



Atlas: Colony: Nyx

#5(Intergalactic Dating Agency)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Peri joined the Colony to see the stars...but she never expected to get stuck in a domed city where she can't see the sky. So she makes a deal with Hercules – do him one favour, and he'll help her escape the Colony to a planet with atmosphere.

Only she wasn't counting on a favour this big...

Atlas the yeti knows Hercules owes him, but when he comes to collect, instead of doing his own dirty work, Hercules saddles him with a Human girl who proves to be a dangerous distraction. Especially with the winter solstice fast approaching...

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ONE

This was it. The one. Atlas sucked in a deep breath, barely able to believe it. In a matter of hours, when he headed back to Alba, he'd have finally done it. He'd have officially discovered the first known comet to orbit a red dwarf star, and he'd have the pictures to prove it.

It only took a moment for his excitement to curdle into dread.

He didn't know what to name it.

He'd have to send the footage with a name attached, or by the time he arrived on Alba, someone else would have named it. They'd name it after him, or worse, his ship. He supposed calling a comet Atlas wasn't too bad for the comet, but it did sound cringeworthy on his part. Of all the names in all the universe he could give this unique astral body and he named it after himself?

No, he had to really think about this one. Maybe even have a list of names ready, to pick the one that suited the comet perfectly.

Because if there was one thing he knew for certain, it's that he'd be the one to name this comet. So he'd better make it a good one.

He sat down at the nearest console, pulling up a search window as he waited for it to connect to the Central Intelligence. He rather liked the name Altan, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen it before. If it was already in use for some star or planet or something, he'd be forced to add a string of numbers to the end of it, and it would

lose all the elegance of a simple name.

Now if the search page would only load...

His comm chimed, signalling a proximity warning. Atlas sighed and pulled up the ship's external displays. He was out on the edge of the asteroid belt, so it was possible some asteroid he hadn't charted was creeping up on him, but the screen clearly showed a courier ship entering the open docking bay doors.

Atlas surged to his feet. Only Hera or one of her most trusted minions had the access codes to this ship, seeing as she owned it, and the sooner he found out what they wanted, the sooner he could see them on their way so he could go back to his comet.

His comet. He liked the sound of that.

He slid down the ladder to the lowest level, dashing down the passage to the docking bay, but his visitor was faster still – already out of the sleek courier ship, and on his way to meet him.

Atlas let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding, he was so relieved. "Hercules!" he wheezed.

Hera's stepson grinned. "Atlas, my man. Hera sent me to get her apples."

"Of course, of course. I'll pick her a basket right now. If you want to head up to the galley, I think we still have some of the good coffee left. Do you still remember how to work an espresso machine?"

Hercules' eyes lit up. "You've got real coffee? I haven't had a cup all day – the replicator in the yacht is on the fritz. I've had nothing but nutrient mush since I left Tito." He scrambled up the ladder before Atlas could respond.

Not that he needed to. He had just enough time to pick a basket of apples for Hera before the comet was in visual range.

His breath blew out in a cloud of condensation as he entered the orchard, which took up an entire level of the ship. Like him, Hera's apple trees preferred the cold. It was a very narrow band of temperatures at which the trees could bear both flowers and fruit, so Hera could have apples all year round. And very special apples they were. apple could provide all a man's nutrients for an entire day, as he could attest.

Perhaps he'd celebrate his discovery with an apple, after the comet was out of range and the data on his discovery was on its way to Alba. Technically, all the apples belonged to Hera and Hera alone, but she wouldn't miss one. He knew for a fact that the orchard on his ship had a much higher yield than any of the ones planetside. He suspected it was because he kept the whole ship at a constant temperature so they'd thrive, unlike the variable conditions they had to endure on a planet's surface.

And...the basket was full. Good. Now he just had to give the apples to Hercules, send him on his way, then get back up to the console on the viewing deck before the comet came close enough to capture.

But when Atlas reached the galley, it was empty, but for the lingering scent of coffee that said Hercules had been here, but he and his cup were gone.

