will serve as a barometer of your genuine connection—attempting to deceive us while caring for a shimmerling is impossible, as they reflect the truth of their caregivers’ bond. ”

The container dissolves, revealing what looks like a floating orb of light about the size of my palm. As we watch, it shifts from pale blue to a pastel yellow, then drifts closer to investigate us .

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, enchanted by the way it seems to dance in the air. “But how do we...?”

“Care instructions will appear in your Manual. The shimmerling must be fed twice daily, with both partners participating. It requires specific environmental conditions for rest. Most importantly, it is highly sensitive to emotional discord.”

As if to demonstrate, the creature swoops closer to Aries, its glow deepening to rich gold as it bobs around his horns. A smile tugs at his lips—the most unguarded expression I’ve ever seen from him.

“Hey there, little one,” he murmurs. The shimmerling practically preens, trailing sparkles as it loops around his head.

Really? Little one? I’ve seen him in many moods, though truth be told, he’s usually granite-faced. But tender? I didn’t have that on my bingo card.

“Show off,” I mutter good-naturedly. The creature immediately zips over to investigate me, its color shifting to an undulating purple. When it nuzzles my cheek, the touch feels like sunlight and champagne bubbles.

“The shimmerling will help guide your progress,” the Committee member adds. “Its wellbeing reflects the harmony between you. We will return for evening meditation.”

After they vanish like a dream at dawn, we spend several minutes watching our new companion explore the cottage. It seems fascinated by everything, leaving trails of shifting color as it investigates corners and cupboards.

“According to the Manual,” Aries says, consulting the pages that have newly appeared, “feeding requires one person to provide sustenance while the other... sings to it?”

“Sings?” The word comes out as a squeak. “I can’t carry a tune in a bucket!”

The shimmerling swoops down to hover between us, its color rippling with what looks suspiciously like amusement.

“You hum constantly, which admittedly is usually a little off key, but I’m sure it’s not that bad,” Aries offers diplomatically.

“Oh really? Remember that traditional song we had to learn for the Blessed Peace Day several years back? The one where Captain Beast asked if someone was strangling a mronck while he looked pointedly at me?”

A startled laugh escapes him—deep and rich and devastating to my composure. The shimmerling spins in delighted circles, trailing sparkles.

“Fine then,” I say, fighting a smile. “ You can do the singing part.”

Working together, we manage to figure out the feeding process.

Aries’ voice is surprisingly good as he croons an old gladiator training song while I hold out the special nutrient solution.

The shimmerling darts through the liquid, absorbing it while performing elaborate aerial acrobatics to the music.

“Show off,” Aries’ tone is fond. The creature responds by shifting to a smug pink color and doing a backflip.

“It needs a name,” I realize. “We can’t just keep calling it ‘it’ or ‘the shimmerling .’”

“Any ideas?”

“What about... Spark? For Sparkle?” I ask. The creature immediately brightens, its

glow intensifying. “I think it likes that.”

“Spark it is.” As Aries consults the Manual again, Spark performs delighted somersaults. “Looks like it needs both our energy signatures to rest properly. We have to... oh.”

“What?”

“We have to each touch one side while it’s in rest mode. It uses our combined energy to recharge.”

My pulse quickens. “But the rules about touching...”

“The Manual says as long as the shimmerling is between our hands, it counts as prescribed contact for its care.” His voice sounds carefully neutral, but I notice the slight flush creeping up the bronze skin of his neck.

Spark bounces between us as if to say “Yes, exactly!” Its color shifts to a warm rose gold that somehow feels... expectant.

“Should we try?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady. “It’s been exploring for a while. Might be tired.”

Aries nods, and we position ourselves on either side of where Spark is hovering. Following the Manual’s instructions, we each extend a hand, palms facing each other with the shimmerling between them.

The moment Spark makes contact with both our hands, a gentle warmth spreads up my arm, but there’s something else—a tingling awareness that seems to connect directly to Aries through our shared contact with the creature.

The creature's glow softens to a peaceful blue, and it seems to melt into a perfect sphere of light between our palms.

"This is..." Aries starts, his voice catching slightly as the sensation deepens. Our hands are so close I can feel the heat radiating from his skin, close enough that when he shifts slightly, the air between our palms seems to crackle with electricity.

"Intimate," I finish quietly, unable to look away from how our hands frame Spark's peaceful form. The energy flowing between us feels like more than just caring for our companion—it feels like we're sharing something fundamental, something that makes my breath shallow and my heart race .

The energy flowing between us through the shimmering feels intimate in a way that should probably be uncomfortable, but isn't.

"I can feel your heartbeat," Aries murmurs, wonder and something darker threading through his voice. "Through Spark, I can actually feel your pulse."

My cheeks flush as I realize he's right—there's an echo of his life force pulsing through the connection, steady and strong and utterly masculine. "This can't be what the Committee intended when they gave us a companion creature." My voice is filled with awe.

"Can it not?" His golden eyes meet mine over Spark's glowing form. "They said it responds to emotional energy. Maybe it's showing us what we're not allowed to acknowledge."

We stand like that for several minutes, hands not quite touching but connected through our sleeping companion.

The intimacy of it is almost overwhelming—I can sense not just his physical presence

but something deeper, the warmth of his affection, the careful control he maintains over stronger feelings.

When his thumb twitches, just barely, I feel the echo of that movement through our shared connection.

Every tiny shift sends awareness skittering across my skin. When he draws in a slightly deeper breath, I feel it through Spark's form like a caress. When my own breathing quickens in response, I watch his pupils dilate as he senses the change through our link.

When Spark finally wakes, it shoots straight up toward the ceiling, trailing jubilant sparks of gold and pink. We step apart quickly, both a little flushed.

"That was interesting." Aries clears his throat and tips his head, one horn tip catching the light. How is it that over the past five years, I've managed to ignore how startlingly handsome this male is ?

"Yes. Very interesting." Moving to check the Manual again, I hope he can't hear my racing heart. "Looks like we'll need to do that twice a day."

The thought of repeating that intimate connection makes my stomach flutter. Spark darts between us, its color shifting to the same rose gold from earlier.

"Are you... matchmaking?" I ask it incredulously. The creature manages to project an air of complete innocence while still glowing that telling color.

Aries' startled laugh joins mine, and Spark spins in obvious delight at our shared amusement. For a moment, the usual tension between us eases into something warmer.

“You know,” he says thoughtfully, “I think we’ve been set up.”

“By the Committee?”

“Maybe. But definitely by this little troublemaker.” He gestures to Spark, who is now performing elaborate loop-de-loops while trailing what looks like crimson hearts. “Pretty sure this ‘reward’ is just another trial in disguise.”

“Probably,” I agree, watching Spark zoom around Aries’ horns again. “But at least it’s a cute one.”

The day develops a new rhythm with Spark’s presence. The creature seems to have appointed itself official tension-breaker, choosing perfectly timed moments to do something ridiculous whenever the atmosphere gets too heavy.

When I get frustrated trying to prepare lunch in the tiny kitchen, Spark creates the illusion of juggling by weaving light patterns around the floating utensils until I laugh.

When Aries tenses during afternoon meditation, it drapes itself across his horns like a glowing scarf until his shoulders relax .

“You’re shameless,” I tell it after a particularly dramatic performance involving the Manual’s pages. “Absolutely shameless.”

Spark just preens, then rockets over to where Aries is reading and drops into his lap like a contented cat. Its glow shifts to a deep, peaceful blue.

“Traitor,” I mutter. “I feed you and this is the thanks I get?”

The shimmerling lifts just enough to stick out what might be a tongue made of light,

then settles back into its chosen spot. Aries' lips twitch as he pretends to keep reading and tries not to act smug.

"Don't encourage it," I warn him. "It's already developing an attitude."

"Wonder where it gets that from," he murmurs, and Spark's delighted color change suggests it knows exactly who he means.

By evening, our new companion has thoroughly wrapped us both around its luminescent little appendages. The second feeding/singing session goes more smoothly than the first, and the energy exchange during rest time feels less awkward.

Still dangerous, still intimate, but... natural somehow. Like maybe we needed this small being to help us navigate the space between careful distance and necessary connection.

As Spark drifts off to sleep between our palms, its peaceful glow reflecting in Aries' eyes, I realize something has shifted. The cottage feels warmer, more like a home than a testing ground.

Maybe the Committee knew exactly what they were doing with this particular "reward."

And maybe that's not such a bad thing.

Chapter Thirteen

A ries

“The Memory Reconciliation process occurs in three distinct phases,” the Committee member explains, their crystalline form throwing bands of color across our meditation corner.

“Today, Phase One: joint observation. In two days, Phase Two: experiencing the memory through Callie’s perspective.

Finally, in four days, Phase Three: experiencing it through Aries’ perspective. ”

Callie sits across from me on the meditation cushions, close enough that I can sense her tension. Spark hovers between us, its usual bright colors muted to an anxious green.

“Given the emotional intensity of these sessions,” they continue, “physical contact in the form of hand-holding and non-sexual touch will be permitted during the memory field’s activation and up to fifteen standard minutes after, if both parties consent.

This exception applies only during Memory Reconciliation. ”

My gaze meets Callie’s. She nods slightly, and I feel an odd mix of relief and terror.

“Today’s memory: your first meeting. ”

The shimmerling darts to my shoulder, radiating soothing beams of lavender light. Then it leaps to Callie, providing her with its calming presence.

“The field activates in thirty standard seconds. Remember, you cannot change events, only observe and understand.”

Callie’s hand finds mine as reality blurs. Her fingers are cold, but her grip is sure. Everything dissolves into memory.

The ship’s jail corridor materializes around us—harsh metal floors, flickering red emergency lights, the oppressive line of cells. Past-Callie and the other Earth women are being marched down the hallway at gunpoint by Urlut guards, their tusked mouths twisted in cruel amusement.

Each cell holds a different species of male.

A lion-like male, complete with mane, tail, and claws—Zar.

A silver male whose skin shines even in the dim light—Steele.

Others whose features blur in the red lighting.

Past-me stands motionless in my cell, watching the procession with carefully contained rage.

Callie’s grip tightens as we observe Past-her stumbling past each cell, trying not to stare at the alien creatures within. I can feel the terror rolling off her in waves. The metal collar around her neck gleams dully, a constant reminder of their power over her.

My free hand darts to my neck. I wore a matching pain/kill collar. We all did. I can

feel the cool metal against my skin even now.

“This one,” a guard grunts, grabbing Past-Callie’s arm. “In with dracker from Dauphus Prime.”

They shove her roughly into my cell. She uses the bars to catch herself from falling, then turns to face Past-me.

The terror on her face is heartbreaking, and for a moment, her knees almost buckle.

Then her determination wins out. She stands straight and lifts her chin, although she’s visibly trembling .

The other women are distributed similarly, their terrified protests ignored. When all ten cells are occupied with one male and one female, the corridor falls silent except for ragged breathing, quiet sobbing, and the metallic clicking of the Urluts striding toward the exit.

A few standard minutes later, the loudspeaker crackles: “You have one hoara to breed with your cellmate. If you do not complete the act, we will execute both occupants of the cell.”

Past-Callie’s face drains of color. Present-Callie’s hand spasms in mine, and Spark immediately wraps us both in soothing light.

“My name is Callie,” Past-Callie says, voice shaking as she dredges up the courage to look me in the eye. “I... I don’t want to die.”

Past-me’s expression flickers—the first crack in my careful mask. “Aries,” Past-me responds quietly. “I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

Past-Callie stands against the bars, arms wrapped around herself. Past-me keeps careful distance, trying to look less threatening despite my size. I would sit on the bed to appear smaller, but I worry that would make things worse.

“Maybe they’ll change their minds,” Past-Callie sighs, though her voice holds no real hope.

The sickening sound of a pain collar’s activation echoes from another cell, followed by a plaintiff scream.

“One hoara means one hoara ,” a guard shouts. “Next one dies.”

Past-me takes a hesitant step forward. “We can’t ...” The words seem to stick in my throat. “We can’t wait much longer. ”

Present-Callie’s hand tightens in mine as we watch Past-Callie nod, tears sliding silently down her face. “Just... please be gentle?”

“Of course,” Past-me promises softly. “Close your eyes. Try to... try to pretend you’re somewhere else. With someone else.”

Present-Callie turns her face toward me, almost pressing her cheek onto my chest, then remembers the boundaries. Spark wraps us both in soothing light as the memory mercifully fades to darkness.

When it resumes, Past-Callie lies curled on the narrow cot. Past-me sits on the floor across the cell, as far away as possible, self-loathing evident in every rigid line of my body.

“I’m sorry,” Past-me whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

Past-Callie doesn't respond. The silence stretches, heavy with things neither can say. And in that silence, we watch the walls begin to build—my withdrawal starting even then, born of guilt and shame and a desperate need to protect her from further harm.

The memory ends, returning us to our cottage. Neither of us speaks for long moments. Spark darts anxiously between us, its color a deep, sorrowful blue. The Committee member has disappeared.

“You tried,” Callie finally says, her voice rough. “To make it... bearable. I'd forgotten that part.”

“I failed, though.” The words scrape out. “Afterward, I couldn't... I didn't know how to...”

“So you withdrew. Built those walls.” She turns to face me, eyes bright with understanding and something else. “Thinking you were protecting me.”

“I'm sorry,” I whisper, echoing Past-me's words. “For everything. ”

“Don't.” Her hand squeezes mine. “Don't for a minute forget that you were as much a victim as I was. We survived. That's what matters.”

Spark suddenly nuzzles between our joined hands, its light shifting to a gentle gold. The shimmerling seems to understand that sometimes comfort doesn't need words.

“Two days,” Callie murmurs. “Until we experience it from my perspective.”

The thought makes pressure build behind my ribs. “We don't have to—”

“Yes,” she cuts in firmly. “We do. To heal this. To understand.”

As if agreeing, Spark performs a determined loop around our still-clasped hands, trailing sparks of encouragement.

Maybe Callie's right. Maybe understanding each other's experience of that terrible day is the only way forward. The Manual says I won't just watch her face the memory, I'll feel it as though it's happening to me...

That might just break me completely.

Chapter Fourteen

C allie

“Phase Two will be... challenging,” the Committee member warns. “Experiencing such memories from another’s perspective can be overwhelming.”

Two days haven’t been nearly enough to process what we witnessed in Phase One. Spark seems to sense our tension, drifting between us as we sit in our meditation corner.

“As before, hand-holding is permitted during the memory field,” they continue. “Are you prepared to proceed?”

Aries looks at me, concern evident in his expression. “We can still—”

“Yes,” I cut in. “We’re ready.”

His hand finds mine as the field activates. Spark presses close to my shoulder as everything dissolves into memory.

The sensation hits first—cold metal against my back where the guards shove me against the bars.

The collar feels impossibly heavy, its weight a constant reminder of my helplessness.

Through Past-me’s eyes, I watch Aries. It’s only now that I remember how big he

seemed to me.

His bronze skin dulled by the red emergency lighting .

Fear claws at my throat. Past-me catalogs possible escape routes, finding none. The cell is tiny—barely eight feet square. One cot, a sink, a toilet without privacy. No windows. No hope.

The loudspeaker's announcement hits like a physical blow: "You have one hoara to breed with your cellmate. If you do not complete the act, we will execute both occupants of the cell."

Past-me's thoughts race: Can't die here. Can't let them win. Have to survive. Have to...

Through her eyes, I watch Aries carefully keep his distance. But there's something else now—a deeper layer of Past-me's terror that I'd buried so completely I'd almost forgotten it myself.

Never done this before. Twenty-three years old and never... The thought fragments as panic claws higher. Not just fear of pain, but of the unknown, of losing something that can never be returned.

Past-me's inexperience shows in her trembling, in the way she doesn't know how to position herself, in her wide-eyed terror that goes beyond situational fear to something more fundamental.

His attempt at gentleness only makes it worse somehow—highlighting the reality of what's about to happen.

Present-Aries' fingers link through mine as we observe. Spark radiates waves of

comforting blue light.

“My name is Callie.” Past-me’s voice shakes, but she forces the words out. Names matter. Identity matters. They can’t take that away.

“Aries.” His response is quiet, careful, though the translation device in my ear makes the words monotone. “I’ll be as gentle as I can. ”

Past-me’s thoughts fracture: He’s trying to help. He’s as trapped as I am. But oh god, I can’t...

What I now know to be the sound of a pain/kill collar being activated fills the air. A scream echoes from another cell almost simultaneously. Past-me flinches violently.

“We can’t wait much longer.” Aries’ voice holds genuine regret.

Past-me nods, tears falling. “Just... please be gentle?”

The plea carries layers Present-me had forgotten—not just “Don’t hurt me,” but “I don’t know what I’m doing,” and “This isn’t how I dreamed it would be.”

The fear is overwhelming now—not just of pain, but of this intimacy forced by violence. Past-me closes her eyes as Aries approaches. She tries to disappear inside herself.

The memory mercifully fades to darkness. When it resumes, a new understanding floods through me. Past-me lies curled on the narrow cot, not just processing trauma, but mourning. Mourning the loss of choice, of romance, of the gentle first time she’d imagined with someone who loved her.

Present-Aries’ grip on my hand tightens, and I know he’s understanding too—finally

grasping the full cost of that moment.

“I’m sorry,” Aries whispers from across the cell. “I’m so sorry.”

Past-me can’t respond. Can’t acknowledge him or the gentleness that somehow made it worse. Because he tried—he really tried to make it bearable. And that leaves my past self with emotions too complex to process.

Through her eyes, I watch him withdraw into himself.

See the walls building between us. Understand finally that his coldness wasn’t rejection—it was the only way he could cope with what he’d been forced to do.

I’d never thought about his side of the equation, never realized he lost part of his soul because he was forced to participate in something he wanted no part of.

The memory field dissolves, leaving us shaking in our cottage. Aries releases my hand, rises and steps backward, his face a mask of horror.

“You were...” His voice breaks completely. “Callie, you were a virgin.”

It’s not a question. The memory field showed him everything—my inexperience, my deeper fears, the innocence I lost that night.

“It doesn’t matter—” I start, but he cuts me off.

“ It matters .” His hands shake as he runs them through his hair. “Gods, it matters. Your first time should have been with someone who cherished you. Should have been beautiful, gentle, chosen...”

Tears track down his cheeks—the first time I’ve seen him cry since his nightmares

about Kren.

“Instead, it was with me. In that cell. Under threat of death.” His voice cracks. “I took something from you that can never be given back.”

“Aries, no.” I rise and reach for him, but he flinches away.

“How can you even look at me? How can you stand to be near me, knowing what I stole from you?”

“You didn’t steal anything.” The words come fierce and sure. “You gave me survival. Gentleness. Protection. And later, the space to heal.” My voice grows stronger. “What happened wasn’t theft—it was sacrifice, by both of us—so we could live to choose each other freely.”

I reach up to cup his face, wanting to wipe his tears, but I fist my hands at my sides.

“That first time wasn’t about love or desire or choice. But every moment since we started these trials has been. Every touch, every word, every breath we share now—that’s my real first time. With you. By choice.”

His forehead drops, almost resting against mine, his breathing ragged.

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness.” He sounds defeated.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not offering it. Because there’s nothing to forgive. Only something to build on. Together.”

Spark immediately wraps us both in soothing light, its color a deep, understanding purple.

“Your perspective revealed much,” the Committee member observes quietly. “Phase Three occurs in two days.”

After they exit, neither of us speaks for long moments. Aries reaches to hold my hand since we’re still within the allotted time. He’s so gentle it’s as though I might break.

“I didn’t know,” he murmurs against my hair. “All these annums , I thought I was protecting you by staying away. But you were processing that loss, too.”

“We both lost something that night,” I admit. “But we found something else. Each other.”

Spark suddenly zips to the kitchen, hovering over the nutrient solution. Its determined movements make us both laugh despite the emotional weight of the moment.

“Comfort food time?” Aries asks, lips quirking slightly.

“Apparently.” The normalcy of caring for our shimmerling helps ground us in the present. “Our little one has opinions about emotional processing.”

Working together to feed Spark provides a welcome distraction. The familiar routine of solution and song helps ease the memory’s weight. When the shimmerlin g settles into its rest-sphere form, we take our positions for the energy exchange without discussion .

The connection feels different today—deeper somehow, weighted with new understanding and acceptance. Spark vibrates contentedly between our palms, as if satisfied with our progress.

“Two days,” Aries murmurs. “Until you see my perspective.”

“Until I understand completely,” I correct gently. “We can’t change what happened. But maybe we can finally heal from it.”

His gaze meets mine over Spark’s peaceful glow. The walls are still there, but now I see them for what they are—protection born of guilt and shame, not rejection. And maybe, after today’s revelations, they’re finally starting to crack.

Chapter Fifteen

C allie

“As a reward for completing Phase Two successfully, you are granted an evening excursion,” the Committee member announces. “The Sanctoran auroras are particularly vibrant tonight.”

My gaze meets Aries’ across our small dinner table. After the emotional intensity of today’s memory session, the thought of escaping our tiny cottage feels like a gift.

“The usual contact restrictions apply,” they continue, “but you may explore the meadow behind your dwelling until a standard hour after the first moon rises.”

After they shimmer out of sight, Spark zooms excited circles around us, trailing sparkles of anticipation.

“I think someone’s ready for an adventure,” I laugh, watching our shimmerling dart between us.

“Can’t blame them. We’ve all been cooped up...” Aries breaks off as we step outside and get our first look at the sky.

Ribbons of light dance overhead—not the greens and blues of Earth’s northern lights, but impossible swirls of purple and gold that paint the entire sky. As we watch, the colors shift and quake like they’re performing some cosmic dance.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, forgetting for a moment all the complex emotions between us.

“Look.” Aries points to where the light show reflects off a nearby pond, doubling the display. “The water acts like a mirror.”

Without discussing it, we make our way to the pond’s edge. The grass is soft beneath my feet, dotted with tiny flowers that glow in response to our movement. Each step leaves trails of bioluminescence.

“It’s like walking through starlight,” I marvel.

“Mmm.” Aries stops, lifts his chin, and takes a breath so deep his chest visibly expands. He’s beautiful in the moonlight, standing there like a statue, the undulating lights performing a little light show on the whorls of his horns.

I tamp down a moment of loss, thinking that I missed sharing the last five years with a man who I vilified. I’m learning day by day that he didn’t earn my disdain.

Spark must not catch my momentary melancholy because it seems beside itself with joy, zooming through the aurora’s reflection in the pond and emerging trailing ribbons of light that match the sky. Its enthusiasm is contagious.

“I didn’t know it could do that,” Aries says, watching our companion create its own miniature light show.

“I don’t think it knew either.”

The shimmering ’s happiness is palpable as it discovers this new ability. “Look at him go!”

Spark continues its aerial dance, occasionally swooping close enough to shower us with harmless sparks that tingle pleasantly against my skin.

The aurora's light reflects on Aries' bronze skin, making him seem to glow from within.

When he smiles at our pet's antics, something warm glows in my chest.

"Oh!" A cluster of peculiar creatures emerges from the grass—something between butterflies and hummingbirds, their wings trailing phosphorescent patterns in the air. They seem drawn to Spark's display, joining in with their own aerial ballet.

"Star dancers," Aries explains softly. "I've read about them. They only come out during auroras."

Our attention is captured as one of the creatures hovers near his horns, apparently fascinated by their curves. Another investigates my hair, its tiny wings wafting breezes that carry the scent of night-blooming flowers.

"They're not afraid of us at all," I marvel as more emerge to join the dance.

"Why should they be?" His voice holds quiet wonder. "Look at them—they're pure joy given form."

Pure joy given form. Did he always have such a gift for words? What else have I yet to discover about this male who is now my mate?

Spark seems delighted with these new playmates, leading them in ever more elaborate patterns through the air. The combined spectacle of the aurora, star dancers, and our enthusiastic shimmerling creates something magical.

A cool breeze carries the scent of rain. Without thinking, I step closer to Aries for warmth. He tenses slightly, and I remember the rules—no contact outside of prescribed activities.

“Sorry,” I murmur, starting to move away.

“Don’t be.” His voice is rough. “I wish...”

The words hang unfinished between us, heavy with possibility as our gazes lock. So many words remain unsaid for long moments, then we break the connection and look to the sky.

Spark seems to sense the moment’s weight. It creates a twirling spiral in the air between us, then pretends to be very interested in its reflection in the water when we both look its way.

“Subtle as always,” Aries says dryly, but there’s humor in his voice.

“It means well.” Watching our shimmerling play with its new friends, I can’t help smiling. “All of them, really. The Committee, Spark, even these little dancers. They’re trying to show us something.”

“What’s that?”

“That beauty can exist alongside pain. That joy is still possible, even after...” I gesture vaguely, encompassing everything we’ve faced and still must face.

His expression softens as he watches Spark lead another aerial parade. “Maybe you’re right.”

We stay for a while after the first moon rises, watching nature’s light show while our

small companion plays with his new friends. The star dancers seem reluctant to let Spark leave, but our shimmerling seems to use an elaborate light pattern to promise its return.

Walking back to the cottage, our arms occasionally brush—accidental contact that sends awareness skittering across my skin. The rules feel especially difficult tonight, with aurora-light painting everything in magic and possibility.

“Thank you,” Aries says quietly as we reach our door.

“For what? ”

“For sharing this.” He gestures at the sky, still dancing with color. “For helping me remember there’s more to life than... than what we have to face in Phase Three.”

Spark creates a red heart between us before zooming inside, trailing aurora-touched sparkles.

“You’re far from sneaky, my friend,” Aries says, and we share a laugh.

The moment feels precious somehow—this shared joy, this reminder that not everything between us is weighted with trauma. That maybe we’re building something new alongside healing something broken.