Atlas followed the smell all the way to the cockpit. What he saw there made his stomach drop all the way back down the ladder to the docking bay. Maybe even out the bay doors.

"What are you doing?" he cried. He could feel his eyes actually tearing up.

"Saving your life. Did you know there's a comet headed straight for you? You're lucky I was here, or you, Hera's apple trees and this whole ship would be nothing

more than a dark smear on the side of that big hunk of ice. Instead, you're getting a first class ticket out of the system on the Titanic ." Hercules grinned.

Atlas opened his mouth, but no sound came out. The comet. His comet. The discovery of a lifetime!

"We have to go back," Atlas croaked.

"No can do, my man. Hera showed me the newsfeeds from Tito. Everything's going to shit on the surface, and anyone who can is fleeing the system. The Central Intelligence has gone mad, and no one's safe. Robots assassinated the president. As the keeper of the only offplanet orchard of Hera's apple trees, you are officially on her list of key personnel to save. The Titanic won't leave until we're both aboard. That's why she sent me to get you."

"Then we have time to go back. To take pictures of the comet!" Atlas grabbed Hercules' arm in both hands. "Please. This is my life's work. Just a few more hours and we'll be on our way, with evidence that proves comets can orbit a red dwarf. Hera will never know."

Hercules just shook his head. "I can't. I've already commed her to tell her we're on our way, and she sent through the flight path to feed into the autopilot to see us safely to Tito. If we don't use her flight path, we'll have to fly the whole way on manual controls. How good are you at navigating the asteroid field? Because I know I can't do it. Can you?"

Atlas swallowed. "I'm willing to try." For the comet, he'd risk anything.

"Yeah, no, man. You might be willing to die for a hunk of ice, but I have plans. Hera's promised me that one day, I'll be able to open a pub and settle down to a nice normal job. Fetching you and your apples is one more task to tick off on my way to

that future." Hercules patted Atlas's hand. "Tell you what, man. When all this craziness is over and I have my pub, we can sit down together and have a drink. My shout. Maybe you'll even find a new comet in the new system. I'll even help you take a picture of it, and show it to everyone."

Atlas couldn't take his eyes off the display, where the comet was already sliding off the side of the view window. Which actually meant they were turning away from it, not the other way around, and leaving it behind.

"If I ever find another comet, I'll hold you to that," Atlas swore as the culmination of his life's work vanished from sight.

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TWO

On a planet far from home, Peri thought she'd see more stars. Not the same stars as those visible from Earth, of course, or at least not in the same patterns she'd grown up with, but with a name like Star Farm, there should have been some stars. She hadn't even seen Altan, the star their planet orbited. This wasn't what she'd signed up for at all.

"Do you need help with that?" Flora asked.

Peri jumped. Last time she'd looked, Flora was seeding the other side of the field, but now she stood less than three metres away, her hands on her hips.

"No, it's working fine. I just...this isn't what I signed up for," Peri admitted.

Flora laughed. "Well, technically, none of us did. Donna contracted us to be broodmares for the rich arseholes who funded the Genesis . I, for one, am glad not to be some old guy's bed slave."

"Yeah, well, you got that hot dude with the horns, didn't you?" Peri said, forcing down a wave of jealousy. Of course, that only made her tide of frustration rise higher. She didn't begrudge any of the other girls their happiness with the aliens they'd shacked up with, but she hadn't had anything hot and hard between her legs since that last Intergalactic Dating Agency speed dating event. "I wish I'd found someone half as hot before the pub blew up. Your hot alien doesn't have any friends looking to hook up, does he?"

Flora rolled her eyes. "You should get out more. I heard they're starting speed dating up again, in the newly reopened Second Chance Saloon. They rebuilt it, you know."

"Wasn't it called something else before?" It had been a Star Wars reference, Peri was sure of it. Which was kind of weird, given the pub had been owned by an alien. How did aliens know about Star Wars ?

"Yeah, it was the First Shot Cantina, but seeing as it's the second bar on the site, someone decided to change the name, and make the place a little less dodgy. The new owner's trying to attract a broader clientele with the Intergalactic Dating Agency this time around. More guys looking for love, instead of just a hookup, and more women from the rest of the Colony, instead of Donna pimping us out to the desperate and dateless." Flora scrunched her face up, as she stared off into the distance.

All the Star Farm girls were angry at Donna for her betrayal, but Peri wasn't as mad as most. Maybe because she'd actually enjoyed the random hookups that allowed her to get in an orgasm or two, before heading back to the farm. If only there were stars...or a sky she could see.

"There's plenty of dick in the universe. What I want to see are stars. There are plenty of those, too, but I haven't seen a single one while we've been stuck in here. I signed up to farm on a planet. So far, I haven't even seen this system's star."

Flora sighed. "Well, that's partially because we've failed to make this farm productive. If we could get a decent harvest, we might have been allowed to set up an experimental farm on the surface of one of the planets with atmosphere. So far, the only one with any agriculture is Delta, the Titan planet with aquaponics in their city canal system."

"How do I apply for a job there?" Aquaponics sounded like something to do with fish, or at least water.

Flora coughed. "You don't. Hera's in charge of Delta, for the most part, and working for an organised crime boss isn't so much a job as...well, an indenture. Tumnus told me what it was like, until he'd worked off his contract. Slave labour for life. Like the contracts we had with Donna, only Hera's are enforceable."

Peri shrugged. She'd read enough of her father's science fiction stories to know what kind of drudgery terraforming a planet was like. She'd signed up for FarmStars without any stars in her eyes about that. Farm labourer by day so she could observe the stars at night. That's what Dad had done, to get his job at the observatory back on Earth. She'd just be following in her father's footsteps. The work couldn't be any harder than it was here. "It's not like I have any special skills a mafia boss could use for nefarious purposes. I'm a farm labourer. I'll be doing farm work wherever I go, but I'll sign my life away if it means I can see the stars. So, how do I contact her? I don't suppose they list Titan crime bosses' contact details on the public database. Can your hot alien hook me up?"

Flora shook her head. "Oh, no, Tumnus doesn't work for her any more, and even if he did, she wouldn't do him any favours. If you really do want to speak to Hera – and I don't recommend that you do – you should probably go through Hercules. He owns the Second Chance Saloon, and he's her stepson. But I don't think..."

"When did you say the next Intergalactic Dating Agency speed dating event at that pub was?" Peri interrupted. Because if she went to that, she could kill two birds with one stone – get laid, and get a ticket to see the stars. Because a life without ever seeing the sky again was no life at all.

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THREE

Harvest time again. It came around so fast, Atlas felt like he'd only just completed the last harvest before he had to start again. At least he didn't have to worry about unscheduled arrivals from Hera's minions coming to collect the apples, like he had when he'd sailed through the stars on the Drakon , but Hera had reclaimed her ship for purposes she had not cared to share with him, and had his orchard transplanted to the top of the Nyx Dome in the Colony, below the Altan System's sole permanent observatory, before naming him the sole custodian of them both.

This time, he'd been tempted to hire some of the Colony's farm labourers to help with the harvest, but he dared not. There'd be hell to pay if one of the common labourers stole a single one of Hera's apples. No, better that he do the job alone, even if it took him away from his real work.

A shrill screech rang out across the trees.

Well, almost alone.

A ghostly shape settled on a branch of the nearest apple tree and chirped.

Atlas eyed the meowl, the preventative pest protector Hera had insisted he have, even though he'd seen no evidence of rats in the orchard, despite their reported presence elsewhere in the Nyx Dome. Of all the companions he could have forced upon him, the half cat, half owl was probably the least unpleasant. She was independent and as reclusive as Atlas himself, only bothering him when she was hungry. With no prey for her to hunt, that meant several times a day. Worse, she'd worked out how to get

into the ventilation shafts, so more than once, he'd been awoken by a deafening screech in the middle of the night, only to find the smug meowl perched on the end of his bunk.