Soon we’ll face more memories, more pain. But tonight, we saw magic, and that feels like its own kind of healing.

Chapter Sixteen

Callie

All three Committee members materialize, their combined presence immediately signaling the importance of this moment. Spark hovers anxiously between Aries and me, its usual bright colors muted to a concerned lavender.

“Phase Three requires complete openness,” they intone. “You will both experience the memory through Aries’ perspective—his thoughts, his feelings, his choices. Are you prepared?”

Aries’ hand finds mine, squeezing gently. His palm feels clammy. It doesn’t surprise me. In fact, I wonder if this will be harder on him than me.

The memory field activates, reality blurring around us. Spark presses close as everything dissolves into the past.

The first sensation is overwhelming—rage and helplessness warring in Past-Aries’ chest as he watches the guards march us down the corridor.

Through his eyes, I see myself stumble past each cell, trying not to stare at the alien creatures within. His enhanced hearing picks up every terrified heartbeat, every muffled sob .

Not again , his thoughts rage. Not another innocent forced to suffer because of these monsters.

When they shove Past-me into his cell, Past-Aries catalogs every detail with brutal clarity—my trembling hands, the fear-scent rolling off me in waves, the way I try to make myself smaller against the bars. His instincts scream to protect, to shield, but he knows that’s impossible.

The loudspeaker’s announcement hits him like a physical blow. One hour to mate or die. His hands clench, nails pricking his palms as he fights to maintain control.

“My name is Callie,” Past-me says, voice shaking but chin lifted. His respect blooms instantly at my courage, even in terror.

“Aries,” he responds, keeping his voice low and calm despite the fury churning inside. “I’ll try to be gentle.”

His thoughts race: How to make this bearable? How to give her some sense of control when we have none? How to touch her without adding to the trauma?

A scream echoes from another cell—someone testing the guards’ resolve. Past-Aries flinches at the sound of the pain collar’s activation, memories of his own torture flooding back.

We’re so connected in this moment that I feel his remembered pain, instantly knowing what the pain/kill collar feels like at high levels, although I’ve only felt it for a moment once, at the lowest level.

I knew he was pressed into the gladiator arena, knew he’d never wanted it, but never knew the poor male had been tortured.

“We can’t wait much longer,” he forces himself to say, hating every word. But better to face it now than risk the guards’ intervention. He’s seen what happens when they get impatient.

When Past-me nods, tears falling, a visceral anguish breaks inside him.

His face contorts with a pain that transcends the physical—this is soul-deep torment.

I feel it now as if it were my own: his desperate need to protect me warring with the knowledge that he can't shield me from what must happen.

The way his eyes briefly squeeze shut, his jaw clenching so hard I can see the muscle jump beneath his bronze skin. When he looks at me again, something has fractured behind those golden eyes—some final barrier between the male he was and the one circumstances forced him to become.

“Just... please be gentle?”

I'll try. He nods, though he knows the circumstances are so brutal that nothing will take the pain out of what's going to come next in that bed. But how can anything about this be gentle? How can I touch you without becoming one of them?

As I watch the pair in the memory inch their way to the tiny bed, narrower than a twin, I hear snatches of his thoughts.

She's a pretty thing... face shaped like a heart.

He turns his head as I disrobe and climb into bed. I recall feeling like a condemned woman going to her death, but now as I see myself through his eyes, I hear, Her hair shines even in the low, red light from the exit signs.

He's focusing on details, I see now, to avoid the enormity of the big picture.

He turns his back and pulls off his loincloth. I remember shivering at that, terrified of the power and strength those slabs of muscles held. Fearful that he could choke me

with barely a squeeze of one hand.

I can't take her in the normal way. Can't look at the pain on her face. Can't watch the emotional effects of what I'm about to inflict.

"Turn over. It will be easier." Yes. Easier for me... I'm such a coward I don't deserve to breathe air .

As I turn, I catch how his eyes slam shut, not simply closing, but clamped hard against... what he must do.

You're a dracker , Aries. You should burn in pain for eternity for doing this.

As he grips my hips, so softly I barely feel it, a thought flies through his mind: Her skin is soft as flower petals.

His disgust at himself strikes me as hard as a storm wave crashing onto shore, just as I hear his present-day sigh and feel his hand clutching mine like a lifeline.

He took me gently, just as he promised, though his cock was huge. He did his business, whispered, "I'm sorry," and rolled off me. After putting on his loincloth, he sat on his haunches against the metal wall at the back of our cell for the rest of the night.

His self-loathing is so bitter, it's as though I can taste it as he berates himself all night, even as the other part of his mind feels empathy for what he imagines that was like for me.

Past-me didn't realize she was crying until a big, fat tear rolled down my face and plopped on my breast.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes, the words inadequate against the weight of what happened.
“I’m so sorry.”

Past-Aries’ thoughts spiral: Should have found another way. Should have fought harder. Should have died rather than hurt her. But they threatened to kill us both if we didn’t complete the act.

The walls begin building then—thick barriers of ice between his heart and the world.

Better to be cold, distant, unfeeling. Better to become someone she couldn’t possibly care for than risk her developing feelings for someone who hurt her—and was sick enough to enjoy it enough to release inside her .

Let her hate me, he thinks as the barriers rise. Better hatred than the alternative.

The memory ends, returning us to our cottage. Neither of us speaks for long moments. Spark wraps us in waves of soothing light, its color a deep, understanding blue.

“You didn’t hurt me,” I finally admit, my voice rough. “You were so careful, so gentle—”

“Don’t.” His hand goes rigid in mine. “Please don’t make excuses for what I did.”

“It’s not an excuse. It’s understanding.” Turning to face him fully, I see pain flaring behind his eyes. “You thought being cold would protect me, but all it did was leave us both alone with our pain.”

“I couldn’t bear it,” he admits, voice breaking. “Seeing you try to be brave, knowing what they were forcing on you. Knowing I had to... had to...”

“Had to survive,” I finish gently. “We both did. And maybe that’s what we need to remember—we survived. Together. What happened in that cell was consensual .”

That last word popped out, but now that it’s been said, it feels so right, so true, that I repeat it.

“Consensual. Two people agreed to participate in that act. The only difference was that I could lie there and try to fly away in my mind, and you had to perform. Out of the two of us, you got the worst end of the deal.”

“No, I—”

I interrupt him and let my thoughts hurtle out of my mouth rapid-fire before he manages to take more of the blame or say he’s sorry one more time.

“Your attempts to protect me locked your heart away. For five years,” I say with such vehemence it shocks me, “I vilified you, hated you for your callous behavior. And all along, it came from the... ”

I pause as I choke up, “From the most compassionate place. I’ll tell you one thing, Aries.” I spear him with my most serious look.

“I never want to hear you apologize again. In fact—”

He interrupts, but I cut him off.

“Let me finish!” Wow, that came out so harsh. “I don’t want to hear one more apology, Aries. In fact, I want you to hear me when I apologize right now.”

Spark’s colors shift rapidly between deep purple and anxious green, unable to settle on a single hue as it senses the emotional turmoil between us.

“I apologize for freezing you out, Aries. I was hardhearted and stiff-necked and cruel, and I should have shown at least a tenth of the compassion you showed me. So, I apologize from the bottom of my heart for hurting you so deeply for such a long time.”

His mouth is hanging open, moving slightly as though he’s trying to figure out what to say but doesn’t have a clue.

“I’d love to start over, Aries. Frankly, if this happened in any other circumstance, I wouldn’t have the guts to ask for your compassion—I don’t deserve it.”

I want to look away, avoid his eyes, but I force myself to brave whatever’s there. He’s still stunned, eyes wide.

“But we’re here, locked in together for months, and there’s a lot riding on this. So, yeah, when you’re ready to put this behind you, let me know. And don’t worry, I don’t expect your forgiveness. You’re a terrific person, but even a saint would have a hard time forgiving me.”

He pauses. The silence goes on long enough that my heart begins to ache. Would he really rather fail this challenge than accept my apology ?

“Your apology is unnecessary, but I accept it anyway. I can’t forgive you because in my mind, Callie, there’s nothing to forgive.”

We simply stare into each other’s eyes for long moments. Thoughts and emotions are whirling within me so rapidly I honestly don’t know what I’m thinking or feeling right now.

“It’s almost unbearable not to hold you in my arms, Callie.

I wish I could. I hate to admit it, but perhaps these stupid rules will work to our benefit.

We have months to learn how to communicate, months to work together, months to let what happened in that cell fade to the far corners of our minds. ”

“And in the meantime, we can learn to be friends,” I chime in, though the way my body responds to his nearness makes a lie of my words. I want more than friendship.

Although we’ve shared so many truths this week, now is not the time for me to share that particular truth.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Seventeen

Aries

The first crack of thunder hits like a physical blow, sending memories crashing through carefully constructed barriers. My hands shake as I grip the Manual, trying to focus on tonight's meditation requirements instead of the way lightning transforms our cottage windows into harsh arena spotlights.

Callie sits cross-legged on her meditation cushion, close enough that her light floral scent fills my lungs with each measured breath.

After the Memory Reconciliation sessions, every time we're near each other, the air seems charged with new awareness.

Even the simple act of breathing the same air holds dangerous intimacy.

"Your heart's racing," she says softly.

Not a question. The thunder crashes again, and my hands tighten into fists, my nails pricking my palms.

"Aries?"

"I'm fine." The lie tastes bitter. Spark drifts closer, its usual bright colors shifting to concerned lavender as it nuzzles my cheek. The shimmerling's touch feels like sunlight and comfort, but even its soothing presence can't quiet the roaring in my

head.

Rain lashes the windows now, driven by a howling wind that sounds too much like... like...

Please, brother. Make it stop. I can't...can't take anymore...

Kren's voice echoes through memory, mixing with the storm until I can't tell which sounds are present and which are past. My hands clench harder, drawing blood where nails pierce flesh.

"You're not fine." Callie moves closer, still maintaining the prescribed distance, but near enough that her body heat radiates against my skin. "Talk to me?"

The power chooses this moment to die, plunging us into darkness broken only by Spark's concerned glow and the regular bursts of lightning blazing through the windowpanes.

In the sudden darkness, Callie's breathing seems louder, more intimate.

The cottage feels smaller somehow, as if the shadows are pressing us together.

Lightning crashes again, and I flinch violently, memories threatening to overwhelm me.

"Come on," Callie says softly, rising from her meditation cushion. "Let's move to the bed, where we can share warmth. The barrier will help us stay close enough for comfort but maintain the rules."

We move carefully through the darkness to our sleeping area, settling on either side of the thin barrier pillow that's meant to keep us separated.

“It’s cold. Sounds like sleet against the windows. Soon it will turn to snow. The barrier,” I manage through clenched teeth. “We need to adjust it. For body heat.”

It’s our nightly ritual—sharing warmth through that symbolic divide. But tonight feels different. Dangerous. The storm strips away careful control, leaving raw nerves and rising awareness .

Spark expands its glow, creating a dome of gentle light around us. Its color shifts to something deeper, richer than its usual bright hues. The shimmerling seems to sense the changing energy between us.

Working together, we rearrange ourselves on either side of the barrier.

But the thunder makes me flinch, and somehow, we end up pressed closer than usual, only the thin batting between us.

I can feel every curve of her body through the barrier, smell the clean scent of her hair, and hear the slight catch in her breath when my hand accidentally brushes hers.

“This okay?” The storm’s fury makes her voice seem more intimate, as if she’s speaking directly into my mind.

“Yes.” The word comes out rough. Another lightning flash illuminates her face—pupils dilated, lips slightly parted. The sight sends blood flooding to my cock. “No. I don’t know.”

Spark trails lightning bolts through its protective dome. There’s something different about its patterns tonight—more sensual somehow, less playful. The light paints Callie’s skin in shifting patterns that make my fingers itch to trace them.

“Can I...” She hesitates, then continues softly, “Would it help if I held your hand?”

It's allowed during emergencies.”

The simple offer undoes me somehow. After the Memory Reconciliation sessions, after seeing how gentle I tried to be even in that cell, she wants to offer comfort. To see past the walls I built when I thought they were protecting her.

Her fingers find mine across the barrier. The touch sends electricity racing up my arm, making it hard to remember why we maintain such careful distance. Her thumb traces patterns on my palm that mirror Spark's light show, and my whole body thrums with awareness.

Thunder crashes again, but this time, the memories feel less immediate. Less powerful than the present moment—than Callie's touch and Spark's protective light and the growing heat between us .

“The memory sessions were dangerous,” she murmurs. “Just not in the way I anticipated. Now I can't take my mind off of all the ways I want to break the rules.”

Perhaps a few weeks ago I wouldn't have known what she's hinting at, but I have no doubt what she means, because I'm close to removing that fucking barrier and owning her mouth with mine.

“Callie...” Her name comes out with the same reverence I would use when talking to the Goddess. “We should...”

“Should what?” Her fingers continue their maddening patterns against my palm. “Maintain proper distance? Pretend we don't feel this?”

“The rules...”

“Allow contact during emergencies.” Her voice holds a smile. “And this definitely

feels like an emergency.”

As if agreeing, Spark expands its protective dome, the light taking on a rosy hue. The shimmering ’s patterns grow more elaborate, creating an intimate cocoon that seems to pulse in time with our matched heartbeats.

“Tell me about the storm,” she says softly, still tracing patterns that make it hard to think. “About why it brings up memories of someone named Kren.”

The name hits like cold water, dousing the heat building between us. My hand tightens on hers as memories surge—rain and blood and desperate choices.

“Not yet,” I manage. “Please. I can’t... not tonight.”

“Okay.” Her free hand moves, almost touches my face across the barrier, then she pulls it away and covers her mouth with it as though she’s physically holding herself back from kissing me. “Then just be here with me. In this moment.”

The storm rages on, but its power diminishes with each gentle touch, each shared breath. Spark’s light wraps us in warmth and possibility as distance becomes harder to maintain. Even through the barrier, every point of contact feels charged with dangerous awareness.

“We should sleep,” I say finally, though sleep feels impossible with her so close, so tempting, so willing .

“Should we?” Her voice holds heat that makes my blood sing. “Or should we acknowledge that something’s changing between us? That our apologies and honesty have decimated some of our walls?”

Before I can respond, lightning illuminates her face again—showing me truth and

want and something deeper that terrifies me more than any storm. Because she's right. Everything is changing. And I'm no longer sure I have the strength to stop it.

Or if I even want to.

Spark creates another heart pattern above us, but this one seems to shimmer with deeper meaning. The light traces down, following the curve of Callie's neck, highlighting places I ache to touch, to lick.

"Your eyes change color when you want me," she whispers, and the direct acknowledgment makes my breath catch. "Did you know that?"

"Callie..." Her name emerges as a growl. "We can't..."

"Can't what? Talk about this? Feel this?" Her fingers continue their maddening patterns against my palm. "Because I think we're past pretending."

She's right. After experiencing each other's memories of that cell, after sharing vulnerabilities and fears, there's no hiding the growing heat between us. Even through the barrier, her body calls to mine.

A particularly violent thunderclap makes me flinch, memories threatening again. But Callie's touch grounds me in the present as she brings our joined hands to rest between us on top of the barrier.

"Stay with me," she murmurs. "Here, now. Feel my heartbeat."

Through the thin barrier, our pulses seem to synchronize. Spark's protective dome takes on a deeper rose-gold color, and the shimmerling weaves patterns that look suspiciously like a net of stars around us.

“Since the third phase, I’ve begun watching you in the early morning, before you awaken.”

I lift an eyebrow in question. Considering her complete disdain toward me for so long, this is hard to believe.

“Yes.” Her voice is breathy. “I imagine something benign, like tracing your bottom lip with my thumb.”

She almost reaches across the barrier, but catches herself. Instead, she shows me what she’s imagined by performing the action on herself.

It’s a simple movement, the softest brush of skin on skin, yet my imagination has gone into hyperdrive as I feel her thumb on my bottom lip. It’s shockingly arousing, proven by my cock’s movement as it bobs in approval.

“I dream about you,” she confesses into the charged darkness. “About touching you without barriers. About...”

“Don’t.” The word scrapes out rough. “Please. I can’t... if you keep talking like that...”

“You’ll what?” Her voice holds heat and challenge. “Break the rules? Give in to what we both want?”

As if responding to her words, Spark’s light pulses stronger, painting patterns across our skin that make every point of near-contact feel electrified. The barrier between us seems thinner somehow, more symbolic than real .

“Rules...” I mutter, suddenly pushing away from her and rising. The Manual sits on the table, its worn pages delineating our restrictions. And maybe... our salvation.

“Aries?” Callie props herself up on an elbow, watching as I scan the pages. “What are you doing?”

“Reading the rules. Very carefully.” I turn my attention to the section on physical contact. Thunder crashes outside as I absorb every word, looking for what isn’t there. When I turn back to her, heat builds in my eyes. “It says nothing about words being prohibited.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Her eyes widen as understanding dawns. A slow smile curves her lips as she settles back against the pillows. “Nothing at all?”

“Not one restriction.” Returning to the bed, I maintain a careful distance as I stretch out on my side so I can watch her, the barrier firmly between us. “Which means I can tell you exactly what I’ve been thinking about. Every forbidden thought. Every dream that’s haunted me for five long annums .”

Spark spins excited circles above us, its light taking on a scarlet hue as it creates an intimate cocoon around the bed.

“Tell me,” she insists, gaze locked with mine across the barrier.

“I remember how you taste,” I start, voice dropping lower.

“One of the things I’ve felt guilty about all these annums is that I licked your throat once, as you slept.

You had the sweetest little smile on your face, and I couldn’t resist inching closer and swiping my tongue in the hollow of your throat. ”

I wait for her to disapprove. Instead, she rewards me with the same smile she wore as she slept that night so long ago.

“You tasted like summer berries and hope. I dream about that taste. About learning every inch of you with my tongue until you cry out my name. ”

Her breath catches. “I remember your grip,” she counters.

“So careful, even then, as you clutched my hips to make your entry easier. I’ve imagined them on me a thousand times since then.

Imagined you touching me everywhere, following my curves, holding me tighter as I writhe beneath your touch, learning what makes me gasp, what makes me beg... ”

The storm outside matches the one building between us as we trade memories, desires, dreams we’ve never dared to voice. Each confession brings us closer to the edge while never quite crossing it.

The storm rattles the windows, each thunderclap punctuating our murmured confessions. Though the barrier remains firmly between us, we’ve gravitated closer until only inches separate us. Close enough to share breath, to see every minute reaction as we trade forbidden thoughts.

Lightning illuminates her face—flushed, lips parted, eyes flared wide and dark with want.

“I watch you during morning meditation,” she admits. “The way your muscles move, how your horns catch the light. I imagine running my fingers along them, learning if they’re as sensitive as they look.”

A growl escapes before I can stop it. “Very sensitive. Especially when...” My words trail off as she shifts closer, still maintaining that crucial measure of distance.

“When what?” Her voice has gone husky. “Tell me, Aries. Tell me everything you’ve been holding back.”

“I remember the sounds you make,” I confess, watching heat bloom across her

cheeks. “Soft little gasps that drive me wild. I lie awake imagining drawing new sounds from you, learning every note of your pleasure.”

The storm’s fury matches our own as the sleet beats wetly against the windows. Spark’s light pulses deeper, painting patterns across our skin that make every near-touch feel electric .

“I dream about your voice,” she whispers. “The way it goes rough when you want something. Like now.” Her fingers trace patterns in the air just above my arm, never quite touching.

“Tell me what you want, Aries. Every dark thought, every forbidden dream.” Her voice drops low and husky, carrying all the hunger she’s been trying to hide. “Tell me exactly what you’d do if these rules didn’t exist.”

My breathing grows audibly heavier, the careful control I’ve maintained for weeks finally starting to crack.

“You want to know what I think about every night as I lay a mere handspan from you?” My voice is rough with want. “How you’d taste. How you’d sound. How you’d feel wrapped around me when I finally claim what’s mine.”

Taking a shaky breath, I unleash five annums of carefully contained desire into words.

“I want to map every inch of you,” I confess, voice dropping to a rumble that makes her shiver.

“Learn every sensitive spot, every place that makes you gasp. I remember one, just here...” My hand hovers over the curve of her neck, not touching but close enough that she must feel its heat.

“The way you trembled when my nose brushed there. I told myself it was accidental, but I don’t think it was. ”

Lightning flashes again, catching the flush spreading down her neck.

“I remember your hands,” she breathes, eyes locked on mine.

“So strong when I watched you days later in the training ring, but so gentle at night. I’ve watched you fight a hundred times since we fought for our freedom, imagining those same hands on my skin again. ”

The barrier between us feels like it’s burning as we trade heated memories and darker desires. Spark’s protective crimson dome pulses, matching our racing hearts.

“There are two spots at the base of your spine,” she continues, her voice gone husky.

“I felt it one night, when in our tangle of limbs I turned over, despite your insistence that we not look at each other. My thumbs somehow found the shallow divots. I remember how you shuddered when I touched you there. Do you still respond that way? Do you still make that deep, desperate sound in your throat?”

A growl vibrates through my chest at her words. “Try me and find out.” The challenge in my voice makes her pupils dilate further. “When these trials are done, when I can finally touch you properly...”

“Tell me,” she demands softly. “Tell me exactly what you’ll do.”

Thunder crashes as I paint pictures with words—of touches too long denied, of passion too long contained. Of all the ways I want to worship her body, learn her pleasure, make her forget there was ever distance between us.

Her breathing grows ragged as I describe each forbidden fantasy.

“I dream about your mouth,” she admits, watching heat flare in my eyes.

“About how it felt against my skin during the feeding ritual. How your lips curved when you smiled at something I said. How they’d feel trailing down my throat, across my collarbone...”

She pauses, her own breathing growing uneven. “I imagine what sounds you’d make if I traced your horns with my tongue.”

“When I can touch you again,” I promise roughly, “I’m going to take hoaras . Learn every way to make you come apart under my hands, my mouth...”

Her soft moan nearly breaks my control. “Tell me more.” Her tone is urgent

And so I do, painting pictures of passion with words alone while the storm rages outside and Spark’s light wraps us in crimson intimacy.

We maintain that crucial physical distance while our words eliminate all other barriers, sharing every secret desire, every forbidden dream we’ve never dared voice .

“You mentioned once... that you could smell my arousal, Aries. Was that true?”

Dear Gods, am I imagining things or does the rustle of the sheets mean she’s spread her thighs to bathe me with her delicious scent?

Yes. That’s exactly what she’s done. And yes... “Yes, sweet Callista. You could tempt a dead man to rise from his grave with a luscious scent like that. You’re killing me.”

After more rustling, my mind imagining a thousand things she might be doing under the covers, each more obscene than the last, she pulls her hand from under the covers, one finger glistening with moisture.

My cock punches against my sleep pants, dripping with pre-cum, I'm certain.

She gives me a naughty smile. It's an expression I've never seen on her face before as she paints her lips with her cream.

I don't understand how the Committee monitors us, how they know if we break rules when they're not around. I imagine it's some type of magic. But they won't need sorcery to hear my groan of desire all the way into town.

"I hear the other males talk, little Callista. They say some females like to be punished. Is that what you want? To be spanked, perhaps, for driving me insane. I may deserve the death penalty, but this? This torture? I don't deserve this."

She tosses her head, giving me a sly smirk. "Sorry, Aries. I don't want to torture you. I just want you to feel as desperate as I do."

"Yes. I'm desperate, little Callista. Just to make sure you're as desperate as me, I'll say one more thing, and then we can go to sleep. I remember..." I let my voice dip low, so she has to ease closer to hear the rest. "I remember what it's like to be inside you, Callie. "

She gasps for the first time tonight, that sound she makes when she's close to release.

"It's warm and sweet and like heaven and home at the same time."

Her pupils widen as her lips pop open.

“And if they decide to put me to death, Callie, that is what I’ll be thinking about with my last breath.”

Chapter Eighteen

Callie

The crowd's angry murmur fills the ceremonial amphitheater, a sharp contrast to the serene flute music meant to set the mood for the Unity Dance we're here to perform.

We've been practicing the exacting steps for days, knowing that one wrong move in the intricate routine could cause Aries' death.

I've never felt this much pressure in my life.

Days have passed since the storm that changed everything between us, and now, through the gauzy curtain separating the waiting area from the exhibition hall, I catch glimpses of protest signs: "Justice Not Romance" and "Killers Can't Buy Love."

At the front of the crowd stands a woman with graying hair and a face carved by grief. She holds a holographic image of a young man, her son, killed in the same arena where Aries once fought. She's become the unofficial spokesperson for the opposition, her loss giving weight to their anger.

"My name is Mira Thessian. My boy died screaming on the sands of an arena," she calls out, her voice carrying over the murmur. "While killers like him lived to fight another day. Where's the justice in that?"

But as she speaks, I notice something else in the crowd—a small group holding different signs: "Redemption Over Vengeance" and "Breaking the Cycle." A middle-

aged Sanctorii male steps forward.

“My daughter was a gladiator,” he says, his blue skin pale with emotion. “She died in the same system that created him. But killing him won’t bring her back. Maybe changing him will prevent the next death.”

Mira’s face contorts with fury. “Easy words from someone whose child chose that life!”

“No one chooses slavery,” the male responds quietly. “That’s the point.”

“Bigger turnout than expected,” one of the Committee members interrupts, their crystalline form reflecting the arena’s harsh lights. “We have doubled security, but you must maintain absolute focus on the dance. Any mistake—”

“Means a mark,” Aries finishes quietly beside me. “We know.”

His massive frame radiates tension, though his face remains carefully neutral.

The ceremonial garments—embroidered flowing silver fabric that will catch the light during our dance—make him look otherworldly.

His horns juxtaposed against the formal styling look like gleaming bronze sculptures, but I can’t reach out to touch them as I ache to do.

A commotion erupts in the crowd. Through the curtain, I see security wrestling with someone who tried to climb the barrier separating spectators from the dance floor. The protester’s shouts echo through the space: “Murderers don’t deserve second chances! Justice for victims!”

Aries’ hands clench at his sides. Without thinking, I step closer—not touching, but

near enough that he can feel my presence and support.

“They don’t know you,” I murmur. “Don’t know what really happened. ”

“Don’t they?” His voice holds a bitter edge. “A life was taken by these hands. Their anger isn’t wrong. It isn’t misdirected.”

Before I can respond, the ceremonial gong sounds. Our turn to dance—to prove our connection worthy of redemption as a crowd that wants Aries dead watches with condemning eyes.

The curtain parts. Walking onto the polished obsidian floor feels like entering an arena. In many ways, it is—one wrong move could bring Aries one step closer to death, just as surely as any gladiator match.

We take our positions as the music shifts to the haunting melody that will guide our dance. The first pose—arms reaching without touching—draws jeers from some in the crowd.

“Fraud!” someone shouts. “How much did he pay you?”

Focus, I tell myself. The dance is everything. Each movement must be perfect.

We begin the first spiral, arms weaving the ancient patterns that symbolize separation and yearning. Aries moves with his natural grace, matching me step for step. Just like in practice, but now with hundreds of hostile eyes watching for any mistake.

The Lament sequence brings us back-to-back, arms reaching up and out while maintaining that crucial inch of space. A stone arcs through the air, missing us by inches. Security moves to intercept the thrower, but we can’t react. Can’t let anything break our focus.

“Keep your eyes on me,” Aries murmurs as we turn to face each other again. “Nothing else exists.”

The dance flows into the Bridge—geometric poses that require perfect synchronization. Each held position feels like an eternity under the crowd’s scrutiny. The protest signs wave like angry flags in my peripheral vision .

Someone starts a chant: “Justice! Justice! Justice!”

But we move through the windmill turns, our arms spinning in opposite directions like interlocking gears. The silver fabric of our garments catches the light, creating illusions of connection where none can exist.

The Supplication sequence looms—those complex kneeling patterns that gave us so much trouble in practice. As we begin the first kneel, I hear it: a distinctive click-whine of a charging energy weapon.

Aries hears it, too. His eyes flick toward the sound, but he maintains the dance. We can’t stop. Can’t react. Can’t do anything but trust security to handle the threat while we move through the patterns that will either save or doom us.

The weapon discharges with a crack. Something sizzles past my ear, close enough that I smell ozone. Still, we dance. Still, we maintain that crucial distance while demonstrating the magnetic pull between us.

“Almost there,” I breathe as we enter the final spiral. Sweat makes the fabric cling to my skin, but our movements remain precise. The crowd’s chaos feels distant now—nothing exists but us, this dance, this moment.

The last sequence brings us full circle—every pattern we’ve learned flowing together in one continuous movement. Despite the threats and jeers and flying objects, we

maintain perfect synchronization. Our bodies mirror each other exactly, connected by something deeper than physical touch.

The final pose approaches—that reaching stance where we began. As we extend our arms toward each other, time seems to slow. In Aries’ eyes, I see everything he can’t say aloud—fear and hope and something much deeper.

The music ends. We hold the pose, breathing hard, as the Committee members materialize around us.

“The dance is complete,” they announce, their layered voices rising above the crowd’s angry buzz. “The connection has been proven genuine through maintained perfection despite extreme duress.”

Only then do I notice the chaos in the arena. Security guards wrestle with multiple protesters who tried to breach the barriers. The remains of thrown objects litter the surrounding floor. Someone screams about justice denied.

But none of it matters. We did it. We proved our connection under the harshest scrutiny possible.

As we’re escorted from the arena, the protesters’ shouts follow us: “Killer! Fraud! Justice!”

“They’re right about one thing,” Aries says quietly once we’re in the relative safety of the waiting area. “I am a killer.”

The simple truth of it hangs between us. I can’t deny it. He admitted as much at the beginning of all this. But maybe that’s not the whole truth.

“Yes,” I say finally, maintaining the bounds that keep him alive, though every instinct

screams to touch him.

“You are. But that’s not all you are. And whatever drove you to it...

” I pause, remembering the anguish of his nightmare mumblings.

“I believe there’s more to that story than anyone out there knows. ”

His eyes hold mine for a long moment, something vulnerable flickering in their depths. “Soon,” he says. “Soon I’ll tell you everything. Just... not yet.”

“I’ll be here when you’re ready.” The words come straight from my heart.

The ghost of a smile touches his lips as we’re led back to our cottage. I’m feeling not quite happiness, but perhaps something like hope.

Chapter Nineteen

C allie

The Committee's latest assignment seemed simple enough—purchase specific ingredients for a ceremonial meal we're required to prepare together.

What they didn't mention was that our required public appearances have become a spectacle, drawing crowds of both supporters and protesters to whatever location we visit.

The Sanctorii Central Market bustles with afternoon shoppers, but I can feel their scrutiny as we navigate between stalls with our Committee escort trailing discretely behind.

Someone's organized this—the way people position themselves to block our path, the coordinated stares, the subtle herding toward less populated areas where confrontation would be easier.

“Fresh drassah beans,” I murmur, consulting our list. “Then spices for that ceremonial dish you mentioned.”

People certainly aren't subtle, as evidenced by their snide chatter and pointed fingers as they follow us through the throng. My shoulders tighten when people stare too long, recognizing us from the news feeds.

The protests have grown more organized since our public Unity Dance. What started

as scattered objections has become coordinated resistance, with security reporting planned disruptions at every appearance.

“Murderer’s whore,” someone hisses as we pass. Aries’ hands clench involuntarily, but I shoot him a warning look.

“Not worth it,” I say quietly. “Let’s just get what we need.”

The drassah merchant eyes us warily as we approach his stall. “We don’t serve killers here.”

“The credits spend the same,” I respond evenly, lifting my chin despite the fear crawling up my spine. “And these beans are required for our assignment.”

“Required?” His face twists with disgust. “Like that dance show you put on? Making a mockery of justice with your little love story?”

Other shoppers stop to watch the confrontation unfold. I sense Aries coiling beside me, ready to defend, but I force myself to remain steady.

“Sir,” I say, keeping my voice firm but polite, “we’re not here to debate justice. Just to buy beans. Will you sell them or should we try another stall?”

My calm seems to inflame him further. “You think you can redeem a murderer with pretty words and fancy moves?”

Before I can respond, someone shoves me hard from behind. The force sends me stumbling directly toward a merchant’s stall that is lined with sharp metal farm tools.

Without thinking, Aries lunges forward, his powerful arms wrapping around my waist and spinning me away from the deadly display. We collide with a nearby fabric

stall in a tangle of limbs and silk.

For a heartbeat that feels like an eternity, we're pressed together completely—my soft curves molded against his hard chest, my face buried in the hollow of his throat where I can taste his skin with each gasping breath.

His hands span my ribcage, thumbs accidentally brushing the underside of my breasts as he steadies me.

The heat of his palms burns through my thin tunic.

I can feel every ridge of muscle beneath his shirt, the thundering of his heart against my cheek, the way his breathing has gone ragged.

His scent—clean sweat and his own personal smell—fills my lungs and makes me dizzy with want. One of his hands has tangled in my hair, the other is now splayed possessively across my lower back, fingers dangerously close to the curve of my ass.

“Are you hurt?” His voice is a rough whisper against my ear, sending shivers cascading through my body. I feel the vibration of his words through his chest, intimate as a caress.

“No,” I breathe, but make no move to separate. My hands are fisted in his tunic, and I can feel him trembling. Or maybe that's me. The prohibited contact feels like drowning in fire, every nerve ending alive with sensation.

His thumb traces my cheekbone with devastating gentleness, checking for injury, and I have to bite back a moan. This is what I've been craving, what weeks of careful distance have denied us both—the simple, profound intimacy of touch.

Then reality crashes back. The Committee's observer appears instantly, their

crystalline form catching the afternoon light.

“Physical contact has occurred,” they intone. “Though protective in nature, a mark must be registered against your progress.”

We separate like we’ve been burned, both breathing hard. The loss of contact feels like a physical ache.

“This is your first mark,” the Committee member continues. “Two more mean failure.”

The crowd has grown larger, some looking satisfied that we’ve been penalized, others appearing uncomfortable with the hostility they’ve witnessed. Three large males circle us with predatory intent.

“Perhaps you should shop elsewhere,” one suggests, hand resting meaningfully on his weapon. “Some places are for respectable citizens only.”

Part of me wants to see Aries unleash his gladiator skills on these bullies, but the stakes are too high now. Two more marks mean death.

“We’re just here to shop,” I say, my voice surprisingly strong.

The largest enforcer steps closer. “Pretty little thing to be defending a killer. Maybe you need someone to show you better options.”

A growl builds in Aries’ chest, his protective instincts clearly warring with the knowledge that any aggressive action could doom us both. Despite the dangerous circumstances, my mind is still focused on the phantom touch of his hands on my skin.

“I have all the options I need,” I tell the bully, surprised by how steady my voice sounds despite the chaos of emotions swirling through me. “And you’re blocking paying customers from this gentleman’s stall.”

The merchant shifts uncomfortably as other shoppers mutter. None intervene, but the crowd’s mood feels uncertain now.

“You heard the lady,” Aries says quietly, his voice carrying that dangerous edge I recognize from his fighting days. “We’re just here to shop.”

The bully’s hand tightens on his weapon. For a moment, violence feels inevitable. Then the Committee member emerges between us and our foes, their crystalline form impossible to ignore .

“Is there a problem?” Their layered voice carries a subtle threat.

Our tormentors step back, recognizing a higher authority. “No problem. Just keeping the peace.”

“Indeed.” The Committee member’s faceted eyes miss nothing. “Then you won’t mind if these two complete their shopping?”

The merchant hurriedly sells us the beans, probably eager to end the spectacle.

As we move to the spice stall, I notice my hands trembling—not from fear of the confrontation, but from the lingering effects of Aries’ touch.

The memory of his body pressed against mine, the way his hands felt on my skin, makes it hard to focus on anything else.

“You don’t have to be so brave,” he murmurs as we walk, close enough that I can

smell his scent, though we're maintaining proper distance. The careful gap between us feels like torture after experiencing his embrace.

"Yes, I do." My voice holds steel, despite the tremor in my hands. "If we let them intimidate us, they win. I won't let them make me feel ashamed of choosing hope over hate."

Years of training in the ship's ludus have taught me to stand my ground, even when my knees want to shake.

I'll never be a gladiator, that's not why I train.

I do it to empower myself, to be able to handle myself in a fight if necessary.

More importantly, I've learned that sometimes the bravest thing you can do is refuse to back down.

Aries' expression shifts at my words, something vulnerable flickering in his golden eyes. The way he's looking at me now—like I'm something precious and dangerous all at once—makes my pulse quicken.

"Besides," I add, trying to lighten the mood despite the tension still crackling between us, "I had backup if needed. Even if said backup was trying very hard to be well-behaved. "

"Yes. Very hard," he agrees roughly, his voice dropping lower. "Though watching you handle them..." He breaks off, glancing at the Committee member still monitoring us.

"What?" Heat blooms in my cheeks at his tone.

“Makes me wish these trials were over,” he admits, the words carrying dangerous promise. “So I could show you exactly how impressive I found your courage.”

The heat in his voice causes a wave of desire to ripple through me. Even here, surrounded by a Committee member and a hostile crowd, he finds ways to kindle fire between us.

We complete our shopping quickly, though open gossip and gaping stares follow us through the market. I maintain my dignity, head high despite the tension, but inside I’m still reeling from our contact.

Back in our cottage, I finally let my composure slip as I let out a sigh of relief. “Well, that was...”

“Terrifying?” Aries suggests, moving to help but maintaining careful distance. “Infuriating?”

“Educational,” I manage, though my voice wavers slightly. “Now we know what we’re really facing. And...” I pause, meeting his eyes. “Now I know what it feels like to have you hold me.”

The admission slips out before I can stop it. His pupils dilate, the air between us suddenly charged with new tension.

“Callie...” His voice holds warning and desire in equal measure.

“One mark against us,” I murmur, unable to look away from the heat in his gaze.

“Callie, it was worth every second.”

Chapter Twenty

C allie

“Partnership under stress.” Three balls of fluff explode into our cottage before the Committee finishes their announcement. Tiny blue eyes. Oversized paws. Immediate chaos. They look like a cross between kittens and puppies, with wide blue eyes and paws that are too big for their body.

“Zorling offspring,” they explain. “Recently orphaned and requiring constant care. You must keep all three alive and thriving for seventy-two standard hours. Failure of even one results in a mark against your progress.”

The creatures—no bigger than my palm—scatter in different directions. One heads for the kitchen and somehow manages to climb onto the counter, another burrows under our meditation cushions, and the third starts a pitiful wailing that arrows straight to my heart.

Spark immediately zips after the counter-climber, creating gentle barriers of light to prevent it from reaching the drassah pot while somehow managing to look both helpful and utterly enchanted by these tiny, furry beings.

“They require feeding every two standard hours,” the Committee member continues as chaos erupts around us.

“Temperature regulation, socialization, and protection from their own curiosity. Zorlings at this age can die from loneliness, overfeeding, cold, or getting into

dangerous spaces they are too young to know to avoid.”

Aries is already moving, his gladiator reflexes serving him well, as he clutches the wailer to his chest. “How exactly do we feed them?”

“Specialized formula needs to be applied with these.” They produce what look like tiny eye droppers. “Miss a feeding, and they weaken rapidly.”

After they leave, we stare at each other over the chaos of three tiny, needy creatures.

“Well,” I say as one of them climbs my leg with tiny, needle-sharp claws, “this is definitely different from meditation, hair braiding, and dancing.”

Aries’ laugh mingles with the renewed wailing from all three zorlings. “At least now I understand why so many couples fail the trials. This is going to be exhausting.”

Within hours, we develop a system, deciding that I’ll handle feeding preparation while he’ll manage temperature regulation, we’ll alternate sleep shifts, and both of us will maintain constant vigilance against their suicidal tendencies.

We discover that the adorable fluffballs can’t regulate their body temperature, requiring us to take turns holding them against our skin. The feeding schedule means one of us is awake every two hours, around the clock.

Spark has appointed itself as an auxiliary guardian, creating soft warning lights whenever one of the zorlings approaches danger and even attempting to herd them away from hazardous areas with gentle pulses of illumination.

“Behind you!” Aries calls as Trouble makes a break for the edge of our bed. I snatch the fuzzy escape artist just before it tumbles to the floor .

The next day blurs into a cycle of feeding, cleaning, warming, and preventing the zorlings from killing themselves through sheer curiosity.

By the end of the second day, exhaustion is testing our patience.

When Trouble—we've named them Trouble, Chaos, and Mayhem—makes its fifth escape attempt of the morning, I snap.

“How did these things survive evolution?” I mutter, snatching the fuzzy escape artist.

“Barely,” Aries replies dryly, catching Chaos mid-leap toward the hot stove. “And only with very attentive parents.”

The observation hangs between us—a reminder of what we're really being tested on. Not just our ability to care for vulnerable creatures, but our potential as partners, as a family unit.

“Your turn,” I mumble at 3 AM, gently transferring the smallest zorling to Aries' chest.

“They're finally settling,” he mouths, arranging all three against his bronze skin. The sight of this powerful warrior cradling tiny, vulnerable creatures with infinite gentleness does something profound to my heart.

By the final day, something has shifted.

The constant cooperation, the shared responsibility, the way we've learned to anticipate each other's needs and movements—it's created a new layer of intimacy.

When Mayhem falls asleep in my palm while Aries holds the other two, we're functioning as a perfect unit.

“The trial is complete,” the Committee announces as they retrieve the now-thriving zorlings. “All three offspring have gained weight and show excellent socialization responses. You have succeeded.”

As the tiny creatures are taken away, chirping contentedly, an unexpected emptiness settles over our cottage.

“I’m going to miss them,” I admit, surprised by the depth of the feeling .

Spark performs a melancholy loop around the now-empty warming nest, its colors shifting to a wistful blue-green that perfectly captures our shared sense of loss.

“So am I.” Aries moves closer, almost reaching to touch my hand. Spark drifts between us, its color brightening slightly as if reminding us that while the zorlings are gone, our own bond remains. “We make good partners, Callie. In everything.”

The word “partners” carries new weight now, tested by sleepless nights and shared purpose. Whatever comes next, we’ve proven we can care for something precious together—and keep it safe.

Chapter Twenty-One

A ries

The Sanctoran Temple's vast dome stretches above us, its crystalline surface reflecting a wash of color across the walls.

Dozens of iridescent spheres hover at waist height—simple tools of light and energy, nothing like our sentient Spark, who watches anxiously from the sidelines near the Committee members.

“The Sanctoran Sphere Trial will begin,” the Committee member announces to the assembled crowd. “Each participant must guide twelve light spheres through prescribed patterns using focused mental energy. Think of it as telekinesis, but only with these specific spheres.”

They gesture, and twenty-four perfect orbs of light rise from recessed floor panels, hovering at waist height. Twelve align before me and twelve before Callie.

“The spheres respond to mental commands from their assigned guide,” they continue.

“Participants must move their spheres in perfect mirror patterns of their partner while maintaining the prescribed physical distance. The patterns will appear as light traces in the air—you must guide your spheres to follow these pathways exactly. Any collision between spheres results in immediate failure. ”

To demonstrate, they create a simple geometric pattern in glowing lines between us.

“These are your paths. Guide your spheres through them in synchronization. Begin with one sphere each, advancing to all twelve for the final sequence.”

I glance at Callie. This is different from anything we’ve practiced. The spheres are just tools, machines that respond to mental focus—but coordinating twelve each while matching movements exactly? While maintaining our physical distance?

A protester’s voice bursts through the anxious silence: “Stop wasting sacred traditions on killers!”

The spheres begin to pulse in sequence, creating the first basic pattern we must mirror. Like a simplified star chart, the lights trace paths we must follow in perfect unison.

“Ready?” I ask softly.

Callie’s answering smile holds surprising warmth despite the circumstances. “Together.”

We begin the dance of light and shadow. Though this is telekinetic in nature, I find my hands moving in precise gestures that guide my spheres. When I glance out of the corner of my eye, I see Callie is doing the same thing. We look as though we’re engaged in a graceful dance.

The ancient Sanctrans believed these patterns represented the flow of cosmic energy—now they’ll test our ability to move as one mind.

The first sequence flows smoothly—simple geometric shapes. But the second level brings spiraling helixes that must cross paths without touching. One sphere brushing another means instant disqualification.

“Careful,” Callie murmurs as our lights weave past each other with barely a hair’s breadth between them. “They’re speeding up. ”

She’s right. Each new pattern flows faster than the last, requiring split-second timing and absolute trust in each other’s movements. The angry crowd fades to background noise as we focus entirely on our synchronized movements.

A sudden commotion erupts in the stands. Through my peripheral vision, I catch someone raising what looks like a disruption field generator—designed to interfere with energy-based technology.

“Incoming,” I warn quietly. “Left side, upper level.”

Callie doesn’t look away from our spheres, but I see her slight nod. When the generator activates, sending waves of interference rippling through the temple, we’re ready.

Our lights flicker and jump, fighting the disruptive energy. But we’ve learned to read each other so well these past weeks that we adjust instantly, compensating for the interference without breaking pattern.

Security moves to neutralize the threat, but more disruption fields activate from different points in the crowd. They’re coordinated this time, working together to sabotage the trial.

The next pattern requires a complex weaving motion where our spheres must pass through a three-dimensional knot without touching. Under normal circumstances, it would be challenging. With multiple disruption fields fighting us, it should be impossible.

But something has changed between us since the Unity Dance. Each trial, each shared

morning ritual, each evening song (despite Callie's admittedly terrible singing) has built a connection deeper than physical. I can sense her movements now, anticipate her adjustments before she makes them.

Our spheres dance through the interference, maintaining perfect synchronization despite the chaos. The pattern grows more elaborate—a spiraling mandala of light that requires absolute precision .

“Focus on the task,” Callie urges gently as more disruption fields join the assault. “Nothing else exists.”

The crowd's angry shouts rise in volume as they realize their interference isn't working. Someone throws something that shatters against the temple's barrier, but we can't spare attention to look. One moment's distraction means failure.

The final pattern looms—the swiftest and most complex sequence yet. Our spheres must trace the ancient symbol for infinity while weaving through twelve crossing points, all without touching.

The disruption fields reach maximum power just as we begin. Our lights flicker wildly, fighting the interference that threatens to send them crashing together. But we move in perfect harmony, guiding them through the pattern as if we share one mind.

When the completion chime sounds, I almost can't believe we managed it.

But as we stand there, exhausted and triumphant, a piece of debris from the collapsing structure breaks loose above us.

Instinctively, I reach for Callie, pulling her against me and covering her head with my arms as the chunk of stone crashes where she'd been standing. For a moment, we're pressed together, her body sheltered completely by mine, both trembling from the

close call.

The Committee member materializes instantly. "Physical contact detected. However, given the immediate life-threatening danger and the protective nature of the contact, no mark will be assessed. But you came perilously close to your second violation."

We separate quickly, both shaken by how close we came to losing everything.

Chapter Twenty-Two

C allie

Back in our cottage, the silence feels heavier than usual. We move through our evening routine—preparing simple food, tending to Spark, arranging ourselves for meditation—but the weight of how close we came to a second mark hangs between us.

“The disruption fields,” I finally say as we settle into our meditation positions. “That wasn’t a random protest.”

Aries nods grimly. “Coordinated. Timed perfectly to when we’d be most vulnerable.” His hands rest on his thighs, but I can see the tension in his shoulders. “Someone’s been tracking our progress, planning this.”

The implications settle around us like a cold draft. The opposition has moved beyond angry crowds to organized sabotage—sabotage that nearly cost us everything today.

“They’ll try again,” I state, not really a question.

“Probably worse next time.” His golden eyes meet mine across our small space. “The closer we get to completion, the more desperate they become.”

I think of Mira Thessian’s grief-hardened face, of the protesters who see our success as a denial of justice for their losses. Understanding their pain doesn’t make the danger less real.

Although all today's trial required of me physically was the wave of my hands, I'm so emotionally fatigued I can barely see straight.

Perhaps it was the near brush with death at the hands of the rioters—or the knowledge that a single misstep could bring Aries' one step closer to death.

For whatever reason, I feel as though I could sleep for a week.

I've never been much of a bath girl, preferring a quick shower and getting on with my never-ending list of tasks. Now, though, I think I'd love a soak in the large tub that takes up most of the cozy refresher.

Then a thought strikes me. It's a picture, really. The very insistent image of me up to my neck in warm water as Aries kneels at the side of the tub, washing me.

I rub the back of my neck with my palm and let my lids flutter shut as I picture the lazy smile on his face, the slow movement of his hands, the look of lambent arousal in his beautiful golden eyes.

My nipples prick into tight buds as I feel my almost constant arousal rise to new heights.

Suddenly an idea hits me. I'm out of my chair and hurrying to the Manual as though my heels have wings.

After several minutes of scanning, I find the passage I was looking for. There must be something about my intense scrutiny of the book, because Aries has left his perch on the window seat and is standing nearby.

Rereading the section on physical restrictions, a slow smile curves my lips. "Interesting."

“What’s interesting? ”

“So many touching prohibitions. They’re so clear. But looking , Aries? There’s not a word against it.”

His expression shifts from confusion to understanding to alarm. “No.”

“Here.” I pat the chair next to me at the table and turn the Manual toward him. "Look for yourself."

“Callie...” His voice holds warning, but I see the heat flaring in his expression.

I don’t blame him for taking an inordinate amount of time flipping through the pages. His life is on the line. But nowhere does it prohibit looking.

“Take all the time you need to confirm I’m right. In the meantime, I’ll be running a bath. By the way, those are usually taken in the nude.”

His hands clench as he reads, and I know the exact moment he realizes I’m right. “This is...” A muscle tics in his jaw. “You’re playing with fire.”

“No.” Moving toward the bathing chamber, I glance back over my shoulder. “I’m playing by the rules. Exactly as written.”

The bathing chamber isn’t large, but the deep tub dominates the space. Candles line the shelves—their light will paint everything in flickering gold.

“Your choice,” I say softly, lighting the first candle. “But I really could use the help.”

His breathing has grown heavier, but he hasn’t moved. “The rules...”

“Will be followed to the letter.” Another candle flares to life. “Not one touch. Just... looking.”

When I reach for the tie of my robe, his sharp intake of breath sends heat pooling low in my belly. “Last chance to leave. ”

“Callie...” My name emerges as a growl, but he stays, eyes burning, as I let the robe fall.

The candlelight plays across my skin as I step into the steaming water. His gaze feels like a physical caress, making every nerve ending tingle.

He’s seen me nude before, but that was a lifetime ago. It’s been five years since then. Five years of hardships and camaraderie, running from bad guys and scrabbling for enough money to stay flying, and five years of fighting.

I’ve spent countless hours in the ship’s ludus , learning tricks from some of the best gladiators in the galaxy. I’m not ashamed of my body. I hold my head high as we both wait for a chime to ring, or one of the Committee to materialize and scold us.

“It’s just the two of us,” I whisper.

He lets out a long, relieved breath.

After settling into the warm water, I grab the round bathing puff and hand it to him.

His hands tremble slightly as he takes it, maintaining perfect regulation distance. “Where?”

Sweet male. He certainly knows where. He learned my body well enough in that cell on the Warbird One all those years ago.

“Start with my shoulders.” Turning my back to him, I gather my hair up, exposing my neck. “Remember—not one touch,” I remind him, although of the two of us, he certainly has more to lose than me if a mistake is made.