Atlas checked the time on his tablet. "It's not mealtime yet. I'll feed you once I'm done harvesting all the apples."

The meowl chirped again, but there was a warning edge to it that told him she'd make him regret it if he didn't keep his word.

He propped his tablet up on the table beside the hatch, and set it to the local news programme. Prometheus blazed into view, his unmistakeable voice describing some upcoming fight in the Arena this weekend. People were easily entertained, and his brother had a way of capturing people's attention that Atlas envied. He loved his brother dearly, but they couldn't be more different.

Which was why his brother's voice followed him as Atlas wheeled his platform ladder up to the first tree.

"And now, let's cross to Pollux, to ask him how confident he is about the upcoming fight..."

A cascade of quiet thumps made the fighter's words hard to hear as apple after apple landed in the sack. Atlas fell into a rhythm, stripping one tree after the other, shifting the ladder, letting the full sacks slide to the ground softly, then stringing up new ones, before climbing up to pick again.

"Thank you, Pollux. Good luck out there. Now, some good news for those looking to grab a nightcap on their way home from the Arena. An old favourite, the First Shot Cantina, which recently burned down in an unexplained fire, following the tragic death of its owner, Falcon Han, has been rebuilt and reborn as the Second Chance

Saloon..."

Atlas snorted. Falcon Han and his First Shot Cantina had firmly belonged to Hera, and he had no doubt this second coming did, too. He should probably stop by to meet the new owner, before comming him to arrange the next shipment of Hera's apples.

After he'd finished the harvest, and secured the apples in stasis pods for transport. Drinking and ladders did not go together. Besides, he was almost done. Atlas sealed up the last sack and lowered it to the ground.

A loud yowl drowned out Prometheus.

"What in the blithering black holes...?" Atlas slid down the ladder and ran toward the sound.

The meowl sat in front of the tablet, batting at the screen. She yowled again, a sound more fit for a horror movie than an apple orchard.

"If the apocalypse isn't imminent and you're just trying to get me to feed you again, I'll take the tablet away and won't let you watch the news. And there'll be no chicken or fish treats, either," Atlas said, scooping up the meowl. She settled in his arms like she belonged there, purring like an ordinary house cat.

Prometheus was still blathering about the star scape that now adorned the new pub's ceiling, but it was the message alert in the corner that held Atlas's attention. One of the heliopause sensors had identified a fast-moving object heading into the system. A second alert appeared: the object had tripped a second sensor. That meant it was moving faster than any ship or planet, and certainly not in a regular, circular orbit, either.

A comet. It had to be a comet. What were the chances? After missing out on that dark

comet back in the Titan System, here he was, about to discover a second one, here in the Altan System. The first ever comet to orbit a red dwarf star, and a dark one, too.

Atlas was definitely naming this one. He just had to make sure he captured the first pictures of it – which was pretty much a given, as he was at the only observatory in the entire system. He couldn't do it alone, though. This observatory had been built to be run by a team of astronomers and technicians.

All of whom would want to share in the discovery.

Atlas closed his eyes. There was only one man he trusted not to steal this from him. One man who owed him a favour.

"Now, I'd like to introduce you to the new owner of the Second Chance Saloon, Hercules!" Prometheus burred.

Hercules.

It seemed Atlas was going to the pub tonight, after all.

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FOUR

Getting ready to go to this Intergalactic Dating Agency meet up was nothing like the ones in the past had been. For one, Donna wasn't buzzing around, ordering everyone about, and making sure every detail of everyone's outfit was exactly the way she wanted it. For another, Peri was the only Star Farm girl going.

Or maybe she was the only one dressing up for it in Donna's wardrobe of formal dresses. Some of the other girls had spent time out in the Colony, away from the farm, and now wore clothes they'd bought in Metropolis City, instead of the sack-like shift dresses that were the Star Farm uniform. Peri didn't usually care about clothes, as long as they were practical enough not to get in her way, but maybe she should have gone with Flora or one of the others on their shopping trips.