The puff glides over my skin, guided by his careful hands. Each stroke feels more intimate than any touch of skin on skin, accompanied by his ragged breathing and the soft splash of water .

“Lower,” I murmur, arching slightly. A sound escapes him—half growl, half groan.

“You’re killing me,” he says roughly, but the puff continues its journey down my spine, through the water, all the way to the top of my ass.

“Just following the rules.” I splash water on my neck and let him watch it trickle between my breasts as I turn to face him. “I wouldn’t want you to miss a spot.”

His eyes have shifted to molten gold, pupils dilated as he watches rivulets trace paths he can’t touch. The puff moves with agonizing slowness across my collarbone, down the curve of my breast.

“The Manual,” he grits out, “did not anticipate this.”

“But it doesn’t forbid it. Lucky us.” Leaning back, I let him see everything the water makes glisten. “Keep going.”

Each stroke of the puff builds the tension higher. His breathing grows more ragged as he works his way down, maintaining that crucial distance while his gaze devours every inch revealed.

It’s been long minutes with no interference by the Committee. Aries’ shoulders are no longer up around his ears. His forehead is no longer tight with worry. His mouth isn’t

pressed into a thin, anxious line. Instead, he's revealing those sensuous lips of his.

Now that he's relaxed, he takes his time, using long strokes to wash my arms and shorter movements to get my neck and ears.

The floral scent reminds me of honeysuckle as it swirls around us. Between the scent and the low light from the candles, it's almost hypnotic.

"Open your thighs," he orders hoarsely. "I want to see all of you. I want to watch the water cascade over every curve while I clean you. "

The rough command in his voice makes my core clench with want. This is the dominant side of him I glimpsed when he fought—the side that takes charge when desire overwhelms his usual careful control.

"Wider," he breathes as I comply, his golden eyes fixed on my most intimate places. "Perfect. You're so beautiful here, Callie. So pink and perfect."

"I like this part of you," I say.

His head jerks back in surprise.

"Dear God, I'm so tired of the man who only communicated his apologies. I like the Aries who orders me to split my thighs for him."

His eyes widen in surprise, but he's far too smart to ask even one follow-up question. Instead, he almost grips my knees to pull them apart even wider, but catches himself in the nick of time.

"I almost..."

“You don’t have to yank my legs wider, Aries. A simple request will do.”

With that, I lift the leg nearest him and settle my sole on the side of the tub. I imagine he has a ringside seat to every fold and hollow of my most private parts.

He gasps and forgets what he’s supposed to be doing with that puff. He’s staring now, not even pretending the sight isn’t the prettiest thing he’s ever seen. I’ve never felt more feminine.

“Callie.” His voice has reached his deepest register. “How can you be so beautiful? And feminine? You’re a different person than the female I met all those annums ago. You’re strong, sure of yourself. The annums have only made you more desirable. ”

My lids flutter closed as I allow myself to feel what his words do to me. This is more than a sex game, more than what I asked for. This is the male I’m falling for, telling me I’ve grown into someone he admires more than the girl whose virginity he took.

His hand is trembling as he shakes his head. It’s as though the moment is so powerful he can barely tolerate the emotions cascading through him. I understand. I feel that way, too.

Grabbing the puff, careful not to break the rule, I clean myself down there. For some reason, though I wanted this to be titillating, it’s become so emotionally powerful, I don’t want to play anymore.

When I’m done, he grips the puff and washes my legs with long, adoring strokes, taking special care behind my knees and somehow managing to get the puff between my toes without touching an iota of skin.

He drops the puff into the soapy water with a plop.

“I quit praying to the Gods after I was forced into the gladiator ludus. I certainly never prayed when I was on the slave ship. But for some reason, the Gods gave me the sweetest gift, Callie. You.”

He pierces me with the most sincere, affectionate gaze. “I squandered it once, Callista, but I vow by all that’s holy, I will never let you go again. Not if you want me. I will do whatever it takes for the rest of my life to be worthy of you.”

Goosebumps swarm over every exposed inch of my body, and they have nothing to do with the chilled air.

“You’re stealing my heart, Aries. One sweet word, one blazing look, one vow at a time.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

A ries

The morning after our intimate bath, I decide I can't put this off anymore. Watching Callie navigate our kitchen—all unconscious grace and morning sunlight—the weight of my secret feels like it might crush my ribs. She deserves the truth. All of it.

“We should talk,” I say quietly. “About what I promised to tell you.”

Her hands clutch the drassah pot she's holding. “Are you sure? We don't have to do this now.”

But we do. After what she shared last night, after how far we've come, she deserves the whole truth. Even if it means losing everything we've built. Can she hear my story without hating me?

Spark drifts closer, its usual bright colors shifting to concerned lavender. The shimmerling seems to sense the weight of what's coming.

“Could we...” My voice catches. “Could we sit in the garden? I need... to be somewhere open to speak the truth. ”

She follows me outside without question. The morning air carries the scent of night-blooming flowers, so different from the rain and metallic tang of the arena that haunts my memories. We settle on the small bench, maintaining the proper gap, while Spark hovers protectively between us.

“My brother Kren and I weren’t born gladiators,” I begin, the words scraping raw. “We were sons of a merchant on Dauphus Prime. Our fathers were different, but we had the same mother. He was three annums younger, but you’d never know it. He always seemed wiser somehow, even as a child.”

The memory rises unbidden. Kren’s small hand in mine as we explored the marketplace where his father traded exotic spices. “There was this time, just before the harvest festival. He couldn’t have been more than six. We were supposed to stay in father’s booth, but Kren heard music...”

“Come on, Ari!” Kren tugged my hand, eyes bright with excitement. “Just for a minima! ”

“Father said to stay put,” I protested, already feeling my resolve weaken. It was impossible to deny Kren anything when he smiled like that.

“But the fire dancers are here! Please?” He bounced on his toes, horns barely visible nubs on his small head. “I’ll be your best brother forever and ever.”

“You’re my only brother, pest,” I grumbled, but let him pull me into the crowd.

The fire dancers whirled in the square, their flames painting patterns that drew gasps from the gathered crowd. Kren’s face glowed with wonder as he watched, still clutching my hand.

“We’ll learn to dance like that someday,” he declared with childish certainty. “You and me, Ari. We’ll make the prettiest fire-patterns anyone’s ever seen. ”

“Oh, really?” I couldn’t help grinning. “And how exactly will we do that?”

He turned those serious eyes on me, eyes that always seemed to see straight through

to my soul. “Because we can do anything together. You said so.”

After I’ve told the story to Callie, I add, “He believed that.” I glance away, not wanting her to see the liquid welling in my eyes. “Right up until the end, he believed we could do anything as long as we were together.”

“I’ll not ask a single question, Aries, and will try not to say a word. Take this at your own pace. But can you pretend that I’m holding your hand? You know I would be, if it wouldn’t break the rules.”

Her sweet reassurance, her desire to be my lifeline as I tell her my story, makes me care for her more than I already do.

“Yes, Callie.” I nod. “I’m holding your sweet hand.”

A beat of silence stretches between us. Whether it’s for a few standard minutes or longer, I don’t know. The need to do this in my own way, in my own time, outweighs even my affection for the female by my side.

“Slavers,” I finally spit out, the word tasting bitter on my tongue.

“I was fifteen, Kren barely twelve. They raided during the night market. Father tried to fight them off, but...” I clench my hands, remembering his crumpled form, the blood pooling beneath him.

“They wanted young males for the ludus . Said we’d fetch a good price. ”

Spark pulses gently, encouraging me to continue. Callie’s eyes hold no judgment, only quiet support.

“The ludus ...” I swallow hard. “It should have broken us. But somehow, Kren kept

his inner light. Even in that dark place, he found ways to make others smile. To keep hope alive.”

As I marvel at how he managed to do that, another memory surfaces, this one from our early days of training...

“Again!” The trainer’s whip cracked. “Until you get it right!”

My arms trembled as I held the weighted practice sword. We’d been at this for hours, repeating the same sequence until our muscles screamed. Kren wasn’t faring any better beside me, his smaller frame shaking with exhaustion.

“Remember what Mother used to say?” he whispered as we moved through the forms again. “About the wind and the mountain?”

I grunted, focusing on keeping my stance correct. “Remind me.”

“The wind howls and rages,” he recited, matching my movements perfectly, “but the mountain remains. That’s us, Ari. We’re the mountain.”

“Pretty sure Mother meant that as a meditation guide, not gladiator training.”

His quiet laugh drew a warning glare from the trainer. “Same thing, isn’t it? We endure. We remain. Together.”

“He was right,” I tell Callie, who listens with shining eyes. “We did remain. Through everything they threw at us—the brutal training, the punishment details, the practice matches that were really just excuses for abuse. We survived because we had each other.”

“You protected him,” she observes.

“I tried.” My voice cracks. “Gods, I tried so hard. Took his punishment details when I could. Traded favors for extra food rations when he was too thin. But I couldn’t protect him from everything.”

Her hand has been lying face up on her thigh nearest me. She gently clenches it, over and over, as though she’s clutching my hand, giving me support .

She doesn’t know what’s coming, but by the tragic look on her face, she knows it’s going to be bad. I doubt she could guess at just how horrible my tale will be.

“They sold us to different owners when I turned eighteen.” The words feel like shards of glass in my throat. “I fought my way back to him, literally. Won enough matches that my new master agreed to buy his contract too. I thought... I thought we’d finally be safe together again.”

Spark’s light dims to a deep blue, reflecting the grief in my voice. Storm clouds gather on the horizon, as if nature itself senses the darkness of what comes next.

“We weren’t.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

A ries

“Our new master fed us well, but not out of compassion. He saw only credits. It’s how his mind worked.

If any of his fighters might be worth more dead than alive, they were expendable.

” The words taste like ash. “Fights on certain planets were lucrative. Those fights had no rules, no mercy. Just slaughter for the crowd’s entertainment.

I’d proven myself brutal enough to survive, but Kren... ”

My hands clench as the memories assault me—his gentle soul trying to harden itself for the arena, his practice sessions growing desperate as the death matches loomed closer.

“He wasn’t a killer,” I tell Callie, my voice rough. “No matter how hard they tried to make him one. The night before his first scheduled death match, I found him practicing in the ludus ...”

I see it as though it were yesterday, just like I’ve watched it ten thousand times or more in the annums since it happened.

“You should be resting,” I said, watching him repeat the same defensive sequence for the hundredth time .

“Can’t.” His movements were precise but held an edge of panic. “If I can just get this right...”

“Kren.”

“The Garroxian fighter tomorrow, he favors a low strike followed by—”

“Kren!” Moving to block his next sequence, I gripped his shoulders. “Stop.”

His eyes, so like mine but holding none of my darkness, finally met mine. “I don’t want to die, Ari.”

“You won’t.” The promise burned fiercely in my chest. “I won’t let that happen.”

I pause, my gaze arrows to Callie’s hand, squeezing the air as though my hand were in it. It blurs as my eyes lose focus.

“But I did,” I grit out, the guilt threatening to choke me. “I let exactly that happen.”

I swallow, feeling compelled to tell the truth.

“No. That’s a lie. I didn’t just let that happen...”

Callie flips her hand palm down to clench her thigh as though she has to clutch onto something to be able to stay and listen to the end of my tale. Spark’s protective dome pulses with waves of comfort, but nothing can ease the weight of what comes next.

“The match...” My voice breaks. “They put him against Selaxx the Flayer. A sadist who specialized in slow kills. I was scheduled right after, could only watch from the holding pen.”

It had been raining that day—a cold, driving rain that turned the arena sand into bloody silt.

I can still hear it drumming against the stone facade, mixing with the crowd's roar and Kren's screams. Every storm since then brings it all back—the metallic scent of blood, the sound of falling rain while my brother died below .

The roar of that long-ago crowd fills my ears. Then Kren's first scream as Selaxx's blade opened his flesh...

“It wasn't a fight. It was torture. Selaxx played with him, carved him up piece by piece while the crowd cheered. I tried to break through the gates, but the guards...” My nails draw blood in my palms as I remember. “They held me back. Made me watch as my brother was flayed alive.”

Spark's light dims to deep gray, matching my anguish. Beside me, Callie makes a small sound of distress but keeps her promise to stay silent.

“Kren fought as long as he could. But when Selaxx severed the tendons in his legs, left him crawling in his own blood...” The memory threatens to overwhelm me. He looked right at me through the bars. His eyes... I'll never forget his eyes.

They held no accusation, no anger. Just a plea. Only trust that his big brother would save him the only way I could.

“Please, brother,” he pled, and his voice was the same one that used to beg me for just one more story at bedtime. Blood bubbled from his lips as he reached toward my position. “Please... end it clean.”

Selaxx laughed, raising his blade for another cut. The crowd's bloodlust reached fever pitch.

“End it,” Kren begged. “Don’t let him... please, Ari...”

I broke free then. Disabled three guards getting to the arena floor. The crowd was screaming, not in bloodlust anymore, but shock. A gladiator interfering with another’s match meant death for both of us.

My hands shake as I force myself to continue. “Selaxx turned to face me, but I didn’t... I never even looked at him. All I could see was Kren. My brother. What was left of him.”

The words catch in my throat, but Callie deserves the whole truth. “Kren smiled when he saw me coming. Actually smiled, through all that pain. Like he knew... knew I’d find a way to help him, just like always.”

Spark wraps us both in waves of deep purple light as my tears finally fall.

“His hand tried to reach toward me, fingers slick with his own blood, and for one terrible moment he looked exactly like the little boy who used to crawl into my bed during thunderstorms.”

I force myself to continue. “I made it quick. One strike, right to the heart. Clean, like he asked. The last thing he mouthed was ‘thank you,’ and then...” My voice breaks completely. “Then he smiled. Even dying, even after all that pain, Kren smiled at me like I’d saved him.”

Though I’ve watched this memory a thousand times, it hurts now more than ever before. Perhaps it’s that I have Callie by my side, that she’s holding my hand—that she’s with me every step of this torturous journey. Her cheeks, streaked with tears, tell me she’s feeling my pain.

“They executed Selaxx for failing to stop me from interfering,” I continue finally.

“Would have executed me too, but apparently the crowd’s bloodlust had turned to something else.

They actually cheered when I killed my own brother.

Called it ‘poetic justice’—one of their favored gladiators showing such brutal efficiency.”

My mouth is so dry it takes me two attempts to swallow.

“The murder charges were filed that same day. Under Garrox Prime law, killing another gladiator—even in mercy—carried a mandatory death sentence. But as long as I remained enslaved and profitable, my owner could delay extradition indefinitely. I spent annums knowing that warrant waited for me, knowing that freedom might eventually lead to my death.”

“Our master...” A bitter laugh escapes. “Always one to turn a profit, started marketing me as ‘The Kinslayer’, the gladiator so ruthless he’d kill his own blood. Raised my value in death matches because everyone knew I’d do whatever it took to end a fight.”

Finally dredging up the courage to look at Callie, I expect to see horror, disgust. Instead, her eyes hold tears and something that looks dangerously like understanding.

“So now you know,” I say roughly. “Why I deserve whatever punishment they give me. Why I tried so hard to push you away. The things I’ve done...”

It’s been a long time since I’ve wanted to die. But for the quickest moment, that thought, which used to live in my mind every waking moment of the day, comes back to hound me.

“I’m going to talk now.” She says. “Unless you ask me to stop.”

I don’t. Knowing her mind matters. The truth has stayed buried, not out of malice, but in the hope that if she could discover who I truly am—see my heart—she might look past the monster I’ve become.

When I don’t ask her to stop, though I don’t have the courage to look her in the eye, she continues.

“Mercy. Dear God, you showed him such mercy.” A dam opens up in her. I don’t know where her tears come from, but they’re a torrent. Her pain and sadness burst from her.

“Mercy?” The word comes out sharp. “I killed him, Callie. My own brother.”

She dashes the tears from her cheeks.

“As you spoke, I tried to crawl inside your skin and imagine what it must have felt like in those moments, but I didn’t have the strength, Aries. I couldn’t pretend, not even for a second, to feel what it was like to be so merciful to your brother at such a high cost to yourself.”

She reaches to touch me, but pulls her hand back at the last moment.

“You ended his suffering when he begged you to. Saved him from a horrible death at the hands of a sadist.” Her voice holds absolute conviction. “That’s not murder, Aries. That’s love in its purest, most painful form.”

Her hand squeezes and squeezes and squeezes as she whispers, “Dear God, I wish I could touch you.”

She gets the bright idea of putting her hand out and Spark curls into it. I touch its other side, keeping the prescribed distance, but somehow feeling as though we truly are touching. She is giving me all of her support.

“You are amazing and loving, and you did the hardest thing a human could be forced to do, even knowing it meant your own death. Aries, you’re my hero.” Her mouth keeps working, but no words come out. It’s fitting. What else can this perfect female say?

I want to scoff, tell her I’m no hero, but it would be cruel to spit that at her. So I sit with it. I don’t know how long we stay like this, with little Spark connecting us, with Callie giving me all of her support and affection.

When I finally return from my trip into the past, I have a new definition for mercy.

Chapter Twenty-Five

C allie

The morning after Aries' confession, everything feels different. Watching him move through our morning ritual—his careful ablutions, the gentle braiding of my hair—I see him with new eyes. Each controlled movement holds fresh meaning now that I understand the weight he carries.

“You’ve been watching me all morning,” he says quietly as his fingers work through my hair. “Like you’re trying to solve a puzzle.”

“Maybe I am.” Through the mirror’s reflection, I catch his gaze. “I’m seeing all these little things I missed before. How your eyes soften when you think I’m not looking. How you always position yourself between me and any perceived threat.”

His fingers resume their intricate work, but slower now, as though he doesn’t want to finish the task. “Old habits.”

“No.” Turning carefully to face him, I make sure he sees how serious I am when I say, “Protection born of affection. Just like with Kren. ”

He flinches at his brother’s name, but doesn’t withdraw like he might have weeks ago. Progress—slow, careful healing happening right before my eyes.

Spark bounces enthusiastically nearby, trailing sparkles of agreement. The shimmerling creates a heart shape between us, then tries to look innocent when we

both glance its way.

“You’re not subtle, little one,” Aries murmurs, but there’s a ghost of a smile playing at his lips—an expression I’m seeing more often since he shared the truth about his brother.

“I meant what I said yesterday,” I tell him as he finishes the intricate braid. “You’re my hero, Aries. Not despite what happened, but because of how you’ve carried it. How you’ve kept your gentleness and honor even through it all.”

His hands pause in my hair, and I catch the moisture gathering in his eyes through the window’s reflection. “I don’t deserve—”

“You do,” I cut in firmly. “You deserve every good thing, including forgiveness. Especially from yourself.”

Working in silence for several moments, he processes this. Finally, so quietly I almost miss it: “Thank you. For hearing the whole story. For not turning away.”

“I’ll never turn away,” I promise, watching his reflection. “Not now. Not ever.”

The rest of our morning routine takes on new meaning—each careful movement, each maintained distance feeling like a choice rather than a restriction. When he hands me my drassah , our fingers don’t quite brush, but the air between us holds more intimacy than any touch.

Before I can settle into my usual breakfast routine, a chime announces the Committee’s arrival. Their crystalline form materializes in our cottage, filling the space with kaleidoscopic color .

“Your progress in emotional honesty merits a new trial,” they announce. “Today, you

will engage in artistic expression through multiple mediums—painting each other while sharing songs that hold personal meaning.”

Aries looks up from where he’s arranging our breakfast, one eyebrow arched. “Both at once?”

“The combined activities will reveal deeper truths about your connection,” they explain. “You must perceive each other through a creator’s eyes while expressing yourselves through varied outlets.”

My heart sinks. “I’m equally terrible at both painting and singing.”

His lips quirk upward—that expression I’m treasuring more with each appearance. “This should be interesting.”

“All necessary supplies await in the garden,” the Committee continues. “Complete the exercise by sunset.” With that, they ghost from view, leaving us with our latest challenge.

An hour later, we’ve set up easels in the garden, paints and brushes arranged alongside a simple wooden flute provided for musical accompaniment. Spark hovers nearby, trailing rainbow sparkles that seem to suggest artistic inspiration.

“So, how exactly does this work?” I ask, studying the blank canvas with the same enthusiasm I’d show a torture device. “Paint while singing? Take turns?”

“Why don’t you start with a song that means something to you?”

” Aries settles at his easel with practiced ease—movements too fluid, too confident for someone who’s never mentioned artistic training.

Heat creeps up my neck as I watch those large hands adjust his brush with surgical precision.

“We’ll both paint while you sing, then I’ll take over the vocals while we keep working.”

The familiar flutter of performance anxiety hits my stomach. “You know how singing makes me nervous.”

“I know how beautifully you express yourself,” he corrects gently, mixing colors with sure, confident strokes. “Even when you think you’re terrible at it.”

Taking a shaky breath, I begin the only song I know all the words to—that old Earth children’s tune about wishing on a star.

My voice wavers and cracks, missing notes spectacularly, but Aries doesn’t flinch.

Instead, he begins painting with surprising skill, his eyes moving between canvas and my face as I struggle through the melody.

“That was... enthusiastic,” he says when I finish, and I can’t help laughing.

“Diplomatically put. Your turn.”

Ancient words spill from his lips—a gladiator training song that turns our garden into something primal and dangerous.

Rich baritone vibrations seem to reach inside my chest, making my brush hand tremble as I try to focus on my canvas instead of the way his throat moves with each note.

The melody carries scars—hints of brotherhood forged in blood, honor carved from desperation.

Both our brushes move in rhythm now, his voice providing a cadence that syncs our creative energy until painting becomes almost like dancing.

Something about singing frees him—drops his careful control until raw emotion bleeds through every word.

“You never mentioned you could paint,” I observe, watching him create what’s clearly going to be a recognizable portrait, while my own attempt looks like abstract chaos.

“My mother taught me,” he says quietly, not pausing in his work. “Before the slavers came. She said I had a natural eye for color.”

Another piece of his past, offered freely. I wonder if these revelations will come more frequently now that he’s talked about Kren. I’d love to hear more of these tiny treasures shared without the reluctance that once characterized any personal disclosure .

My own attempt at painting him goes about as expected. What should be his strong jaw looks more like a lopsided rectangle, and his distinctive horns resemble bent twigs rather than elegant bronze curves.

“This is hopeless,” I mutter, dabbing more yellow onto what’s supposed to be his eyes. “You’re going to look like a deranged goat with anger issues.”

“I’ve been called worse,” he says solemnly, though his eyes sparkle with mischief.

“Well,” I add, loading my brush with purple paint, “at least you’ll be a colorful

deranged goat.”

Without warning, I flick the brush toward him. Paint arcs through the air, landing in a spectacular splatter across his forearm.

Instead of annoyance, his expression holds pure delight—something I’ve rarely seen from him. With deliberate precision, he dips his brush in green paint and retaliates. Cool droplets land on my cheek.

“Now we’re even,” he says, golden eyes gleaming with challenge.

“Are we?” Loading my brush with yellow, I aim for maximum splatter effect.

Soon we’re both decorated with rainbow colors, our canvases forgotten as we wage an increasingly elaborate paint war. Spark joins enthusiastically, trailing through wet paint then zooming in patterns that leave light-infused color streaks between us.

“The Committee did say we should explore artistic expression,” I remind him solemnly, though laughter threatens to bubble up.

“I believe I’m getting the hang of that.” With surgical precision, he sends a tiny red dot right to the tip of my nose .

“How did you manage that?” I yowl.

But as our battle continues, something shifts. Our laughter mingles with the afternoon breeze, paint decorating us like festival markings. The combination of music and art, of playful combat and growing intimacy, creates something I hadn’t expected.

Pure joy.

When was the last time either of us simply played? Before the trials, before our years of careful avoidance, before everything that came after that cell. This moment feels precious somehow—a glimpse of who we might have been under different circumstances, who we could still become.

“We should probably attempt the actual assignment,” Aries suggests eventually, though he makes no move to clean up.

“Probably.” But I’m reluctant to end this moment of lightness.

“Here,” he says, loading his brush with vibrant blue. “The Committee member specified painting each other, not necessarily on canvas.”

My pulse quickens as I follow his reasoning. With deliberate slowness, he extends the brush toward me. “May I?”

Nodding, I hold perfectly still as he glides the brush along my cheekbone, painting a curved line that follows its contour. Though only the bristles touch my skin, the sensation feels startlingly intimate.

“My turn.” Taking up a brush with golden paint, I reach across the prescribed gap to trace designs across his forehead and down the bridge of his nose.

We continue this way, trading delicate brush strokes across each other’s features while humming snatches of our respective songs. My hands tremble slightly as I outline the curve of his lips with copper paint. His pupils dilate as he traces my eyebrows with emerald green .

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs, adding dots of silver along my jawline. “Especially covered in paint.”

“And surrounded by music,” I add, attempting to hum his gladiator song while painting swirling patterns at his hairline near the base of his horns. His sharp intake of breath confirms their sensitivity.

“Dangerous territory, Callie.”

“Regulation distance maintained,” I remind him, my voice husky.

When we finally step back to survey our work, we both burst into laughter. We look magnificently ridiculous—faces decorated with spirals and dots, clothes splattered with every color available, hair streaked with accidental paint splatters.

“The Committee is going to have opinions about this interpretation,” I manage between giggles.

“Creative compliance,” Aries says solemnly, though his paint-decorated face makes the serious tone impossible to maintain.

The Committee member takes form before we can continue, their faceted eyes shifting colors as they observe our paint-splattered forms.

“The artistic expression exercise is complete,” they intone. “Though executed with... unexpected interpretation of ‘multiple mediums.’”