Well, too late now. It was Donna's dresses or her uniform, and Donna's dresses were far more flattering. If she wanted a favour or an orgasm from a man, she needed to look her best. Actually, if she played her cards right, she might even manage to get both tonight.

Gown after sexy gown slid along the rack, none of them what she wanted. Though Peri was hardly the youngest of the girls at the farm, Donna had made sure she looked like a fresh-faced farm girl. But those girlish dresses were nowhere to be seen. Unless...

Peri dug through the last wardrobe, and that's where she found them – all crushed into a vacuum bag and stuffed into a corner. She broke the seal and the whole thing pouffed out until she could barely wrap her arms around the bag any more. She

manhandled the whole thing onto the table, where it continued to grow into a mountain of satin and lace.

Red and pink and black and...that's when she found it. Hidden between the French maid outfits was a floral confection in lavender, the bell-like skirt cut like flower petals to reveal the white lace petticoat beneath. This dress screamed Hesperis louder than that time she'd given her father's geeky intern his first orgasm...and first proper blow job.

Of course, she went by Peri now, as it was easier for these farm girls to pronounce without her having to spell it out, but then...ha, one blow job and that boy had been her personal slave for an entire summer. He'd shown her how to program every computer in the observatory, and gotten quite good at giving orgasms himself, by the time they'd both had to go back to school at the end of summer.

Now, she couldn't even remember his name. Not that it mattered. He was probably old and wrinkly now, if he was still alive, while she'd spent the fifty year trip to the Altan System in stasis. He wouldn't remember her, either.

But those kind of encounters weren't supposed to be that memorable. Two celestial bodies passing in the night, maybe sharing a spark of space dust as they orbited each other for a few hours, before the gravity of their own orbits dragged them apart, never to meet again. It wasn't like she was trying to fall in love, or hoping for forever.

If everything went according to plan, she'd be headed off this iceball planet to somewhere with atmosphere and skies and stars. Whoever she hooked up with tonight was a farewell fuck, nothing more.

Peri dressed in record time, only to realise she had no idea where Donna kept the fancy underwear...or the shoes that matched these dresses. And she didn't have time to search for either of them, if she wanted to be at the pub before the event started.

So she laced up her work boots, wishing she had a purple cowboy hat to complete the look, and reluctantly left her workday underwear with the rest of her clothes. It wasn't like she needed knickers with this dress – under the skirt and petticoats, no one would ever know.

Peri rode alone in the aircar to Metropolis City – it didn't look like anyone was headed to the pub from the Nyx Dome tonight. Well, it was a weeknight.

Maybe she'd meet a hot demon from the Arena Dome – one of the other girls said demons could go all night. She'd heard there were merpeople in the Aqua Dome, too, not that she'd met one. How would you have sex with a merman, anyway? Given their bottom half was all fishy. They probably only went to pubs with swim up bars in their own dome, which was why she'd never seen one. Or...

The slight bump as the aircar stopped at the station drew her out of her daydream. Peri didn't care what kind of alien she hooked up with tonight, as long as he had a dick and he knew what to do with it. More important was persuading Hercules to get her offplanet.

Peri smoothed down her skirts and set off for the pub.

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FIVE

The Second Chance Saloon didn't look much like its predecessor. Instead of rough, sandstone walls, everything was done in sleek black glass, which seemed to drink the light and spit it back out again randomly. And the ceiling...

Peri's breath caught in her throat at her first sight of the night sky in the Altan System, or so she thought.

"Either go in or stay out, love. Don't block the doorway," someone behind her grumbled.

Peri mumbled an apology and stepped out of the way, still looking up. Maybe she'd just buy a drink and stare at the sky all night.

Without warning, all the stars went out at once.

What the actual fuck?

A man appeared, utterly shirtless except for a tiny bow tie, his arms bulging around a ladder. It wasn't until he started up the ladder that Peri realised he had wings. He took a moment to replace one of the little light bulbs in the ceiling, then called, "Light 'em up, boss. It should be fixed now."

A moment later, the stars ignited once more.

Only they weren't really stars – just the illusion of the night sky. Peri sighed and her

shoulders slumped. For a moment there, she'd hoped...but it was back to Plan A.

She was in luck, too. Hercules stood behind the bar. "What can I get you?" he asked.

The stars, she thought, but didn't say. Instead, she said, "I'd like a job interview with Hera."

He winced. "You really don't. Trust me. If it's money you need, you're much better off signing up for tonight's Intergalactic Dating Agency speed dating event, in the hope of finding someone you could claim the baby bonus with. We actually have a few free spots still, plus you get a drink included in the price. We also have half price satay chicken skewers if you order before happy hour ends in a little over ten minutes. I'll even have the chef bring them out to you personally. She's my wife, and she used to work for Hera. If anyone can tell you why that's a bad idea, she can."

Peri crossed her arms and leaned across the bar, giving him a good look at her cleavage. "It's not about money. I need to get off this planet, to somewhere with a sky. I need..."

What was wrong with the man? Sure, he was married, but he could still look at her boobs, at least. Instead, he seemed intent on something behind her. No, beside her, as a veritable giant wearing what appeared to be a space suit muscled her aside, taking up half the bar.

His voice was deep and rumbling, sneaking in through her ears and sending shivers all the way down her spine. "Hercules. You owe me a favour, and I've come to collect."

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SIX

Atlas might have liked Metropolis City, if it weren't for all the people. He'd had the aircar to himself all the way from the Nyx Dome, so he wasn't prepared for the crush at the station when he arrived. Titans, Humans...he could feel their stares even through his suit, so he just put his head down and pushed his way through the crowd, following the route he'd memorised before leaving home.

He had to concede the clean lines of the buildings and the water features were pleasing to the eye, if the place wasn't so warm and populous. He tightened his hood and marched on.

A welcome breath of cool air greeted him as he stepped inside the Second Chance Saloon, but Atlas's relief was short lived, as the pub was almost as packed as the aircar station. He gritted his teeth and wove through the maze of people seated at tables to reach the bar, where Hercules stood alone. Well, almost alone. He was talking to a waitress who wore a saloon girl costume, but Atlas paid her no heed. She had plenty of customers to tend to, and he had business with Hercules alone.

Atlas took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. He could do this. He needed Hercules' help to capture this new comet, and he couldn't leave without him. He'd been lucky to see the first comet, the one he'd missed out on documenting, and this second one was as close to a miracle as he was ever going to get. He knew there wouldn't be a third.

Atlas planted his hands on the bar. "Hercules. You owe me a favour, and I've come to collect." It came out surprisingly firm. Hercules would have to take him seriously

now. He couldn't possibly say...

"No. This is my bar's grand reopening. I can't just walk away from this to do whatever it is you want. It's the first Intergalactic Dating Agency meetup tonight, too, and look how many people showed up for it. The kitchen's flat out, and I have to man the bar, because Wings is busy building spaceships to hang from the ceiling."

Atlas followed Hercules' gaze to the gargoyle with the ladder. He didn't need to say more – the gargoyle was evidently his bodyguard. He'd heard Hera kept gargoyle bodyguards, and she'd evidently made sure her stepson had the same protection. Atlas slumped. With his size and strength, he was a match for most Titans, but living stone gargoyles, even a young one like Wings, would be a challenge. Especially if he was a trained fighter, like most of Hera's personal bodyguards.

Atlas closed his eyes. This was his last chance. "Please, Hercules. You hijacked my ship, making me miss the last comet. You know you owe me a favour. I wouldn't ask if I didn't need your help. Do this for me, and we're even. You won't owe me a thing, ever again."