Spark creates what looks suspiciously like a guilty shrug, then zips behind a flowering bush.

“The Manual didn’t specify how the paint should be applied,” Aries points out, his face perfectly serious despite being covered in golden spirals. “Or that the musical elements couldn’t be incorporated throughout.”

“Quite correct,” they acknowledge, and I could swear there’s amusement in their multilayered voice. “Creative compliance has been noted. The combined exercise has revealed significant emotional resonance and comfort with vulnerability.”

After they fade away, we collapse onto the grass, careful to maintain proper distance despite our mutual desire to close it.

“We should clean up,” I suggest, though I make no move to rise.

“In a moment.” Aries reclines on his elbows, face tilted toward the sky. Paint decorates his bronze skin like ancient warrior markings. “This was... unexpected.”

“The painting or the singing?”

“The joy,” he says simply, meeting my eyes. “I’d forgotten what it felt like to just... play.”

“Me too.” Watching Spark create lazy loops above us, I realize we’ve found something precious today. Not just in the artistic expression or musical sharing, but in the laughter. The lightness. The permission to be imperfect and silly together.

Something has shifted between us since his confession yesterday. Not just understanding or forgiveness, but something lighter. The weight of his secret, once shared, has made room for moments like this—spontaneous, joyful, free.

“Sixty-four more days,” I murmur, our familiar countdown feeling different now. Less like a burden and more like... anticipation.

“Sixty-four days,” he echoes, his eyes holding mine with a new openness. “And then... forever.”

The promise in those words wraps around me like a physical embrace. Whatever trials remain, we've turned another corner today. Found another piece of what we're building together—the ability to find joy in our imperfections, beauty in our chaos, and harmony even when we're completely out of tune.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Callie

Rainbow water spirals down the drain as I scrub paint from my skin. Blue and green swirl together like bruises healing in reverse. Something's shifted between us during today's creative chaos—something that makes my chest feel too small for my lungs.

Voices drift through the cottage—Aries is talking to someone. The Committee? Though they just left, I recognize their distinctive multilayered tones. Drying my face quickly, I step into the main room.

Aries stands with unusual stillness, his expression carefully neutral despite the traces of copper paint still adorning his forehead. Something in his posture sends warning signals racing along my spine—the coiled tension I recognize from his fighting days, when he sensed danger approaching.

The entire Redemption Committee is present—three figures in flowing robes of blue, red, and yellow, their combined presence making clear this is no routine check-in.

“Callista,” the Committee members acknowledge in unison, their robed figures reflecting the evening light. “We were just explaining to Aries that your progress has exceeded expectations.”

“That sounds... positive?” I move closer to Aries, instinctively seeking the comfort of his presence while maintaining the prescribed distance.

“Indeed.” Their faceted eyes shift colors. “In recognition of your exceptional progress, the Committee has decided to offer Aries immediate redemption and guaranteed life.”

Joy crashes through me, so sudden and overwhelming that my knees nearly give out.

They barely pause before they continue: “But he must remain on Sanctorii permanently as a temple guardian.”

The unspoken implication hangs heavy in the air. “And me?”

“You would be free to return to your ship. To your previous life.”

The words hit like physical blows.

Never see each other again.

“The remaining trials become increasingly dangerous,” the red member explains, their voice holding something almost like compassion. “Couples who reach the final phase face mortality rates of sixty percent.”

My mind races. Sixty-four more days of perfect compliance through increasingly deadly trials. One mistake, one moment of weakness, and Aries dies.

Against guaranteed life, though separated forever.

“We understand this is a big decision,” the blue-robed member says. “You may have until tomorrow’s sunrise to provide your answer.”

“Consider carefully,” the yellow-robed member cautions as they begin to fade. “The trials ahead test more than connection—they test survival itself.”

After they vanish, silence stretches between us, heavy with everything we stand to lose .

“They’re offering you life,” I say finally, though the words scrape my throat.

“At what cost?” His voice holds raw pain, the depths of which I’ve never heard before. “Never seeing you again? After what’s grown between us?”

A knot coils behind my ribs as I watch conflict war across his features. “Better alive and separated than dead because we were selfish.”

“Is that what you want me to choose?”

“What I want,” I say, “is for you to live . That’s why I volunteered for these trials in the first place.”

“But?”

“But I never expected to find this.” My voice catches. “Us. Whatever we’re becoming together.”

His gaze holds mine, something desperate flickering in their depths. For a moment, it seems he might say more, but instead he turns toward the window.

“Guaranteed life apart or the risk of death if we want to stay together,” he murmurs. “And we have until sunrise to decide.”

Some risks might be worth taking. Some connections might be worth fighting for.

Or maybe love means knowing when to let go.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Callie

Dawn approaches too quickly. Neither of us has slept—how could we, with this impossible choice looming? I’ve watched Aries pace our small space for hours, his internal struggle playing out in the rigid set of his shoulders, the way his hands clench and release.

“I made you these,” he says finally, breaking hours of heavy silence as he reaches his outstretched palm to me. “I was going to save them for after we succeeded, but...”

He can’t finish the sentence. After . A future that might now be impossible.

My fingers hover over delicate earrings carved into the shape of flames. “When did you find time?”

“During your naps. Dax taught me woodworking, before...” He shrugs, but I understand. Another fragment of the life he’ll have to abandon if he accepts the Committee’s offer.

“I need you to understand something,” he continues, keeping his voice steady despite the storm I can see raging behind his eyes. “I’ve survived many things, Callie. Forced servitude, losing Kren, fifteen annums as a gladiator, and then five annums keeping everyone at a distance. ”

Spark moves closer, bathing us in soothing blue light, as if trying to ease the weight

of his words.

“But a life without you, knowing you exist but never being able to see you again?” The thought clearly tears at him. “That’s not survival. That’s just another kind of death.”

“But a real death—” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“Would be preferable to an eternity knowing I gave up what we’ve found.” His hands clench with the effort not to reach for me. “I’ve spent my life making sacrifices I thought were acts of love. Killing Kren to end his suffering. Pushing you away, thinking it would protect you.”

He meets my eyes with devastating honesty. “But true love isn’t about giving up happiness—it’s about fighting for it. I would rather risk death with a chance of a life with you than accept a half-life without you.”

Tears blur my vision. “I can’t bear the thought of you dying because I was selfish enough to want you for myself.”

“Selfish?” The word draws a bitter laugh from him. “Callie, you’ve been willing to sacrifice everything for me from the beginning. Your freedom. Your reputation. Even now, you’d give up your own happiness to guarantee my life.”

“That’s what love is.” The word slipped out before I could stop it.

His breath catches. “Love?”

Heat floods my cheeks, but there’s no taking it back now. “Yes. I love you, Aries. I’ve been fighting it, trying to convince myself it was just the circumstances, just the proximity. But it’s not. It’s you. It’s us.”

Spark erupts between us, showering golden light that drips down on us like firework sparks. Our little companion has been with us through every step of these trials, growing alongside our connection .

“I love you too,” he says, his voice rough with emotion. “And that’s why I can’t take their offer. Do you understand? I would rather risk death with a chance of forever with you than accept guaranteed survival without you.”

The chime announcing the Committee’s arrival interrupts us. All three materialize, their crystalline forms catching the morning light.

“You have reached a decision?” Their multilayered voices fill our small space.

“We have,” Aries answers before I can speak. This has to be his choice, his risk to take. “I respectfully decline your offer.”

Relief and terror war in my chest as I realize what this means.

“We will complete the trials as originally agreed,” I add, my voice steady despite my racing heart.

The Committee members’ faceted eyes shift, colors swirling in their depths. “You understand the risks? The final trials will test not just your connection, but your very will to survive.”

“We understand,” I say firmly. “We choose to face them together.”

Aries reaches across the table toward my hand, hovering just above my skin—a promise of what awaits when we succeed.

“Then let the remaining trials begin,” the Committee intones before fading away.

We sit in the aftermath of our choice, hands almost touching across that familiar gap.
A finite number of days left to either prove our love unbreakable or die trying.

“No regrets?” I ask.

His smile holds fierce determination. “Only that we waited so long to find each other.”

Outside, Sanctorii’s sun climbs higher, marking another day in our countdown.
Whatever comes next—whatever trials, whatever dangers—we’ll face them as we’ve learned to face everything.

Together. Without barriers. Without fear.

Some choices aren’t choices at all. Some connections are worth any risk.

And some love stories are worth dying for—or better yet, worth living for.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A ries

Three days later, we stand before the Committee in the central temple, awaiting instructions for what they call “The Sanctorian Trial of Elements.” Their crystalline forms refract the harsh arena lights as they explain the challenge before us.

“Participants must navigate all four elemental chambers while maintaining physical connection through the Unity Bonds.”

I study the four doorways that have risen from the ground. Each portal pulses with different energy—one flickering with flame, another rippling like water, the third swirling with wind, and the fourth solid as stone.

The Unity Bonds are different from the cord that linked us during the harvest festival. These are ceremonial bracelets, connected by an energy field that vibrates as we reach maximum regulation distance.

“And if the bonds break?” Callie asks, her voice carrying through the arena despite the murmuring crowd.

“One more mark against your progress. ”

“With one mark already against us—from when you caught me at the market, we have little margin for error.”

Spark hovers anxiously nearby, its color a wary yellow as it watches the crowd. Since our choice to continue the trials, the opposition has grown more organized, more dangerous.

“Which chamber first?” Callie asks, her gaze meeting mine with absolute trust.

“Fire,” I decide. “Better to face the most dangerous one while we’re at full strength.”

Her answering smile holds confidence I don’t entirely feel. “Let’s show them what we’ve got.”

The crowd’s murmur grows louder as we approach the flame portal. I can make out snatches of conversation—bets being placed on our failure, chanted hopes for justice, a few surprising voices calling for our success.

Mira Thessian’s voice rises above the crowd.

“You want to see justice? Watch them fail. Watch him pay for what he’s done.

Someone should pay!” Her grief has hardened into something sharp and unforgiving, turning a personal loss into a public crusade.

She can’t change the gladiatorial system, but she can focus her energy on me, on us.

I catch Callie’s attention, but there’s nothing we can say or do to make this better.

“Ready?” Callie’s fingers adjust the Unity Bond on her wrist, her expression determined.

“Together.” The word has become our talisman against fear.

Stepping through the portal, heat immediately assaults us, far more intense than I expected. The chamber blazes with fire pits and flaming barriers—a maze designed to test our coordination and ability to work together.

“Maintenance team confirms tampering with the fire control systems,” I hear a security officer report through their comm near the portal. “Heat levels are triple standard safety protocols.”

Sabotage. Of course. The opposition has moved beyond protest to active interference.

“Callie,” I call over the roar of flames, “it’s hotter than it should be. We need to move quickly.”

She nods, sweat beading on her forehead as we navigate the narrow path. Each step requires perfect coordination, the Unity Bonds vibrating when we come too close to maximum separation.

A sudden geyser of flame erupts between us, forcing us to opposite sides of the path. The Bonds stretch, glowing bright with warning as we reach maximum regulation distance.

“Jump on three!” Callie calls out, already gauging the distance. “One, two—”

We leap simultaneously across the flames, landing safely on the same side of the path. The coordination we’ve developed during weeks of trials serves us well, our movements perfectly synchronized without conscious thought.

“Almost there,” I encourage as the exit portal comes into view through the smoke.

“Sector three!” I hear through security comms. “Male in blue robes seems to be holding a control device. Looks like he’s targeting the path structure.”

The saboteur's device sends a pulse through the chamber's structure. Cracks spiderweb across the narrow stone bridge we're crossing, and a whole section starts to give way beneath Callie's feet.

"Callie!" Fear claws at my throat as she stumbles toward the edge of the collapsing walkway, empty space yawning below where moments before there had been solid stone .

The Unity Bonds stretch to their limit as I brace against a stable section, providing a counterbalance that keeps her from falling. For a moment, we hang suspended at regulation maximum distance, the energy field between our bracelets vibrating like a plucked string.

"You can do it," I urge as she maintains her balance and eases toward me.

Her smile is tight but genuine as we navigate around the damaged section, finally reaching the exit portal. The cool air of the central arena hits like a blessing after the inferno behind us.

The water chamber proves less physically demanding but more psychologically challenging.

The path disappears beneath a dark pool, requiring us to swim through underwater obstacles while maintaining our connection.

The Unity Bonds' energy field wavers underwater, making it harder to judge our distance.

We manage that trial unscathed but out of breath.

The air chamber nearly breaks us, with swirling vortexes that threaten to tear us apart.

At one point, I'm lifted completely off my feet, the Unity Bonds stretching to maximum as Callie anchors herself to a metal grate.

Only our perfect trust in each other's movements keeps the connection from breaking.

The firmament chamber is pitch black except for faint luminescent crystals showing a treacherous path across a bottomless chasm.

The narrow bridge vibrates ominously, sections crumbling at random intervals.

Security comms in the background of my thoughts confirm what I suspected—more sabotage, unauthorized access to the control systems.

We're halfway across when an even more violent tremor hits, sending cracks spiderwebbing through the entire structure. The path ahead begins to collapse, leaving no way forward .

“Back!” I shout, pulling toward the entrance—but that section is crumbling too. We're trapped on a rapidly disintegrating island of stone.

Callie's eyes meet mine, determination replacing fear. “Jump for the exit. Together.”

It's an impossible distance. The Unity Bonds will certainly stretch beyond maximum. But she's right—it's our only chance.

“On three,” I agree, gauging the angle. “One... two... three!”

We leap simultaneously, the Unity Bonds stretching, vibrating, warning—but not breaking. As we land hard on the exit platform, the entire structure collapses into the chasm below.

The crowd erupts in surprised applause as we emerge from the final chamber. Even those who came hoping for our failure seem impressed by our survival against clearly tampered challenges.

The full Committee materializes—all three crystalline forms reflecting the arena lights, their unified presence confirming the gravity of both our success and the decision they must render.

“The Trial of Elements is complete,” they announce in unison.

“Despite unprecedented interference, you have maintained your connection through all four chambers. The disruption field operators have been identified as members of an extremist cell,” they continue.

“Their arrest has sparked debate among your opposition—many now question whether their cause justifies such dangerous methods.”

They continue, their tone shifting, “However, the safety protocols were breached during the final chamber collapse. When the bridge structure disintegrated, your leap exceeded the required amount of separation momentarily before landing.”

“But we maintained connection through the Unity Bonds,” I protest, my voice tight with controlled anger. “And the system was sabotaged—we would have died if we hadn’t jumped.”

“The Committee acknowledges the extraordinary circumstances and external interference,” they respond.

“However, even though we were lenient when physical contact was made a second time due to extenuating circumstances, rules must be applied consistently. A mark shall be registered against your progress—your second.”

One more mistake and I die. I could swear my heart quits beating for long moments. How odd that this thought makes me ache, not for my own loss of life, but for how it will devastate Callie, who is bonded to me as tightly as any true mate.

“The culprits have been detained,” they continue, perhaps sensing our despair. “Due to the external interference and your exceptional performance despite it, the Committee has modified your remaining trial period. Your redemption shall now be completed in sixty days total rather than ninety.”

Back in our cottage, the adrenaline finally fades, leaving us both trembling with exhaustion. The Unity Bonds have been removed, but we can still feel the phantom connection between us, the way we moved as one entity through impossible challenges.

“They tried to kill us,” Callie says, her voice steady despite her shaking hands. “Not just make us fail—actually kill us.”

“And they’ll try again,” I say, the certainty sitting heavy in my gut. “The opposition is growing more desperate as we get closer to completion.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Callie

“The Public Forum begins in one standard hour,” the Committee member announces, their crystalline form painting our corner with streaks of iridescence. “This represents your opportunity to address the concerns of the community directly.”

“And the format?” Aries asks.

“Under increased security, you will each present your perspective on the Redemption Rites,” they explain.

“The community will then pose questions. As with all trials, physical contact remains prohibited, with one exception—you may hold hands during the most challenging portions if deemed necessary by the Committee.”

“What will you say?” I ask, watching him pace our small cottage. “About... everything?”

He stands stock still, his golden gaze meeting mine with unexpected intensity. “The truth. All of it.”

“Aries—”

“No more hiding, Callie.” His voice is gentle but firm. “If they’re going to hate me, let it be for what actually happened, not rumors and assumptions.”

Hours later, we stand before the packed amphitheater.

Mira Thessian sits in the front row, her son's image clutched in her hands.

Behind her, other families hold similar portraits—a devastating gallery of the gladiatorial system's victims. But I also notice, scattered throughout the crowd, faces that show uncertainty rather than hatred. Not everyone here wants blood.

“The Redemption Committee welcomes you to the Public Forum,” the announcement echoes through the amphitheater as we step onto the central platform.

The amphitheater falls silent as Aries steps forward. Standing tall despite the scrutiny, his bronze skin catching the afternoon light, he looks every inch the warrior—but there's a vulnerability in his eyes that only those who truly know him would recognize.

“My name is Aries Dravek Zavalon,” he begins, his deep voice carrying effortlessly. “And I am a killer.”

The blunt admission sends murmurs rippling through the crowd.

“I stand before you not to deny my crime, but to share the full truth of it.” His hands remain steady as he tells the full story—his childhood with Kren, their capture by slavers, the gladiator training that tried to break their spirits.

When he reaches the arena fight—Kren being tortured by Selaxx the Flayer as Aries watched helplessly—his voice remains steady, but Spark's color deepens to a sorrowful, bruised purple, reflecting the pain the memory still causes.

“My brother looked at me through the bars and begged me to end it,” Aries continues. “To give him a clean death rather than allow his torture to continue for the crowd's

entertainment. ”

The amphitheater is utterly silent now, every face intent on his words.

“I disabled three guards breaking into that arena,” he says simply.

“And then I granted my brother the mercy he begged for. One clean strike to the heart. That is my crime. Not random violence. Not bloodlust. An act of mercy that has haunted me every day since I performed it. I won’t beg for forgiveness.

I have no right to ask for your understanding.

What I offer—nothing more, nothing less—is the truth. ”

My turn. Taking a deep breath, I step forward, feeling the weight of hundreds of stares.

“My name is Callista Marston,” I begin. “I was born on Earth, worked a normal job, had a normal life. Until I was abducted by slavers along with other women from my planet.”

The familiar story spills out—our captivity, the forced mating program, the slave rebellion that won our freedom. But this time, I add the parts I’ve never publicly shared.

“Aries and I were paired in that cell,” I explain. “Forced together by threat of death. But even in that horror, he showed me kindness. Gentleness. Tried to shield me from the worst of our shared trauma.”

Meeting Aries’ gaze across the platform, I find the courage to continue. “When we gained our freedom, we both retreated from the pain. For five standard years we

carefully avoided each other, both carrying wounds we couldn't bear to acknowledge."

My voice grows stronger as I continue. "I've watched Aries over these weeks of trials. Seen how he protects those weaker than himself. How he carries guilt for actions taken under impossible circumstances. How he would sacrifice his own happiness to spare others pain."

The flame earrings seem to warm against my skin as I speak. "If redemption isn't possible for someone like him—someone who made an impossible choice out of mercy and has spent years punishing himself for it—then what hope is there for any of us?"

Silence follows my words. Then a woman stands in the front row.

"I lost my son to arena violence," she says. "I came here hoping to see justice served. But justice and vengeance aren't the same thing, are they?"

"No," Aries answers gently. "Though I've often confused them myself."

What follows are thoughtful questions—about Kren, about our connection, about what redemption truly means. Aries answers with unflinching honesty, and I find myself reaching for his hand during the most difficult moments.

"Final question," the Committee announces as the sun dips below the horizon.

A young woman rises, her expression thoughtful. "You've spoken much about the past. What of the future? Should you complete these trials successfully, what then?"

Aries' hand tightens briefly around mine before releasing it. The question hovers between us—one we've carefully avoided discussing directly.

“If we succeed,” he begins slowly, “I hope to return to one of our two ships. To our crew—the family we’ve created. To continue the work of helping others who, like us, were once slaves.”

His gaze meets mine, holding something so tender it makes my breath catch. “And I hope to build a life with Callie. Not because the Rites demand it, but because these trials have shown us both what we truly want. Each other.”

“The same,” I confirm, smiling despite the tears pricking my eyes. “Every word.”

As the Forum concludes, the Committee signals the end of questions.

The crowd disperses slowly, their reactions mixed but noticeably different from when we began.

Not universal acceptance—some protesters remain steadfast, their signs still demanding justice.

But many others leave with thoughtful expressions, hostility replaced by something closer to consideration.

“My brother died in the arenas,” one man tells Aries as we prepare to leave, his voice low. “I came here hating you. I still don’t know what to feel, but... I understand better now.”

“Understanding is enough,” Aries responds quietly. “I never expected forgiveness.”

Back in our cottage, exhaustion hits like a physical blow. Emotional vulnerability proves more draining than any physical trial we’ve faced.

“Do you think it made a difference?” I ask, watching Aries stare into the garden

through our window.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “But I feel... lighter. Speaking the truth after carrying it alone for so long.”

“Less than a month left,” I murmur, our familiar count a comfort after the emotional intensity of the day.

“Yes,” he echoes, his eyes holding mine with new openness. “And then forever.”

The promise in those words wraps around me like a physical embrace. Whatever trials remain, we’ve faced perhaps the most difficult one today—standing before our opposition not as perfect heroes seeking redemption, but as flawed beings who’ve made impossible choices and seek healing together.

Chapter Thirty

Callie

“This is your final trial,” the yellow-robed Committee member announces as we stand before the massive doors. “Enter with open hearts and truthful spirits.”

“The Reconciliation Chamber contains the Waters of Truth,” the red-robed member explains as we stand at the entrance to the sacred space. “As you enter, memories will surface—your shared past, wounds still unhealed, truths still unspoken. You must face these together.”

“And if we can’t?” Aries asks, his voice steady despite the tension in his posture.

“Then the redemption fails.” The Committee members’ voices hold no malice, only simple fact. “But given your progress, we believe you are capable of success.”

The Temple of Reconciliation rises before us, its opalescent walls shifting colors in the morning light.

Unlike the public arenas of previous trials, this sacred space permits only the participants and Committee members.

But before we step in, I can feel the hatred radiating from the crowd outside—their chants growing louder, more organized.

Security warns us that protests have turned into threats.

Someone threw acid at our transport. Despite the public forum weeks ago, they want blood, not justice .

The doors swing inward, revealing a circular chamber dominated by a pool of water so still it might be glass. Strange light pulses beneath its surface, casting rippling patterns across the chamber walls.

“The Waters of Truth,” the lead Committee member intones. “Step into the pool and begin your reconciliation. Touch is allowed.”

We approach the water’s edge cautiously. The liquid doesn’t look quite natural—more like liquid moonlight than water, with depths that seem to shift and change as we watch.

“Honesty won’t be hard for us now,” Aries murmurs with conviction as he extends his hand toward mine.

For the first time in months, I take his hand without hesitation. His skin is warm against mine, the simple contact sending electricity up my arm after so long without touch.

Our first step into the water brings an immediate rush of sensation—not wetness, but something like pure emotion made tangible. The Water glows where we touch it, spiraling outward in patterns that reflect our intertwined journey.

“The Waters reveal truth that cannot be spoken,” the blue-robed Committee member explains. “Not memories—you’ve already shared those—but the deeper currents that run beneath.”

As we wade deeper, the water around us transforms, shifting colors with each step.

Where our joined hands break the surface, golden light spreads in rippling waves.

The sensation is unlike anything from our Memory Reconciliation Sessions—this isn't about seeing past events, but feeling the emotional truth behind them.

"It's showing us..." My voice is awed, watching ribbons of light twine around our arms.

"What we've become," Aries finishes, his voice filled with wonder. "I've been fighting this for weeks," he admits quietly, his eyes never leaving mine. "Telling myself it was gratitude, or circumstance, or anything but what it really is."

"What is it really?" I ask.

"You know what it is, Callie. You feel it too."

The waters reach our waists, and suddenly I understand what we're seeing. Not memories replayed, but the invisible threads that have formed between us through every trial, every confession, every moment of growth. The connection we've built shimmers around us, made visible in this sacred space.

"I feel you," I murmur, amazed at the depth of it. "Not just physically—it's like I can sense the shape of your thoughts."

"It's what's been growing all along," he says, his eyes reflecting the water's glow. "Behind all the rules and distance."

The waters pulse, shifting to reveal not what was, but what could be. As they reach our shoulders, the light changes, showing glimpses of possible futures—clear pathways forming where once there were only walls and barriers.

“You’ve faced your shared past,” the Committee calls. “Now, face your deepest fears about your future.”

The waters shift again, showing possible futures: Aries withdrawing once more, building new walls; myself keeping emotional distance, too afraid of being hurt again.

“That’s not what I want,” I say fiercely, turning to face him fully in the glowing pool. “I’m not afraid anymore.”

“Nor am I,” he responds, his free hand rising to hover near my cheek as though he doesn’t fully believe we’ve finally been given permission to touch. “Five annums was enough wasted time.”

The waters pulse a final time, rising to form an arch over our heads before slowly receding, leaving us standing in an empty basin, our hands still clasped .

Suddenly, a figure crashes through the chamber’s entrance—one of the protesters from outside, his face twisted with desperation and hatred. In his hand gleams a weapon, aimed directly at the Committee members.

“No redemption for killers!” he screams, lunging forward.

Without thinking, Aries releases my hand and throws himself between the attacker and the crystalline beings who have guided our journey. The weapon’s energy bolt sears past his shoulder as he tackles the man to the ground.

“Aries!” My scream echoes through the chamber as I rush to help, also breaking our connection to subdue the attacker.

Shortly after the mayhem, security arrives to restrain the man. The Committee’s

faceted eyes shift between us—no longer connected, our hands no longer joined, standing apart in the sacred space.