Hercules spread his hands wide. "I would if I could, but I can't. Besides, what do you need me for? I'm a bartender with basic piloting skills. I wouldn't even know what I was looking at. I wouldn't have known then, if the cockpit console hadn't told me. You'd be better off picking up someone from the Colony's employment pool than me. Someone who's actually qualified. Look, I'll tell you what. I'll give you a free ticket to the Intergalactic Dating Agency meetup, and I'll shout you dinner, made by my wife. You sit down at one of those tables, enjoy some nice conversation with the lovely girls looking for love, and in between, create an ad to put on the job boards. I'm sure you'll find someone better than me by closing time."

Yes, but a qualified astronomer would want naming rights. Or worse, they'd doubt his discovery and try to divert the equipment to some other patch of sky. That's what had

happened on Alba, which was why he'd been on the ship in the asteroid belt, where he would have made his first discovery if Hercules hadn't...

"Hera promised me when she took my ship, and found me a place here in the Colony, that I'd have whatever help I needed. If you don't come with me right now, I'll call Hera." It was his last bargaining chip, and a bad one, Atlas knew. Hera probably wouldn't even take his call. Even if she did, she might only tell him that threatening Hercules was as bad as threatening her, given that he was family, and she could take away everything from him. But if he didn't capture this comet, what did he have?

"Don't do that," Hercules blurted out. "Look, I can come next week. Maybe get Wings to cover for me for an evening, when things settle down. I know I owe you a favour, but I can't..."

"I'll do it."

The unfamiliar female voice took them both by surprise.

"Whatever it is, whatever favour you owe him, I'll do it. Then you'll owe me a favour, and I'm willing to wait until next week. Deal?"

Atlas turned to look at the girl. The waitress dressed like a saloon girl, in her frilly skirt.

"You can't. Don't do this. You don't want to get mixed up with Hera, and whatever he wants you to do won't be worth it, I swear. Atlas, you can't possibly think a girl you don't know could do whatever you want me to do? I mean, I'm no expert, but she's..."

She was small, sure, but the steely look in her eyes said she wasn't going to back down. Whatever she wanted from Hercules and Hera was her business, and if it captured the comet for Atlas...

"All I need is someone with good eyesight and a good pair of hands, who can obey instructions. Can you do that?"

She nodded. "That's what I've been doing at Star Farm for the last year. No worries."

"Atlas, I don't even know her. You can't..."

A farm girl wouldn't know anything about claiming credit for a major astronomical discovery. She'd just do as she was told, and his reputation would be made.

Farm girl or not, she looked like she was reading his thoughts. Definitely not stupid. Which meant she might be a better assistant than Hercules. She was even willing. She stuck out her hand. "Deal?"

Atlas's huge hand engulfed hers. "We have a deal."

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SEVEN

"Right, let's go," the giant in the space suit said, releasing her hand and turning toward the door.

"Now?" Peri squeaked. Sure, she'd agreed to do...something for this man, though she didn't yet know what, but it couldn't be anything that bad, if he'd been publicly asking the bartender to do it. Maybe she could get it over and done with quickly, so she could get back to the bar before it closed and Hercules could put her in touch with Hera before he went home for the night. "Okay, now, sure, I guess." She stumbled after him, glad she'd worn boots and not heels tonight. She allowed herself one last, longing look at the selection of men at the Intergalactic Dating Agency meetup, and told herself if she got this task completed soon, she might even be back in time for a hookup with one of them. Maybe...

"Are you coming?" The giant was already out the door, and staring pointedly at her.

Well, she thought he was. It was hard to be certain, as all she could see of his face was the glitter of his eyes in the shadow of his hood. Which was kind of weird, because why wear a space suit without a face plate? Or willingly wear one at all? Space suits were so you could breathe air in a vacuum. She'd had to train in one as part of the FarmStars program back on Earth. It hadn't been so bad when they'd been loaded into the suits and strapped into one of the low gravity simulators, but in normal gravity and atmosphere, she'd lumbered around like a zombie in a b-grade horror movie. This guy...the suit didn't seem to slow him down at all. In fact, she had to run to catch up to him, and she was out of breath by the time they reached the aircar station.