“Physical contact has been broken,” they intone solemnly. “Connection severed during the final trial.”

My heart stops. Blood roars in my ears as the world tilts sideways. After everything—all the trials, all the growth, all the love we’ve built—Aries’ protective instincts have doomed us both. I can’t breathe. Can’t think. The chamber spins around me as months of hope crumble to ash.

“That constitutes your third mark,” they continue, and I feel despair crash through me like a tidal wave. “No,” I whisper, the word torn from my soul. “Please, no. Take me instead. Execute me. He was protecting you—protecting everyone. Please—”

“Under the laws of the Redemption Rites...”

The pause stretches for an eternity. I reach for Aries, our eyes locking across the space that now feels like a chasm. His face holds no regret—only fierce protectiveness and devastating love. He would do it again, I realize. He would choose their safety over his own life every single time.

“I love you,” he mouths silently, and I feel my heart shatter completely.

Then—impossibly—the Committee’s crystalline forms begin to... glow brighter?

“However,” their voices shift, carrying something that might be warmth, “your willingness to sever your own connection to protect others—to risk the very redemption you’ve fought for in service of a higher cause—demonstrates the transformation these Rites seek to achieve more powerfully than any trial we could devise.”

“The final mark is not merely waived—it is transformed into the ultimate proof of your worthiness. You have shown that your love extends beyond yourselves, that your redemption serves not just your own healing, but the protection of others.”

“Aries Dravek Zavalon,” they intone formally, “having completed all required trials, having demonstrated genuine transformation through connection, you are hereby granted full redemption under Sanctorii law. Your sentence from Garrox Prime is commuted. You are free to choose your path forward.”

The words hang in the air, almost too momentous to comprehend. After everything—the death sentence, the weeks of trials, the constant danger—it’s over. He’s free. We’re free.

“And us?” I manage, my voice catching. “The bond we formed for the trials...”

“Is yours to maintain or release as you choose,” they respond. “What you build with that opportunity belongs to you alone.”

Aries’ eyes meet mine, holding a question I answer without hesitation.

“I choose to maintain it,” I tell him, speaking to him rather than the Committee. “Every day, every moment, I choose you.”

“As I choose you,” he responds, his voice grave with emotion. “Now and always.”

The Committee withdraws, leaving us standing in the empty basin, our hands still joined. The moment stretches, heavy with possibility now that all restrictions have been lifted.

“Can I...” His free hand rises again, hovering near my face. “After all this time...”

“Yes,” I breathe, the single word barely audible.

His fingertips touch my cheek with reverence, the simple contact after months of careful distance sending shivers dancing in waves throughout my body. His palm curves against my skin as if made to fit there, and I can’t stop myself from leaning into his touch.

“Callie.” My name emerges with such adoration. His thumb traces the curve of my cheekbone with wonder, as if he can’t quite believe he’s permitted to touch me freely.

“More,” I urge, my own hands rising to frame his face, tracing the line of his jaw, the curve of his horns, all the features I’ve spent months memorizing from a careful distance.

His forehead presses against mine, mirroring our morning ritual, but now without rules or barriers between us. His breath mingles with mine, his hands sliding to my shoulders, then my waist, drawing me closer with exquisite gentleness.

“I’ve dreamed of this,” he murmurs, his voice thick with restrained desire. “Every night since the storm.” He pauses, then adds, “No. For years before that.”

“Show me,” I challenge softly, my fingers tracing the curve of his horns. “Show me everything you’ve been holding back.”

His lips brush mine—barely a touch, a question more than a kiss. When I respond by pressing closer, all hesitation dissolves.

Chapter Thirty-One

Aries

The cottage door closes behind us with a soft click, and suddenly the air between us crackles with electric tension. After lunars of careful distance, of stolen glances and whispered confessions during storms, we're finally completely alone with no rules between us.

Callie stands before me, her chest rising and falling rapidly, those flame earrings catching the lamplight.

Her pupils are already dilated with want, and I can smell her arousal—sweet and intoxicating, the scent that's tortured me through countless nights separated by that inadequate barrier pillow.

"No more counting inches," she breathes, her voice husky with need.

"No more barriers," I agree, my own voice rough as gravel. "No more pretending I don't want to devour every inch of you."

She takes a step toward me, deliberate and hungry. "During the storm," she says, "when we could only use words... you promised me things, Aries. You painted pictures with your voice that kept me awake, aching for you. "

My hands clench at my sides, fighting the urge to grab her. "I remember every word," I growl. "Every fantasy I whispered to you while we lay there burning for each

other.”

“Then stop talking,” she challenges, closing the remaining distance between us, “and show me.”

Something snaps inside me at her words. Lunars of careful control, of denied desire, of watching her body move within the confines of this small space while forbidden to touch—it all explodes into desperate need.

I’m on her in an instant, my hands fisting in her hair as I claim her mouth with five annums of suppressed hunger. She moans into the kiss, her body melting against mine as her hands claw at my ceremonial robes. The sound goes straight to my cock, already hard and aching for her.

“I’ve dreamed of your mouth,” I rasp against her lips between desperate kisses. “Of how you’d taste when I could finally have you properly. Of making you scream my name until your voice goes hoarse.”

“Then do it,” she pants, already working frantically at my robe fastenings. “I’m so tired of dreaming, Aries. I need you to make me feel everything you promised.”

Her fingers brush against my chest as she pushes the fabric away, and I nearly come undone from that simple contact. “Careful, sweet Callie,” I warn, my voice dropping to a dangerous rumble. “I’ve been holding back for so long, I might not be gentle.”

“I don’t want gentle,” she fires back, her nails scraping down my chest hard enough to leave marks. “I want everything . The passion you’ve been hiding. The dominance you showed when you ordered me to spread my thighs during that bath. I want the gladiator, not the saint.”

Her words unleash the predator I’ve kept leashed for lunars . With a growl that’s

more animal than human, I lift her off her feet, carrying her to the bed as she wraps her legs around my waist. The friction of her core against my cock through our remaining clothes makes us both groan with need.

“You want the gladiator?” I ask, laying her down and looming over her, letting her see the raw hunger in my eyes. “Then you get all of me. No holding back. No careful consideration. Just pure, desperate need.”

I tear at her gown—not violently, but with urgent efficiency—baring all the skin I’ve been dying to worship. When the fabric finally gives way, revealing her naked body to my starving gaze, I have to pause just to breathe.

“Gods, Callie...” My eyes devour every curve, every freckle, every perfect imperfection. “You’re so much more beautiful than my pale memories.”

She arches beneath the intensity of my stare, her nipples hardening under my scrutiny. “Stop looking and start touching,” she demands, her voice breathless. “You promised you’d map every inch of me with your hands and tongue. I’m holding you to that.”

I don’t need to be told twice. My mouth crashes down on hers as my hands finally, finally get to explore freely. I palm her breasts, thumbs circling her nipples until she’s writhing beneath me. Her skin is silk and fire, exactly as I imagined during those torturous nights of separation.

“You taste like honey and sin,” I mouth against her throat, my tongue tracing the pulse point that’s been driving me mad during our morning rituals. “I want to taste every part of you until you’re shaking apart in my arms.”

“Yes,” she gasps, her back arching as I kiss my way down her body. “Please, Aries. I need your mouth on me, your cock in me. I’ve been aching for you for so long.”

I lavish attention on her breasts, sucking and biting until she's making those breathy little sounds that feature in every fantasy I've had. Her hands tangle in my hair, holding me against her as if afraid I might pull away .

"I remember," I growl against her skin, "how you painted your lips with your own cream that night during the storm. How you tortured me with that image while I couldn't do anything but imagine tasting you myself."

Her moan is pure sin. "I was thinking of your tongue," she confesses breathlessly. "Imagining it was you making me that wet, you driving me out of my mind with need."

"Now I can," I promise, kissing my way down her trembling body. "Now I can taste every drop of you, make you come on my tongue until you forget every name but mine."

When I reach the apex of her thighs, she's already glistening with arousal, the scent of her desire making my mouth water. I look up to meet her eyes, seeing my own desperate hunger reflected there.

"Watch me," I command, my breath hot against her most sensitive flesh. "Watch me feast on you like I've been starving for months."

The first stroke of my tongue draws a cry from her lips that echoes through the cottage. She tastes even better than I imagined—sweet and musky and entirely addictive. I explore her thoroughly, finding every spot that makes her gasp, every technique that makes her hips buck against my mouth.

"Oh gods, Aries," she pants, her hands fisting in the bedsheets. "Your tongue—it's even better than you described. I'm already so close."

“Not yet,” I growl against her wet flesh, pulling back just enough to make her whimper. “I want to hear you beg for it first. Tell me what you need.”

“I need you to make me come,” she pleads, her voice breaking with desperation. “I need to feel your mouth on me until I scream. Please, Aries. I’m burning alive.”

Her desperate honesty breaks my control. I dive back in with renewed hunger, my tongue and lips working her toward the edge with ruthless precision. When I feel her body beginning to tense, I slide two fingers inside her tight heat, curling them to hit that spot that makes her see stars.

She shatters with a scream loud enough to carry to the town square, her body convulsing around my fingers as waves of pleasure crash through her. I work her through it, gentling my touch as she comes down from her high.

“Beautiful,” I murmur, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs as she trembles beneath me. “But we’re nowhere near done, sweet Callie.”

Before she can respond, I’m moving up her body, my cock hard and aching as it slides against her wet core. The sensation draws groans from both of us.

“I need to be inside you,” I confess, my voice rough with desperation. “I need to feel you wrapped around me, need to claim every inch of you.”

“Then take me,” she demands, her legs wrapping around my waist to pull me closer. “Show me what all those months of wanting felt like. Make me feel everything you couldn’t say.”

I position myself at her entrance, pausing for just a moment to savor this—the culmination of lunars of yearning, annums of denial. Then I’m pushing inside her tight heat, both of us crying out at the exquisite sensation of finally being joined.

“Fuck,” I groan, my head dropping to her shoulder as her body adjusts to my size. “You feel even better than I remembered. So tight, so perfect around me.”

“Move,” she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders. “I need you to move, Aries. I need to feel all of you.”

After establishing a rhythm that’s anything but gentle—I give her deep, demanding thrusts that claim her completely.

This is annals of suppressed desire given form, lunars of careful restraint finally unleashed.

Her body meets mine thrust for thrust, taking everything I give her and demanding more .

“Harder,” she begs, her voice breaking on the word. “Make it harder. I need to feel you for days after this.”

I give her what she’s asking for, my hips snapping against hers with increasing intensity. The sound of skin against skin fills the cottage, mixing with our desperate moans and the whispered endearments that spill from our lips.

“I love you,” I growl against her throat, my pace becoming erratic as pleasure builds to impossible heights. “I love you so much it terrifies me. You’re everything , Callie.”

“I love you too,” she gasps, her inner walls beginning to flutter around me. “So much. For so long. I’ve been yours since that first night in the cell, even when I didn’t know what it was, and later, when I couldn’t admit it.”

Her confession pushes me over the edge. With a roar that shakes the cottage walls, I bury myself deep inside her as my climax crashes through me. The sensation of my

release triggers hers, and she comes apart beneath me with a scream that's pure ecstasy.

We collapse together, our bodies slick with sweat and trembling with aftershocks. I roll us to our sides, keeping her pressed against me as we struggle to catch our breath.

"That was..." she begins, then trails off with a breathless laugh.

"Everything," I finish, pressing kisses to her damp forehead. "Everything I dreamed of and so much more."

She tilts her head to look at me, her eyes soft with satisfaction and love. "No more barriers," she murmurs.

"No more rules," I agree, pulling her closer. "Just us. Finally, completely us."

As we drift toward sleep in our little cottage—the place where we learned to love each other—I'm filled with profound gratitude. In a few days, we'll return to our ships, to our crew, to the galaxy that awaits. But tonight, we're exactly where we belong.

In each other's arms, with no distance between us.

Chapter Thirty-Two

C allie

The transport's engines hum beneath us as we clear Sanctorii's upper atmosphere.

Through the viewport, I can see the Galaxy Warrior's familiar silhouette growing larger against the backdrop of Sanctorii's twin moons.

My hand rests in Aries' as we watch our former prison—and our salvation—disappear into the star field.

“Any regrets?” he asks softly, his thumb tracing circles on my palm.

“About leaving?” I shake my head, leaning into his warmth. “That cottage served its purpose. It taught us how to love each other. But it was never meant to be permanent.”

“No,” he agrees, pressing a kiss to my temple. “It was a beginning, not an ending.”

The past week since our redemption has been a whirlwind—debriefings with the Committee, final documentation of our successful trials, and countless preparations for our return to our comrades.

But through it all, the freedom to touch him whenever I want, to sleep curled against his warmth without barriers, has felt like a miracle I'm still adjusting to .

“We should be docking with the Galaxy Warrior soon,” our pilot announces over the comm. “I’m told the other ship, the Devil’s Playground will join you shortly. Prepare for transfer.”

My stomach flutters with anticipation. After months away, we’ll finally see our two crews again—our found family who believed in us when we couldn’t believe in ourselves. And more importantly, we’ll begin the next chapter of our lives together.

“Nervous?” Aries asks, noting my expression.

“Excited,” I correct, squeezing his hand. “We get to go home. Our real home, with our people.”

“And we get to choose which ship becomes our permanent home.” He gives me a meaningful look.

When our group grew large enough to split into two ships, I jumped at the chance to choose the Devil’s Playground .

It wasn’t just that it had safer assignments than the Galaxy Warrior —that was reason enough.

But the real reason? The Galaxy Warrior was Aries’ ship.

And I didn’t want to be anywhere near him.

Now, though, the Devil’s Playground represents a different possibility—a fresh start where we can simply be Aries and Callie, together. Yet, even now, we haven’t made a firm decision.

Spark zooms excitedly around the transport’s small cabin, trailing sparkles of

anticipation. The shimmerling seems as eager as we are to rejoin the crew who've become our family.

"I've been thinking about Captain Beast's offer," he says quietly. "About joining his crew permanently."

Aries' eyes meet mine, warmth and affection in their golden depths. "After everything we've been through, the idea of combat missions and constant danger feels..."

"Exhausting," I finish. "I want time to just be with you. To build something together without looking over our shoulders."

"The Devil's Playground's transport and trading missions would give us that," he agrees. "A chance to heal, to grow into who we are together."

The comm crackles: "Docking sequence initiated. Welcome home."

Home. The word carries new weight now, encompassing not just the ships that carry us through space, but the man beside me, the crew who chose to be our family, and the future we're building one choice at a time.

As the Galaxy Warrior comes into view through the transport's viewport, I feel a surge of pure joy. We're not returning as the same people who left months ago. We're returning as partners, as mates, as two souls who found their way back to each other against impossible odds.

"Ready?" Aries asks as we prepare to dock.

"With you?" I smile up at him, this man who's become my anchor, my passion, my home. "I'm ready for anything."

The docking bay doors open, revealing familiar faces wreathed in smiles. My heart swells as I see our crew—our family—waiting to welcome us home.

“They’re back!” Anya’s elated shout echoes through the bay as she rushes forward, Captain Zar-Rynn close behind her. Within moments, we’re surrounded—Dr. Drayke scanning us for injuries, Petra bouncing on her toes with excitement, Shadow’s mechanical eye whirring as it adjusts to take us in.

“You’re both alive!” Petra launches herself at me, nearly knocking me off balance. “I was going crazy waiting for news! I know it was a long, grueling time for you, but waiting with no word for months wasn’t easy for any of us.”

Only then do they notice our linked hands. Shadow’s human eye widens, a slow grin spreading across his scarred face. “Well, that’s certainly an interesting development.”

“Come on, big guy,” Petra playfully punches his massive shoulder. “Like we all haven’t been hoping for this for years?”

Before we can respond, Spark zooms out from behind us, trailing excited sparkles as it performs elaborate spirals around the gathered crew. Their reactions range from Shadow reaching instinctively for his weapon to Petra, gasping in pure delight.

“What in the name of all the gods is that?” Dax demands, his voice deep as he watches Spark create intertwining light patterns in the air.

“This is Spark,” I explain, unable to keep the fondness from my voice. “A companion creature... gifted to us during the trials.”

“It’s adorable!” Petra extends her hand cautiously toward the shimmerling , who immediately nuzzles her palm with gentle warmth.

“Its species is also sentient, highly intelligent, and by the look of it, completely besotted with these two,” Captain Zar-Rynn observes as he approaches, his golden eyes missing nothing—our clasped hands, the wooden flame earrings, the way Aries positions himself protectively at my side even though we’re among friends.

“Captain,” I acknowledge with a respectful nod, though I don’t release Aries’ hand.

“The charges are officially dropped?” he asks, his tone careful but hopeful. “That’s what their comm said, but I want to see the official papers.”

“Complete redemption under Sanctorii law,” Aries confirms, his voice steady with quiet pride. “The death sentence has been commuted. I’m free. ”

Captain Zar-Rynn smiles. It took me months for that fang-filled grin not to terrify me.

“That calls for a celebration,” Captain Zar-Rynn declares. “Captain Beast and the Devil’s Playground crew should be arriving within the hour.”

As if summoned by his words, Captain Beast’s booming voice echoes through the bay: “Starting the party without us?”

Captain Beast’s massive form fills the doorway, his emerald skin and golden nose rings gleaming.

Behind him filters the Devil’s Playground crew—Aerie with her short blonde hair and efficient stride, along with her adoring mate, Maximus.

Vartan, with his distinctive gold and red coloring, strides in with Lyra next to him, looking as badass as ever.

But before anyone can respond, a commanding voice cuts through the celebratory

noise: “Captain, your crew hierarchy lacks proper ceremonial protocols. In civilized space, rank is displayed through—”

“Prince Pompous, I swear by all the gods, if you mention your dead empire one more time...” Captain Beast’s growl carries a warning that makes everyone turn.

A tall figure with metallic silver skin and moving tattoos steps into view, his liquid starlight eyes surveying the gathering with obvious disdain. “I merely suggest that formal introductions would be more appropriate than this... chaos.” The male waves a dismissive hand.

Captain Beast turns to us with obvious exasperation.

“You two had trials? We’ve had trials. Two lunars of non-stop royal etiquette lessons.

” He jerks his thumb toward the silver-skinned male.

“We rescued him and some others shortly after we left you on Sanctorii. Meet our rescued Aethonian prince who thinks he’s here to civilize us barbarians. ”

The prince’s gold veins pulse brighter with irritation. “I am Prince Zorath of the Aethonian Empire, and I merely seek to restore proper order to—”

“See what I mean?” Captain Beast cuts him off. “Hope you enjoyed your romantic getaway because we’ve been playing babysitter to Captain Ancient History here.”

The tension breaks as crew members from both ships laugh, and I feel some of the stress from our trials finally lifting. We’re home, among family; even difficult passengers are manageable compared to what we’ve just survived.

Zorath’s mouth pops open with obvious affront at being dismissed, but before he can

launch into another lecture, Captain Beast claps him on the shoulder hard enough to make the prince stagger.

“Why don’t you go practice your ‘proper protocols’ somewhere else while I catch up with my people?” Captain Beast suggests with dangerous cheer.

As Zorath stalks away with wounded dignity, his moving tattoos swirling in agitated patterns, Captain Beast shakes his head. “Two months of that. I’m seriously considering spacing him.”

“He can’t be that bad,” I say, watching the prince’s retreating figure.

“Give it five minutes,” Aerie mutters. “He’ll try to reorganize your breathing technique.”

The crew’s laughter follows us as we continue toward the dining area, though I catch a few sympathetic glances aimed at wherever Zorath disappeared to. Despite his insufferable attitude, he’s one of them now—a rescued soul trying to find his place.

Captain “And this little light show?”

“A companion creature,” I explain. “Spark responds to emotional energy and helped us navigate the trials when physical touch was prohibited.”

The shimmerling performs increasingly elaborate displays for Captain Beast, completely enchanting crew members from both ships. Dr. Drayke seems particularly intrigued, his blue fingers carefully tracing patterns in the air that Spark enthusiastically mimics.

“Fascinating,” he murmurs. “The neural pathways required for such responsiveness to emotional stimuli...”

“Later, Doc,” Captain Beast interrupts with amusement. “Right now, I believe congratulations are in order.”

The dining room has been transformed with colorful streamers and a celebratory spread that could feed both crews twice over. Maddie stands proudly behind a massive cake decorated with Sanctorii symbols for redemption and new beginnings.

“I’ve been baking like mad since we got word that you were released early... and that two of you would be returning,” she explains, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

My throat tightens at this tangible proof of how much a part of their lives we are.

The celebration flows around us—toasts and stories, laughter mixing with the underlying current of profound relief. As the evening progresses, I find myself studying the faces of our chosen family, marveling at how they’ve supported us through everything.

“So,” Shadow drawls once we’re all settled with generous slices of cake, “are we going to address the obvious? You two are actually touching now. Voluntarily. After five annums of elaborate avoidance maneuvers that would impress professional dancers.”

Heat blooms on my cheeks, but Aries’ hand remains steady in mine. “The trials required us to face our shared past,” he says simply. “To understand what happened during our captivity, and why we both withdrew afterward.”

“Memory Reconciliation Sessions,” I elaborate, seeing understanding dawn on several faces. They all know our history—that we were paired during the forced mating program. None of them ever knew why we so carefully avoided each other afterward.

“Healing,” Dr. Drayke says softly, his blue eyes warm with professional and personal satisfaction. “True healing requires facing trauma, not hiding from it.”

“Speaking of which,” Captain Beast interjects, his massive frame settling more comfortably in his chair, “I have a proposition.”

All eyes turn to him expectantly.

“The Devil’s Playground could use a head of security.” His attention focuses on Aries. “If you’re interested in a change of pace from combat missions.”

Captain Zar-Rynn nods approvingly. “The Galaxy Warrior will always be your home if you want, Aries, but Captain Beast’s right. After what you’ve been through, perhaps some time focusing on transport and trade—and... relationships—rather than rescue operations would be beneficial.”

“I’d love to accept,” Aries says, looking at me for confirmation. My answering smile is all he needs to see. We’ve gotten an engraved invitation to build our life together without constant danger, while still serving our extended family.

“I have my eye on an unused storage area on B deck. We could remodel it, make it comfortable for a couple. Roomier than Callie’s quarters.

But for now, you’ll have to make do in her room.

” Captain Beast’s eyebrow actually waggles, which makes me giggle.

“I imagine you won’t mind sharing a small bed for a while. ”

“We’ll... manage,” Aries says, accompanied by his own eyebrow waggle.

The celebration continues around us—more toasts, shared stories, and the comfortable chaos of two crews reuniting.

I catch Aries' eye across the room as Petra launches into an animated tale about their latest trading mishap, and something passes between us.

A shared understanding that while we love these people, while we're grateful to be home, what we need most right now is each other.

"Think anyone would notice if we disappeared?" he murmurs after moving closer under the pretense of helping clear empty glasses.

"They're family," I reply softly, watching Shadow demonstrate some elaborate fighting technique while one of the new rescues takes notes. "They'll understand."

His smile is warm and private, meant only for me. "Then let's go home."

As we slip quietly from the dining hall, Spark trailing behind us with sleepy pulses of contentment, I hear Petra's voice rise in mock outrage: "And they're gone! Called it! Captain Beast, you owe me ten credits."

The sound of our family's laughter follows us down the corridor toward our new quarters, toward the beginning of our real life together.

Chapter Thirty-Three

C allie

The door to our new quarters slides shut behind us, leaving just the gentle hum of the ship's engines and our ragged breathing. After all the crew reunions, the toasts, and the chaos of officially transferring to Captain Beast's ship, we're finally alone in our permanent home.

Spark seems to sense the electric tension crackling between us, its bright colors shifting to knowing rose-gold as it deliberately zips to a far corner shelf, settling into its rest-sphere with what looks suspiciously like a smug pulse. Even our faithful companion knows what's about to happen.

"So," I breathe, watching Aries prowl across the room like the predator he is, all controlled power and barely leashed hunger.

The starfield through our viewport frames his bronze skin and gleaming horns, but it's the molten gold of his eyes that makes my knees weak. "Our first night in our real home."

My pulse thunders as he stalks closer, each step deliberate and predatory. This isn't the careful reverence of our first joining—there's something feral in his expression now, something that promises the gentle intimacies we shared at the cottage are a thing of the past .

"I can smell your need from here," he growls, stopping so close his heat seeps into

my skin—but he doesn't touch me. "Sweet and intoxicating. Do you have any idea what that does to me?"

"Tell me," I challenge, lifting my chin defiantly even as my body betrays me with a shiver of pure want.

His smile is wicked, all sharp edges and dark promise. "It makes me want to devour you. To mark every inch of your skin so thoroughly that everyone on this ship knows exactly who you belong to."

The possessive edge in his voice makes my core clench with need. "Then stop talking," I reach for him, "and take what's yours."

Something flashes in his eyes—heat and hunger and a playful dominance I haven't seen since that storm night when he ordered me to spread my thighs for him during my bath.

His head dips, but instead of the gentle brush of lips I expect, he captures my mouth in a kiss that's pure claiming—teeth and tongue and barely restrained violence that makes my blood sing.

His hands don't frame my face tenderly like before; instead, they fist in my hair, angling my head exactly where he wants it for deeper access.

"You want wild?" he snarls against my lips, his voice a rough growl that sends shivers racing down my spine. "You want me to stop holding back like some civilized male?"

"Yes," I breathe, my hands already working at his tunic. "I want everything you were afraid to show me before."

His laugh is dark and predatory as he spins me around, pressing my palms flat against the viewport. The cold transparisteel against my heated skin makes me gasp as he presses against my back, his mouth hot against my ear.

“I’ve been fantasizing about bending you over and taking you against a viewport window,” he confesses roughly, his hands already working at my clothes with efficient brutality. “About having you watch the stars while I make you scream. ”

Heat floods through me at the idea, at the feral hunger in his golden eyes. “What are you waiting for?”

My words unleash something savage in him. Fabric tears as he strips me with ruthless efficiency, his mouth trailing fire down my spine. But instead of gentle kisses, he uses teeth—nipping and marking until I’m trembling against the cold viewport.

“I can see our reflection in the window,” he rasps, his hands skimming down my sides with possessive intent. “Can see how desperate you are for me? How beautiful you look when you’re about to be thoroughly claimed?”

I bend at the waist, needing friction, hoping to feel his hard length against me.

“Not yet. First, I want to watch you fall apart against this window.” One large hand slides up to cup my breast, fingers finding my nipple and rolling it between thumb and forefinger with just enough pressure to make me arch and gasp.

“That’s it. Let me hear those pretty sounds you make when I touch you. ”

His other hand trails down my stomach, fingers dancing along my hip bone before sliding between my thighs. When he finds me already slick and ready, he chuckles darkly against my ear. “So wet for me already. And we’ve barely started.”

“Aries,” I breathe, my palms flat against the cold viewport as he works me with skilled fingers, circling my clit with maddening precision while his other hand continues its assault on my breast. The dual sensations have me trembling, my reflection in the window showing a woman completely undone.

“I could take you right here,” he growls, his fingers increasing their pace until I’m gasping and writhing against him.

“Press you against the portal and make you watch the stars while I claim you. Would you like that, Callie? To be thoroughly owned from behind? Where I can take you any way I want? ”

The thought sends a shock of arousal through me so intense I nearly climax from his words alone. “Please,” I whimper, my hips rolling against his hand.

“Please what?” His fingers slow to an agonizing tease.

“Please don’t stop. Please touch me. Please—” The words dissolve into a moan as he pinches my nipple harder, his fingers on my clit finding just the right rhythm to have me seeing stars.

Just when I’m about to shatter, he withdraws both hands, spinning me around to face him. His eyes are molten gold, pupils blown wide with lust. “Now I take you to our bed,” he says, his voice rough with barely contained need. “And finish what I started.”

Before I can protest the loss of his touch, he lifts me bodily, my legs wrapping around his waist as he carries me to the bed, stalking like a jungle animal.

Instead of laying me down gently like before, he tosses me onto the mattress with just enough force to make me bounce, his eyes drinking in every inch of newly revealed

skin.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, but there’s possessiveness in his deep tone, a claiming that makes my core clench with need. “Mine.”

“Yours,” I agree, reaching for him, but he catches my hands again.

“Not yet.” His voice holds command that shoots desire straight to my core. “I want to look at you. All of you. Spread your thighs for me, Callie. Let me see what’s mine.”

The order echoes our storm-night confessions, and I comply eagerly, watching his nostrils flare as I reveal myself to his hungry gaze. The way he’s looking at me—like I’m a feast he’s been starving for—makes me feel powerful and desired in ways I never imagined .

“Perfect,” he breathes, his hands skimming up my calves, my thighs, everywhere except where I need him most. “Do you know how many times I’ve recalled this exact view? How many nights I lay awake thinking about tasting you properly?”

“Stop teasing,” I demand, my hips lifting toward his hands. I’m so desperate it’s a wonder I can string two words together.

“So impatient,” he chuckles, but his face holds no levity. His expression reminds me of a predatory animal. “I like you desperate for me.”

His mouth traces a maddeningly slow path up my inner thigh, his breath hot against my skin. When his tongue finally swipes across my most sensitive flesh, I cry out, my hands fisting in the bedsheets.

But this isn’t the careful, reverent exploration like it was in our cottage. This is possessive, demanding—his tongue and lips working me with single-minded focus,

driving me toward the edge with ruthless precision. When I'm trembling on the brink, he pulls back with a wicked grin.

"Not yet," he growls when I whimper in protest. "I want you wild first. Completely undone."

"I am, Aries," I plead. "I'm desperate."

He just smiles, a feral grin, and his fingers replace his mouth, sliding inside me as his thumb finds that bundle of nerves that makes me see stars.

But it's when his other hand reaches up to my breast, when those careful fingertips suddenly pinch my nipple with just enough force to blur pleasure and pain, that I truly fall apart.

"That's it," he encourages roughly, his fingers working magic inside me. "Let go for me, sweet Callie. Show me exactly how desperate you are."

I shatter with a scream that echoes through our quarters, my body convulsing around his fingers as ecstasy crashes through me. But he doesn't stop, doesn't give me time to recover—instead, he moves up my body like a lion claiming what's his.

"My turn," he growls, and suddenly our positions are reversed. He's on his back, hands gripping my hips as I straddle him, his cock hard and ready beneath me.

"Ride me," he commands, his voice rough with need. "I want to watch you take what you want."

The position gives me power, and I use it ruthlessly. I sink down onto him slowly, watching his face contort with pleasure as my body adjusts to his unique anatomy. Those ridges along his shaft feel even more pronounced now, creating friction that

has us both groaning.

“Faster,” he urges, his hands guiding my movements. “I want to feel you lose control.”

I establish a rhythm that’s anything but gentle—rising and falling with increasing intensity, using the angle of my hands on his shoulders to allow me to take him deeper than before. His alien anatomy responds to my movements, the ridges swelling and pulsing in ways that drive me wild.

“Your horns,” I gasp, remembering his confession about their sensitivity. “Can I...?”

“Yes,” he growls, understanding immediately. “Touch them. Hold on to them.”

My hands find the curved bones, gripping them as I increase my pace. The contact sends shockwaves through him—his back arches, a sound escaping him that’s purely alien harmonics that seem to resonate in my bones.

“Callie,” he groans, his control finally starting to crack. “You’re going to kill me.”

“Good,” I pant, using his horns for leverage as I ride him harder. “I want you completely crazed.”

But he’s not ready to surrender control entirely. With a move that showcases his gladiator strength, he flips us again, pinning me beneath him with a speed that steals my breath.

“My turn,” he rasps, settling between my thighs. “Hold on.”

What follows is nothing like the tender way he’s always treated me.

This is raw, primal—his hips snapping against mine with increasing force, each thrust driving deeper than the last. The ridges along his shaft create sensations that border on overwhelming, and when he adjusts the angle to hit that spot inside me that makes me see stars, I nearly scream.

“That’s it,” he encourages roughly, one hand gripping my hip, the other braced beside my head. “Take all of me. Every ince .”

His pace becomes punishing, desperate, and I meet him thrust for thrust, my nails scoring his back as pleasure builds to impossible heights. When he leans down to capture my mouth in a kiss that’s more devouring than tender, I taste myself on his lips and nearly come undone.

“I can feel you getting close,” he growls against my lips. “Come for me, Callie. Come on my cock like you’ve been dreaming about.”

His words, combined with a particularly deep thrust that has his ridges dragging across every sensitive spot, push me over the edge. I shatter with a scream that’s his name, my body clamping around him as waves of pleasure crash through me.

The sensation of my climax triggers his own. With a roar that shakes the bulkheads, he buries himself deep inside me, his own release pulsing hot and thick as his alien anatomy swells and contracts in rhythms designed to maximize both our pleasure.

We collapse together, both trembling and gasping for breath. His weight pins me to the mattress, but I wouldn’t move even if I could—this feeling of being completely claimed, completely his, is intoxicating.

“That was...” I begin breathlessly.

“Exactly what we both needed,” he finishes, pressing kisses to my throat, where I’m

sure he can feel my racing pulse. “Wild. Desperate. Perfect.”

He rolls us on our sides—still connected, his possessive gaze piercing into me.

“From now on, every time I take you, it’s going to be because we both want it. Because we can’t keep our hands off each other.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” I ask, feeling desire stirring again despite my recent climax.

His answering smile is pure sin. “Both.”

As if to prove his point, his hand skims down my body, finding me still sensitive and slick. His cock is still inside me, jerking back to life.

“Besides,” he murmurs, his fingers beginning a lazy exploration that has me gasping, “we have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

“Aries,” I breathe, my body already responding to his touch.

“Mmm?” His mouth finds that spot on my neck that makes me melt.

“We’re going to scandalize the crew.”

His laugh rumbles against my throat. “Let them be scandalized. After five annums of avoidance and two lunars of trials, I think we’ve earned the right to be thoroughly inappropriate.”

Outside our viewport, stars wheel in their eternal dance, but inside our quarters—our home—we create our own universe of heat and passion and perfect freedom. No more rules. No more barriers. Just us, finally able to love each other exactly as we

choose.

Wild. Desperate. Completely ours to forge as we want.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Chapter Thirty-Four: Epilogue

One Year Later

Callie

The first months after we left Sanctorii passed in a blur of adjustments.

Integrating back into crew life, processing our experiences, learning to touch freely after so long with restrictions.

We chose the Devil's Playground , drawn to Captain Beast's offer of transport missions over the Galaxy Warrior's dangerous rescue operations.

But as our first rescue mission approached—a distress call from a failing slave transport—I realized we'd been preparing for this moment all along. Every trial we'd endured, every barrier we'd overcome, had been leading us here: using our freedom to free others.

Here we are, still in our bed, wrapped in each other's arms as I—

The alarm klaxons shatter the peaceful morning as the Devil's Playground drops out of hyperspace. I'm already moving before my feet hit the deck, muscle memory from a year of rescue missions taking over .

“Bridge, now!” Captain Beast's voice booms through the ship's comm system.
“We've got a situation.”

Aries is beside me instantly, both of us pulling on clothes as we race through the corridors. The controlled chaos of an emergency response flows around us—crew members rushing to battle stations, the familiar hum of weapons systems coming online.

“What’s the situation?” I ask as we burst onto the bridge.

Captain Beast’s massive frame dominates the viewport, his expression grim. “Slave transport, dead in space. Life support failing.” He gestures to the drifting ship ahead. “Forty-seven souls aboard, including children.”

The familiar surge of determination floods through me. This is why we do this—why we’ve spent the last year working with Captain Zar-Rynn to expand our rescue operations. Every soul we save is a victory against the system that once held us captive.

“Transport prepped and ready,” Aries reports from the tactical station, already shifting into his role as head of security. “Medical teams standing by.”

The rescue proceeds with practiced efficiency.

Our year of working together has forged the crew into a seamless unit.

When we board the failing transport, the scene is heartbreakingly familiar—dozens of beings from various species, collared and caged, their eyes holding that same hopeless desperation we once knew.

As we often find in situations like this, the slavers escaped in pods, leaving the poor slaves with little to no ability to maintain life support.

There’s something in these people’s expressions other than despair, though.

Recognition. Hope.

“You’re them,” says a young Vorthari female, her reptilian skin pale with exhaustion. “The ones who escaped. The ones who come back. ”

Our reputation has spread throughout the underground networks. Former slaves turned liberators. A crew that doesn’t just survive—we return to pull others from the darkness.

“We’re here now,” I tell her gently, working to remove her collar with tools I’ve become expert at using. “You’re safe.”

Hours later, after all forty-seven beings have been processed, treated, and settled into temporary quarters, Aries and I finally steal a moment alone in our cabin.

“Tired?” he asks, pulling me against his chest.

“Exhilarated,” I correct, looking up at this male who’s become my partner in every sense of the word. “Did you see that little Whelpie boy’s face when Dr. Raine told him he was free?”

His arms tighten around me. “I saw. I also saw you promising his sister we’d help her find their parents.”

“Because we will.” The certainty in my voice comes from a year of keeping such promises. “Our contact network reaches half the outer rim now. If they’re alive, we’ll find them.”

“And if they’re not?”

“Then that little boy and his sister have a home with us—or at the Sanctuary on

planet Fairea, just like all the others.” I lean into his warmth, marveling at how natural this has become. “We’ve built something good here, haven’t we?”

“Better than good.” His lips brush my temple. “We’ve built hope.”

Through our viewport, I can see the Galaxy Warrior approaching—Captain Zar-Rynn responding to our call for additional support. Tomorrow, some of our newest rescuees will transfer to his ship, others will choose to stay with us, and a few will decide to start new lives at Sanctuary.

All of them will have choices. Real choices, made freely .

“The Redemption Committee was right,” I murmur against his chest. “We couldn’t know what we were building during those trials.”

“What do you mean?”

“They weren’t just testing whether we could love each other. They were testing whether we could become the kind of people who turn pain into purpose.” I look up at him, seeing my own understanding reflected in his golden eyes. “Whether we could be worthy of the freedom we were fighting for.”

His smile is slow and warm and devastating. “And are we? Worthy?”

“Ask me after another forty-seven rescues,” I tease, but my voice catches with emotion. “Ask those children sleeping safely in our guest quarters tonight. Ask the families we’ve reunited, the lives we’ve saved.”

“I already know the answer,” he says, his voice dropping to that intimate register that still makes my knees weak. “We’re worthy because we choose to be. Every day, every rescue, every time we reach back into the darkness to pull someone else toward

the light.”

Later, as we lie tangled together in our bed, I listen to the gentle hum of the ship’s engines carrying us toward Sanctuary. Tomorrow will bring new challenges, new rescues, new souls to save. But tonight, we rest in the knowledge that we’ve found our purpose.

We aren’t just survivors anymore. We’re liberators. We’re hope made manifest in a galaxy that desperately needs it.

And we’re just getting started.

“I love you,” I whisper into the darkness.

“I love you too,” he responds, his arms tightening around me. “Now and always. ”

Outside our window, stars whirl in their eternal dance, but inside our quarters—our home—we’ve created something even more beautiful: a love that doesn’t just heal, but heals others in return.

This is what redemption really means. Not just saving ourselves, but becoming the kind of people who save others. Not just finding love, but using that love to light the way for those still lost in darkness.

And tomorrow, we’ll do it all again.

Chapter One

Present Day

Somewhere in Space

Anya

Someone is screaming. I must be dreaming because I went to sleep on my comfy mattress, yet I feel like I'm lying on cold, hard metal. What's going on?

My eyes pop open, but my brain isn't fully online yet. Was I drugged? My head feels like it's split wide open. As my eyes focus, I notice other bodies lying on the floor nearby. My heart beats like a jackhammer when I see boots that belong on the feet of some post-apocalyptic Mad Max character.

The pain is too real—I'm not dreaming. I make an end run around my rising panic and order my brain to engage.

I glance up past black boots to leather-clad calves and see they are wrapped around the feet and legs of something definitely not human.

I may not have had my morning cuppa joe, but my brain is now making lightning-fast synaptic connections.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize that the creature resembling a humanoid boar who is currently pointing a gun at my chest is an alien .

Sweat blooms on my upper lip and my eyes widen in fright as I absorb what's going on.

I thought aliens from other planets were the stuff of sci-fi movies and National Enquirer abduction stories. This isn't fiction. This is real! I order my brain to comply with whatever they ask and force my hands to stop trembling. Job number one is to stay alive.

Crap, he sees my eyes are open and signals with his gun for me to get up.

I may be disoriented, but I'm not crazy enough to argue with the business end of that weapon.

I stumble toward a couple of human women forming a line behind another boar-man.

This one grunts at me and I can't help but notice these guys have four short tusks protruding up from their bottom jaw. Holy shit... tusks!

I get in line behind two women in their twenties like me. One is in baby doll pajamas, the other is wearing only a pair of black boxers with small red hearts. I'm the one from Colorado in a cute flannel two-piece number with a moose on it. Have we all been kidnapped from Earth in our sleep?

"What's happening here?" the petite redhead in the front of the line asks, earning her a hard thump on the head by the butt of boar-man number two's gun.

Rule number one, no talking. Check. Other women are shakily standing up at the first guy's command. We're forming an impeccably ordered line. I'm obeying every direction, even as icy terror races along my veins.

A third boar enters, fumbling with a handful of tech gear.

I realize these are glorified collars as he fastens one around each of our necks, and trust me, he's not gentle about it.

Screens on the walls jump to life and a video plays.

It does not have high production value, but the message is crystal clear.

We all watch, horror growing, as the video depicts a collar being snapped on a reptilian alien's neck.

The picture shifts to a close-up of some alien version of a smart watch on an extremely hairy arm.

An equally hairy hand pushes a button on the watch and voilà, cut to the poor victim being shocked at what appears to be a torturous level.

His eyes widen and his alien mouth pulls back into a rictus of agony as he screams, a sound so chilling the hair on the back of my neck stands up.

Now there's a shot of the watch being dialed higher, and then a gruesome close-up of the victim screeching in pain, his eyes rolling backward.

His knees hit the floor as he claws at his neck, trying to remove the collar.

With no additional warning, I hear a loud pop, and his head explodes right off his shoulders.

My knees sag, but I don't allow myself to sink to the floor.

I hear the sound of someone retching a little in the back of her mouth, but I can guarantee no one is uttering a word of protest.

Don't fuck with these guys. Point taken.

My horror escalates, my heart hammering in fear, as we're marched into an adjoining room.

One by one, we're given a painful shot behind the right ear.

No doubt what this is for because now the alien gibberish isn't gibberish anymore.

The translator they implanted allows me to understand the angry orders they are barking.

"You're on the Warbird One in deep space. You're now the property of the MarZan cartel. Follow!" the boar at the head of the line commands.

My head reels at this information. It was obvious they kidnapped me from my home on Earth, but to hear myself called property spears a sharp arrow of terror through my body.

I'm being as compliant as possible. I'm no fool.

No one's coming to save me, I'm too cynical to believe that.

I need to figure a way out of this mess.

Even as I attempt to control my rising panic, I struggle to get a mental image of every room, hallway, and door—trying to keep track of the layout of this place.

The floors and walls are metal. Everything is utilitarian with no frills.

There's been no attempt to make anything attractive or homey.

Stark lights shine brightly from above. I see doors, but I don't know where they might lead.

I have no idea the scope of the ship, how many floors, or rooms, or aliens might be lurking down hidden corridors.

I take note of how many of these ugly aliens I see, how heavily armed they are, and who's in charge. If there is a way off this ship and back home to Earth, I need to find it.

Terrified of being punished for looking behind me, I sneak a quick peek at how many of us there are—maybe ten human women walking briskly in this fast-paced line. There are four guards, all muscled, wide, ugly pig-like males covered in medieval-looking brown leather pants and tunics.

In addition to the four short tusks protruding up from their bottom jaws, they have porcine noses, and two small horns on the top of their heads.

They each have a baton fastened to one side of their belt and a gun fastened to the other.

With a rifle slung over one shoulder and the smart watch torture thingy on one wrist, they look ready for battle.

We're forced into a corridor that looks like it's straight out of a low-budget fifties jailhouse movie.

Cell after cell comprised of three impenetrable-looking metal walls and a fourth wall of bars facing the hallway.

Each room is about eight feet square, with one small bed, a toilet, and a sink.

My mind is only registering this information peripherally because my primary focus is on the inhabitants of the cells.

I glimpse the alien in the first cell. He's pushing seven feet tall with thick, ropey muscles. He looks kind of Neanderthal with a short, slightly flattened forehead, and shaggy hair and beard. His jaw is set and tight, his weight is on the balls of his feet, and his brown eyes look flat and dead.

Two of the boar guys flank both sides of his door.

Poised in battle stances, their raised guns tell me they won't allow any pushback from us women—or the gargantuan alien in the cell.

On high alert, the boar to the right of the door points his gun at the alien in the enclosure.

“Face the back wall! On your knees, hands on your head!” The guy instantly pivots, then sinks to his knees.

The boar-guy at the head of the line pushes the redhead in the pink PJs into the cell as if she weighs little more than a bag of groceries.

He slams the door shut behind her and keeps the line moving.

I'm worried for the redhead, but I don't dare give her even another passing glance.

The guards are antsy and look as if they're itching to use their weapons.

At the door to the second cell, the guards go through the same routine.

They throw boxer girl into the cell with a fairly humanoid-looking guy.

He's humongous—so muscled he makes Conan the Barbarian look puny.

He has a robotic left arm and a prosthetic eyepiece that shines red.

He's heavily scarred on his face, right arm, and bare torso.

He's the more "human" of the two males I've seen.

This realization spikes a shiver up my spine.

He looks strong enough to kill with his bare hands.

The feral glance he tosses over his shoulder after the bars clang closed shows no compassion for the human female in his cell.

Before we move toward the third cell, the boar at the head of the line asks no one in particular, "How are we going to get her into his cell? He has the highest record of kills in the arena. I doubt he'll get on his knees without a fight."

"Fuck him," another responds. "Shock the shit out of him until he's out cold, then throw her in."

"He doesn't wait for any argument, just presses his watch and turns up the dial until I hear the alien in the next cell roar in pain so loudly my ears ring."

Then I hear a thud, which I assume means his body hit the floor.

"You're next, human," one of them orders me. "Let's see if you're alive tomorrow." His tusky laugh chills the marrow in my bones.

Fearful of what my new cellmate looks like, I'm afraid to step around the boar at the

front of the line. But I'm too terrified of the guards to dawdle, so I take one step forward. One of the guards impatiently tosses me on the floor of the cell next to my comatose cellmate.

The seven other human females in line gape in horror at the scene in my cell, then continue forward without missing a step.

The alien I'm imprisoned with is clearly out cold. His cheek pressed to the hard gray floor. Although I have nothing to fear from him at this moment, my guts are churning as if they're in a blender.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

This guy is enormous, although it's hard to tell how tall he is because he's in a crumpled heap.

He's facing away from me, but it's impossible not to notice his massively wide, furred shoulders, slender waist, muscular thighs, and limp tail.

Tail! He's got a tail! He's wearing only a primitive fabric loincloth covering little more than his sex.

I scoot over between him and the back wall so I can see his face.

I involuntarily gasp in shock. Although his facial shape is human, his features are feline.

His nose is wider and flatter than a human's, and there is a groove slashing from nose to upper lip.

His body fur is golden, his mane and the tuft at the tip of his tail are dark mahogany.

He has a tiny white dot where each of his short whiskers emerges from around his flattened nose.

Even though he's unconscious, his slightly parted lips reveal canines which are frighteningly long and sharp.

His hands and feet are more humanoid than feline, with fingers and toes rather than paws.

I see no fingernails under the close-cropped fur, but I wonder if he has some sharp retractable claws hiding under there.

He looks like power and grace, even as he lies on the floor, unmoving.

It's obvious he's been through a lot. There are raised, discolored remnants of deep cuts all over, but his back is badly scarred in a pattern that could only come from a whip—many whippings.

I don't think this creature's had an easy life .

I'll probably never get another chance to give him such a close inspection, so I reach out with one finger and gently touch his shoulder, wondering what his fur feels like.

As swift as lightning, he opens his eyes and grabs my arm.

He lithely sits up on his haunches, squeezes my forearm so hard it takes my breath away, and growls.

His grip is like steel. I yelp and try to pull back.

His fingers tighten and I immediately decide there is no reason to resist. I'm completely overpowered.

His golden feline eyes bore into mine as he squeezes my arm, and a low growl escapes the back of his throat. I have no idea if he even possesses receptive speech, so I use body language to acquiesce. Gazing at the floor, I slump my shoulders in submission.

“Never. Touch. Me. Again,” he snarls.

“Absolutely.” I’m still looking downward, making myself as small and non-threatening as possible.

He probably outweighs me by double and is strong enough to throw me twenty feet.

I’ve seen enough jailhouse movies to realize we’ve just established dominance in this cell and he’s definitely in charge.

He flings my arm away as if I have leprosy, gets to his feet in one agile move, stalks to the bed, and sits. Okay, I get it. One bed—it’s yours. I’ll figure out how to manage on the hard, cold floor. He lays down, taking up the entire width of the bunk, which seems narrower than a twin bed.

I wonder if he’s going to sleep, but when I finally work up the courage to glance at him, I see he’s still piercing me with a predatory stare. In his culture, staring must not be rude, because he’s not even pretending to be sly about it. His animalistic “don’t fuck with me” look speaks volumes.

I crab-walk backward until my back is tucked against the corner of the rear wall.

It’s as safe as I’m going to get. No one can sneak up behind me.

I’ll be ready for a frontal attack, although I have no idea how I’d protect myself from him.

Between his sharp teeth and all those muscles, I might as well kiss my ass goodbye.

He’s lying on the bed and seems content with that position for right now.

I pull my knees up under my chin and try to figure out what to do.

In the span of an hour, I've been kidnapped by aliens, collared, chipped, and thrown into a tiny cell with a lion-man.

An angry, feral, alpha lion-man who's still staring me down.

At this moment, I can see no escape, no pathway to safety, no way home.

As I inspect where he grabbed my arm to see if I have a bruise, I notice my hands are trembling. I'm blinking rapidly to keep tears from sliding down my cheeks, and my chin is quivering so hard I tuck my head down behind my knees to hide my fear.

I've always been a glass half full kind of girl, so I try hard to find the silver lining—any silver lining. The best I can do is to be thankful that I went to sleep last night wearing more than a pair of boxer shorts.

Zar

Propping my torso against the wall behind the length of the bed, I put my hands behind my head, elbows out, and stare at this new female. I've never seen this species before. She must have adequate intelligence since she was smart enough to back off and has the sense not to challenge me.

It's kind of shocking a species like hers evolved on any planet. She has very little muscle mass, no visible claws or talons, no barbed tail, not even sharp teeth that I can see. Perhaps her planet has no natural predators? She wouldn't last a minima in the gladiator ring.

Her face seems bland, with no distinguishing features. Perhaps they make good breeders because I can't see any other attraction.

I'm caught off guard as a pang of concern for her flashes through my mind.

I shouldn't care. It's everyone for themselves in my world.

But it must be shocking for an unprotected female to wake up aboard a slave ship on its way to a gladiator breeding planet.

I wonder if her species has evolved enough to even comprehend space travel. She looks completely petrified.

We both seem startled when an announcement interrupts from overhead speakers.

“You have one hoara to breed with your cellmate. If you do not complete the act, we will execute both occupants of the cell.”

I sigh heavily, my jaw tensing. I am sick to death of being forced to breed.

Anya

Oh no! Hell no! Just no! Can I please catch a break? They want me to breed? With angry lion-man?

I glance over, expecting him to be sprouting a raging hard-on in his loincloth, ready to pounce. Interesting. He looks even less enthused than I am. His face went slack and his eyes dulled.

The loudspeaker repeats the announcement, this time with more urgency.

Clearly, they mean business. My mind is spinning and I'm a jumble of emotions, from disbelief to fear to a hell of a lot of anger at this whole situation.

I briefly consider refusing the order, but a picture of that unfortunate alien's head exploding flashes through my mind.

“Take your pants off. Get in bed,” he urges softly, sounding more resigned than horny.

I’m still in a tight ball in the corner. Pulling a shaky hand across my forehead, I wipe the beads of cold sweat off my brow. Afraid of what this huge alien will do to my body, I’m paralyzed.

“They’ll kill you if you don’t follow orders. Get up,” his tone sounds urgent and... concerned? I guess so. His head will explode as well as my own if we don’t comply .

A guard stalks to the front of our cell and points to the collar controller on his wrist. When I don’t immediately leap to my feet, his fingers mimic his head exploding, complete with gruesome sound effects. This propels me out of my paralysis and toward the bed.

There’s no reason to balk or argue. We’re both invested in making this happen.

I’m sure neither one of us wants to earn their punishment.

I slip under the thin blanket, then shimmy out of pants and panties and toss them to the floor.

My heart is hammering now, not in sexual excitement but in all-out abject fear.

Do I remember something about cats back on Earth having barbed penises?

Lion guy has untied his loincloth and, although his cock is flaccid, it looks enormous. Even if his equipment doesn’t stab or sting, I’m not sure that’s going to fit. Thankfully, it looks pretty human, albeit humongous, and I don’t see any barbs.

“Get yourself ready,” he announces almost robotically, then takes himself in hand.

His powerful right hand strokes his length from base to tip and back.

He appears as emotionally engaged as when I'm making tuna salad.

He seems to be using a practiced stroke from a time-worn formula to get down to business.

As I watch, I catch his deep, feline frown as he notices I'm not getting busy.

Before he can scold me, I cover my face with the blanket, slam my eyes shut, and slip my fingers toward my happy spot.

I have a time-worn formula, too. Even with this awful situation, between my efforts and a little spit, I think I'm ready.

I peek out from the covers to see lion guy is steel hard and ready for action.

"I'm... I'm ready," my voice is whisper-soft and shy. I slip back under the covers like a prairie dog hurrying to hide in its den.

"Turn over." This is an order. I do as I'm told and get on all fours.

This entire day, this entire process, is so surreal.

I'll pretend I'm in a dream. I can't afford to tune in to my panic right now.

I just have to go through the motions and get this over with.

The picture of that alien's head exploding is a strong incentive to do what I must in this tiny bed.

He slips the covers up, and then I feel his weight on the bed.

He gently lifts my middle, fits himself behind me, then dispassionately slips a finger inside me.

Satisfied I'm ready, he presses his cock against my entrance and waits, giving me time to adjust. He eases in gently, then pulls back, then presses in slightly more.

If I'm not mistaken, he's trying hard to give my body time to accommodate his enormous equipment.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

There's nothing sensual here. Neither of us is interested in enjoyment.

I have to give him credit; he's trying his best not to hurt me.

The way he's managing this process, giving my body time to adapt to this invasion, seems far more considerate than I would have ever expected.

When he's finally fully seated inside me, he executes three carefully disciplined thrusts, grunts no louder than a sigh, and completely retreats.

His mouth comes close to my ear, his furred, chest touching my back for the first time. His warm breath fans my cheek as his husky voice whispers, "I'm sorry."

Chapter Two

Anya

I'm not sure my life could get any weirder.

The entire landscape of my existence has turned upside down in the last few hours.

I don't have the heart to even think about the goal of this little exercise, which must be to impregnate me with lion-man sperm.

I don't want to envision the half human/half lion whose cells might be multiplying in my uterus right this very moment.

Despite my efforts, my mind flashes me a picture of an alien baby. A frisson of fear bolts up my spine.

I'm trying desperately not to feel sorry for myself or worry about what the future holds or wonder where I am or where they're taking me.

Forbidding myself to think of Mom, Dad, my two sisters, and my great friends back in Denver, I give myself permission to mourn their loss later.

I need to focus on this moment. Right now I need to pee, clean my leaky nether regions, and get back to the corner of my cell to take just a few minutes to cry. I think I've earned it.

After the peeing and cleaning, but before my well-earned complete nervous breakdown, I hear a commotion coming from down the hall.

The solid walls between cells only allow me to see the metal wall through the front bars of my cell.

It sounds like the guards are taking the girls out, then returning them.

Whatever is going on out there, and however awful it is to be in this cell, fear flares, clenching in my belly.

Lion guy is lounging on the bed, leaning against the wall again. I can tell by his blank expression that he's checked out. I'm glad he wasn't watching me on the toilet. I think I've had all the mortification I can stand.

"What's your name?" If I don't distract myself, I'm going to completely lose my mind. Besides, I'm tired of thinking of him as Lion Guy.

“Zar.”

“I’m Anya, thanks for asking,” I snap, then pause, wondering if more venom is going to spew out.

I’m hovering between two emotions. Part of me is on the cusp of unleashing a blistering tirade at him, blaming him for the fact his sperm is trailing down my thigh at this very moment.

But I know he was no more a willing participant in what just happened than I was.

The other part of me just wants to collapse in a heap on the floor and go completely catatonic.

“This is the worst day of my life.” I’m proud that didn’t come across as a moan or an accusation. It sounded factual, because it’s the truth.

I’m standing across from him, hands fisted to keep control of my emotions, which are toggling from abject fear to roiling anger. My teeth are clenched, and every muscle in my body is tightly coiled .

I’m about to launch into an angry monologue, then stop abruptly, like the wind unfurled from my sails.

It’s not his fault. He didn’t ask for this any more than I did.

Look at him. He’s in his own little world, no happier than I am.

My emotional rollercoaster speeds right past anger and stops at sadness.

“Don’t cry, Anya,” I whisper to myself even as hot liquid gathers behind my eyes and

my chin quivers. “Shit.” I don’t want to cry. Crying feels like weakness, but I can’t control the tears now snaking down my cheeks.

He shakes his head, bringing himself back to the present, then gives me full eye contact for the first time since we met. He stares for a long moment, then leans toward me, elbows on his thighs.

“There’s no way to make this easy for you.

” His eyes search the ceiling as he appears to fish for something to say.

“Being a slave is a hard life. It’s unpleasant to know you have no choices, no control over even your own body, that you must do everything the guards order.

I’m sorry you had to endure...” His gaze flicks to the bed.

“I hate to be the one to tell you that your old life, whatever it was, will never return.” He looks at me directly and adds gently, “There is no escape.”

Two tusk guys appear at the cell door as if on cue. Zar is already on his knees, facing the back wall, hands on his head. Perhaps I’m crazy, but I think he’s doing it to protect me, not himself.

The tusk guys force me at gunpoint down the narrow metal-walled hall to an exam room. In one simple nanosecond, every single National Enquirer story I’ve ever read about alien abductions flashes through my mind. I can’t get the words “anal probe” out of my mind. My body shivers in fear.

The room is stark. Robotic, high-tech machines straight out of a sci-fi movie are attached to the wall. The alien doctor is waiting for me. He’s not wearing a white coat, just a navy-blue jumpsuit and the fakest, most smarmy smile I’ve ever

encountered.

He's way more humanoid than the tusk people. He's human-sized, human-shaped, human in almost every way, except for the sky-blue skin. Slightly handsome, his face has those sunken cheeks and sharp blue eyes straight out of central casting for a generic movie villain of the good-looking variety.

"Hellooo," he says cheerily. "Now, who do we have here?"

I give him an icy stare. I refuse to make this easy for him. He wants a complete chart on me? Wants my medical history? Well, they should have thought of that before they beamed me aboard.

"A first name at least," he wheedles. "I'd hate to have to call you Patient C throughout the exam."

Icy stare. Feet planted. Maybe it's because we're alone in this room with no boar people, or that his collar controller is sitting on the counter a few steps away, but I feel emboldened

"Well, let's just get you up on the exam table." He pats it twice, decisively.

Angry glare, feet still planted, I imitate Zar's feral don't fuck-with-me look.

What do you know? It works. His shoulders sag and his eyes inspect the floor.

I get the distinct impression he doesn't want to be doing this any more than I do.

His attitude is nothing like the aggressive, threatening guards.

"Look, Patient C, it is my job to ensure that intercourse and ejaculation have occurred

in the proper, um, place. It will make it easier on both of us if you just,” he pats the table again, twice in quick succession, “hop up here and let me take a quick look.”

He has a speculum in hand and quacks it like a puppet mouth to emphasize the words, “quick look. ”

“You’re a doctor? Where I come from doctors take an oath that says, ‘above all do no harm.’” I give him the full force of my patented stink eye.

“You went to school to be a doctor, a healer? And your mission on this ship is to examine my most private space to make sure the alien I’ve been forced to mate with has ejaculated in the correct hole? Really? You can go fuck yourself.”

He looks at me, stricken. “Fuck? Myself?”

He’s incredulous, obviously not understanding the idiom. My body hums with hope. I’m getting to him. Maybe there’s no way to break out and pilot an alien spacecraft back to Earth, but perhaps I can connect with this guy. Maybe trigger his guilt and garner his help.

“Seriously, you went to years of school. Even though you’re from a different culture, you had to have wanted to be a healer when you were younger, right?”

You’re on a slave ship . You’re double checking the culmination of enforced rape .

You understand you’re actively harming sentient beings, right?

How do you look yourself in the mirror?”

Oh goodness, I really think I’ve gotten to him. His plastic happy look has completely evaporated, and his cheek muscle is twitching restlessly. He’s silent for a long while,

his face stony. “Let’s get you up on the table.” He’s looking over my right shoulder, avoiding my eyes.

All right. I think I’ve pushed as far as I’d better go today if I want to stay alive. Perhaps, though, I’ve made him think.

After pulling off my pants, I hop up on the table. Although the doctor is blue and I’m on high alert, the procedure isn’t any more uncomfortable than my annual exam back home. The entire assessment takes all of two minutes.

“The guards, the Urluts, will order you and your cellmate to have intercourse every day, and will bring you to me daily to confirm it. It would be much more pleasant for us both if you were to be more cooperative in the future.” He gives a slight bow.

Still avoiding eye contact, he lets me pull my clothes back on and escorts me to the door.

Surprisingly, Zar’s facial muscles slacken in relief after the Urluts unceremoniously deposit me back into the cell.

He’s crouched in my corner, a silent invitation for me to have the bed.

I suddenly realize I haven’t slept in... I have no idea how long.

But I’m tired and ravenous, as well as scared and angry and lonely for family and friends.

I see some kind of food bars on the floor of the cell. They must have tossed them in when they brought me back. I grab them, drop half in Zar’s lap, and plop on the bed.

“Are these edible?” I ask.

“They are nutritious, not delicious.”

I doubt they rhyme in his language, but they do in mine and at the moment, sleep deprived and hungry, it strikes me as utterly hilarious. I laugh for at least a minute, feeling more and more insane as the seconds tick by, but I just can't stop giggling.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

“You should eat, then sleep.” He pauses for a long time, then he asks, sincere concern radiating from his golden eyes, “What did they do to you?”

“No anal probe,” I say delightedly while waving my half-eaten bar, and then giggle some more. I can see by his unblinking expression he wants to know I’m okay, and my manic behavior is not reassuring him.

“Medical inspection to see we followed orders,” I add more soberly.

He nods, his gaze skittering from mine. He probably suspected as much. It may be my first day in captivity, but it is certainly not his first time at the rodeo.

Zar

She wolfed down two food bars, opened the third, and fell asleep with it still in her hand. It’s clearly been a long, grueling day for her. Is this feeling swirling in my belly empathy?

I don’t want to wake her, but I can’t sit here on the floor all night.

We’ve already mated, so I don’t imagine crawling into bed with her would terrify her.

Moving over to the bunk, I gently slide in behind her, my back scraping the wall, then loosely hang my arm over her midsection.

Before I lay my head on the mattress, I take a moment to observe her more closely.

At first, I'd found her flat face and beige flesh to be singularly unattractive.

Now I see tiny variations on her skin with interesting little brown dots on her cheeks and nose.

Her features seem soft and sweet, especially when she's sleeping.

Short, light brown curls halo her face. Her pink mouth looked pretty when she smiled.

After settling my head on my bicep, I ponder why, after all the males and females I've been forced to couple with, I'm feeling intrigued by this female. I thought sexual attraction was yet another emotion I had shoved into the far recesses of my mind and completely locked away.

Clenching my jaw, I grind my teeth to try to turn off all thoughts and feelings. Annus ago I discovered emotional numbness is the best way to tolerate my captivity.

Any a

It's almost as if someone has called me awake from inside my head. The words, "Wake up," don't come through my ears. My eyes pop open and the first thing I'm aware of is Zar's warm, furred body wrapped around me like a second skin.

Outrage flares through me for half a second because his arm is slung intimately across my waist. Then I realize this bunk is tiny, and he has at least as much right to it as I do. He's taken no liberties, and truth be told, his soft warmth is reassuring.

Unable to shake the feeling I'm being stared at, I glance out the front of the cell to see an elf-like creature.

She's three feet tall, maybe less. Her body appears lithe and graceful.

Her eyes are upturned and a shade of jade green so luminous they look lit from within.

She has elf ears like in the movies—they're oblong and point up and back.

She catches me looking at her and returns my glance expectantly.

I silently wonder if she's a prisoner or staff.

Prisoner. I hear inside my head.

You can hear my thoughts? I project the question toward her.

Yes, her voice, from inside my head, sounds as surprised as I feel.

Aliens, spaceships, lionmen and now this little elf talking in my ear? Wouldn't it be wonderful if someone slipped me some bad acid and this was just a dream?

No, this is real. Shaking myself fully awake, I remind myself job number one is to get back to Earth.

How come you have the run of the ship? I ask.

I'm the captain's pet. I'm so small and powerless they pay little attention. In exchange for favors, the captain gives me his protection.

If I wasn't cynical a day ago, I sure am now. A shiver slices through me as I wonder exactly what type of favors this little thing has to grant the male who captains this ship. Forcing that thought to the recesses of my mind, I say, I'm Anya. Nice to meet you.

Tyree.

Did you want something?

I just wanted to talk. I've never been able to have this kind of telepathy before. In the past, it's only been if someone asked, and wanted it, like the captain. I've never been able to wake someone out of a sound sleep before.

This is blowing my mind, I admit.

Me too.

Tell me, is there any way off this ship? Any way to escape? I want to barrage her with a hundred other questions, but I quiet those thoughts.

I've been a slave for a long time. On this ship for about one of your years. I have some ideas, but I don't think any would work.

Desperate, I pepper her with questions and learn a lot of useful information.

It's clear she isn't any happier about being a slave than I am.

She uses her budding powers of telepathy to cure the captain's anxiety and chronic insomnia.

She stays in his room every night, lying on the floor at the foot of his bed, and soothes him to sleep with her abilities.

Because she's always been a model prisoner, she has the complete run of the ship. The guards treat her like she's of no more consequence than a potted plant. The captain keeps her on the bridge with him, where she calms him during the day.

Could you fly this ship? I ask boldly .

I've watched everything they do. I know a lot more than they suspect. But... I would never want to mislead you into thinking I could fly this ship on my own.

I'm sure she didn't need her powers of telepathy to read my dejection.

You do want to escape? I ask.

Of course, I think all the slaves do. If it weren't for the collars, one of the batches of slaves they transport would have fought them a long time ago.

I'm not giving up, I tell her. There's got to be a way out of here for all of us.

The cell block door opens and Tyree scurries into the shadows as an Urlut stomps through the hallway doing a bed check.

With Tyree gone and nothing to distract me, I find my attention completely consumed by my proximity to my feline cellmate. His heavy, furred arm cradles my waist and his muscled front hugs my back.

I don't know what time it is, but my spidey senses tell me my bedmate has a severe case of "morning wood," because it's pressing insistently into the back of my thighs. He'll need that in a few hours when the Urluts will force us to "complete the act."

I drift back into an uneasy sleep with the words "surreal," and "lion-man," and "breeder" swirling through my dreams.

Zar

I'm rudely ejected from deep sleep to fully awake by the Urluts' loud commands to

mate. They inform us that yesterday's abnormal one-day vacation from the ludus, our gladiator school, is over. They'll take us to the gymnasium to work out as soon as we complete our bed duties .

That suits me just fine. I didn't know what to do with myself yesterday with all that time on my hands. I'm used to lifting weights and sparring all day, every day. It's good that way—less time to think. And besides, I have absolutely nothing to say to this female.

Anya wakes with a groan, face tight, her gaze darting to remind her where she is. It's obvious the moment she recalls she's in captivity on a slave vessel. Her slight look of expectancy disappears, her brow wrinkles, and her lips tighten into a flat line.

I was born into captivity, at least as far back as I can remember. Annum ago, after many unsuccessful attempts to escape followed by painful consequences, I gave up any hope of freedom. Anya has had only one day to accept her new reality.

I can see by her tight muscles and angry eyes she desires no part of the Urluts' breeding program, nor does she want any part of me. I don't blame her. Neither of us wants anyone ordering us to share intimacy.

She walks to the toilet and gives me a scathing look, silently commanding me to look away. Her race must like privacy for that. I try to imagine a life where a person could have privacy for basic bodily functions. It must be nice.

Her cheeks already flushed with embarrassment, the color deepens as she shucks her pants and dives into bed.

Covering her face with the blanket, she reaches between her legs and readies herself for me.

I grab my length to stroke it, surprised to find it's already standing proud and ready to perform.

I wait for her hushed, "I'm ready," and join her under the blanket.

She's on her hands and knees, as I'd instructed her yesterday, but I find myself yearning to mount her from the front, to see her interesting face and expressions.

I'm certain that would distress her, so I just cover her from behind, and get ready to complete the act .

I'm certain she wants to get this over as quickly as I do, so I don't know what possesses me to touch one finger to her soft halo of brown curls or stroke her cheek with my knuckle.

At first, she sucks in a breath and stiffens, but when I freeze and do nothing else, she calms herself, breathing more slowly, limbs relaxing.

I have no idea how to make this easier for her.

Placing myself at her entrance, I notice her dampness there.

I stroke the head of my cock back and forth, making sure she's slick enough to accept me.

Gently placing my hands on hers, I reassure her wordlessly.

I enter her slowly, tenderly, then finish the act as quickly as possible to cause her the least discomfort.

Any

It's not that Zar and I have a relationship of any kind, but it hurts my feelings he can't stand to be inside me for more than thirty seconds. I should be happy he's so quick about his business. It's ridiculous for me to feel insulted—but I am.

Peeking at the women in the two cells I pass on my way to medbay, I give them my wordless support.

I'm glad to see "boxer girl" in the cell next to mine is now wearing a humongous blue jumpsuit.

I would have hated to have to walk around with my boobs exposed, especially with so many alien eyes watching every move.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

The enforced sex hasn't been easy on any of us, but I think I heard her crying while "completing the act" this morning. I feel powerless realizing there's nothing I can do to help.

Paying little attention to anything but ideas of how to escape, I keep my pace brisk as an Urlut forces me down the hallways at gunpoint. While we hurry through the corridors, I notice every doorway and every turn as I look for crew I've never seen before.

If we were to stage a rebellion, we'll need to know the guard-to-prisoner ratio. I forbid myself to even wonder if the others want to overthrow our masters. Rather than being negative, I force myself to focus on escape .

Yesterday, I wasn't aware every male prisoner is a full-fledged, trained, powerful gladiator.

Zar explained this morning that the only thing they do all day every day is train and fight.

No wonder the Urluts are so quick to use shock collars on them.

Even though the guards are huge and armed to the teeth, it sounds like they would be no match for any of these warriors if they squared off in a fair fight.

My thoughts come to a halt as we arrive at medbay. Dr. Evil, who never introduced himself even though he was so insistent I give him my name, tries to get me up on the exam table as fast as possible.

I decide to converse, even if it is one-sided, the whole time I'm in the exam room. I want him to realize he's hurting us women—that we're real people with emotions. Maybe I can reconnect him to his desire to be a helping professional.

“So, assuming at one point you wanted to heal people, what happened to you? How did you wind up serving on a slave ship?” How's that for getting right to the point?

He pats the table, looking resigned that I won't jump right up. We're having a stare-down. He sighs, shrugs, and for some unknown reason, answers me.

“Student loans.”

“Say what?”

“You're right. I always wanted to be a physician, a healer. Medical training doesn't come cheap. I didn't want myself or my family burdened with my loans, so I accepted this job. It was supposed to be a quick one annum tour of duty with the Urluts on a transport freighter to erase all my debt.

“I was told I would tend the vessel's crew. I never dreamed the ship would transport slaves. Or that it would involve...” He looks forlornly down at the speculum in his hand as if it's the first time he's ever seen one. “It was bait and switch, but the contract is ironclad. ”

Those deep-set, piercing blue eyes look haunted for the briefest moment. Then he's patting the table again.

He paid the price for my cooperation today. After quickly shucking my PJ bottoms, I climb onto the table and slip my feet into the stirrups. How come they've invented space flight and they still can't figure out a way to warm those things?

“What are you going to do when you've paid your debt?” I ask afterward while I

shrug into my clothes. I'm still trying to figure out how to use this information to my advantage.

“Originally, I thought I'd go back to Dacia, my home planet. But they could charge me with war crimes for this. They'll never allow me to return without harsh punishment.”

Whoa, for being the one in total control of this situation, he certainly looks powerless and forlorn.

“I guess we're all prisoners in one way or another,” I add faintly.

He breathes a deep sigh. We both know we'll be continuing this conversation tomorrow.

When I'm back in my cell, I have nothing to occupy my mind. I think it's been two days since I was kidnapped, but now my old life seems far away. I guess it is far away. I don't know much about space travel, but I'm guessing I could be millions of miles from Earth by now.

The call center where I worked has probably already sent me a termination notice via email for my two unexcused absences.

Kinda makes me all warm and fuzzy inside, thinking about my relationship with my former employers.

They didn't have shock collars at my job, but it felt like a master/slave relationship in other ways.

My fists ball in anger at myself. I hated that crappy job.

Why was I sleepwalking through my life? How did my life get derailed?

I had plans to go to college after I moved away from home.

Instead, I accepted a shit job to ensure a steady income.

Before I realized, several years passed and I never enrolled in business school.

My plans for my future got hazier, and I got caught up in the treadmill of just getting by.

If I ever get back to Earth—like if this is a bad dream and I wake up any time soon—the first thing I’m going to do, if they haven’t already fired me, is quit that soul-sucking job and find something I’m passionate about.

I wonder if my parents and two sisters know I’m AWOL. My chin trembles as I realize they must be worried sick. What I wouldn’t give to Zoom with them right about now.

That’s a depressing thought, which is doing me no good. I will not allow myself to fall down that rabbit hole. Switching gears, I nod my head in determination. I need to figure out how to escape.

We might have a chance. After all, we have a cadre of trained fighters who probably all want to be free. There’s a ship’s officer who hates what he’s doing, and, of course, little telepathic Tyree.

After the guards transport us to medbay and back, they’re pretty scarce. There doesn’t seem to be a vast army of them on board, so they must be closely monitoring the gladiators and not bothering with us puny Earth women.

Gingerly fingering my shock collar, I decide to take a risk. Moving to the front of the cell next to boxer girl’s compartment, I whisper, “What’s your name?”

No answer. Also, no shock. So, emboldened, I ask more loudly.

“Shhhh,” is her only reply. Then, after a moment while she’s probably waiting to see if one of us gets zapped, she answers, “Grace.”

“I’m Anya. It’s nice to know your name. I was tired of calling you ‘Boxer Girl’ in my mind. ”

“I think of you as Moose,” she admits with a soft laugh. “I’m glad the doctor got me these clothes, even though I look like the doc’s Mini-Me in this rolled-up blue jumpsuit.”

“Yes, I was glad to see that. It must have been awful for you to have to walk around almost naked that first day.”

After pausing a moment while I wonder if I should mention my concerns, I barge ahead. “I’ve heard some... distressing noises from your cell. I’ve wondered if you’ve been crying. Is your guy treating you all right?” There is such a long silence I wonder if her collar’s been shocked.

“It’s awful,” her voice is rough with emotion.

I’m not surprised. From the sounds of things, I’d wondered if the guy with the red robotic eye had been considerate with her during our mandatory mating.

“Grace, I’m so sorry. Does he understand he’s scaring you? Hurting you?”

“He’s... I’m not sure if he has actual emotions other than anger.

We talk. When I told him it hurt, he slowed down.

I think he tried. He warns me they’ll punish us both if we don’t follow orders.

Maybe he thinks he's protecting me in some crazy way.

I honestly don't think he wants to hurt me. He's just so... disconnected.

"I mean, have you seen his face? His arm? I'm not sure how much of him is human and how much is robot."

"I don't know how to help. Do you think my guy could talk to him at the ludus tomorrow? Urge him to be gentler? More considerate?"

"Anything's worth a try."

My head fills with selfish thoughts—like I'm so glad Zar has been kind. I try not to have any survivor's guilt over my luck.

Luck, that's a funny word to describe such an awful situation .