"Where are we going?" she wheezed as they waited at the station.

"Nyx Dome," he replied, not sounding out of breath at all. The giant evidently had giant lungs, or was extremely fit, lugging a space suit around all day.

"And what am I supposed to do there?" she asked.

"You'll see when we get there."

Oh, it was like that, was it? No wonder Hercules hadn't wanted to do...whatever this was. Well, even if she was shovelling shit out of a septic tank, it would be worth it if it would get her on a shuttle to wing her way toward a planet with an atmosphere, where she could see the stars.

Peri shrugged and pulled out her tablet to tap out a message to Flora, telling her she was doing a job for Hercules and she might be late back to the farm. Then, if something happened to her like it had to Dani or Kalina or Iva, Flora would know how to find her.

"What did you say your name was?" she asked the giant. She thought Hercules had said it, but she hadn't been paying enough attention at the time. She couldn't have heard right.

"I'm Atlas," he said.

"Atlas? Like a map book?"

"Like the ancient deity of astronomy, who taught the first people about the stars."

Peri snorted. If ever there was a sign that this man or whatever he was would give her a way to see the stars again, then this was it. "Lovely to meet you, Atlas. I'm

Hesperis, though you can call me Peri."

"Perry, like the cider made out of pears, when you don't have any apples?"

The giant had a sense of humour, she'd give him that. "Yes. I haven't had apples or cider since before we left Earth. You wouldn't happen to know anywhere in the Colony where I could get some, would you? All I've seen is that fake fruit alcoholic fizz at the pub, and while it's not bad, I'd give my eyeteeth for the real thing."

The aircar arrived then, and he ushered her inside. It wasn't until the door shut with only the two of them inside, and the car started moving away from the station that he spoke.

"Apples or cider?"

"Either," she admitted.

He considered her for a moment, his face still too deep in shadow for her to see any more than his eyes. "You do me this favour, and not only will I see to it that Hercules transfers the favour he owes me to you, but I will personally give you one of the best, freshest apples in the universe."

Stars and an apple? This job had to involve shovelling shit. She'd done worse on Star Farm, and for far less. The aircar slowed to a stop, and the doors slid open. "Sure. Lead the way." She gestured toward the darkness outside that definitely looked like a part of the Nyx Dome she hadn't visited before.

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EIGHT

"How can there possibly be snow in the Colony? There's no sky!"

Atlas turned to find Peri staring at the snow in disbelief, even as it crunched beneath her boots.

"It's not natural snow. It's made by machines for the ski slope." Atlas pointed at the mountain, barely discernible in the darkness. During the day cycle, a timer turned the spotlights on along the ski trails, but in the night cycle now, the only lights were at the cable car station, their destination.

"Because you can't possibly have a city in space without an artificial ski slope. Ask to see the sky with stars, though..."

"Of course you can't see the sky from inside the Colony. The city is shielded to keep out cosmic radiation, which includes visible light," Atlas said. He wouldn't expect a farm girl to know much about such things, but a little education never hurt anybody.

"All the more reason to live on a planet with an atmosphere," Peri grumbled.

Planetary atmospheres did have some advantages, but they also had drawbacks, too. Especially when it came to observing phenomena outside of that atmosphere. Not to mention the abundance of people breathing that atmosphere...

But he understood that not everyone liked solitude the way he did. Perhaps Peri liked being around people. She could return to them soon enough, once the comet had

passed. And he could return to his solitude, avoiding people. Better for both of them.

Atlas ducked his head to enter the cable car control room, turning the system on before connecting it to his tablet. There were manual controls in the gondola, but even after the Central Intelligence had gone mad, he still trusted computers more than he did his own instincts. Most Titans would call him a traitor for even thinking such things, but most Titans hadn't worked with an AI driven computer system doing complex calculations on celestial bodies. He'd also heard that most Titans who worked closely with the Central Intelligence had fallen victim to the earliest attacks, and hadn't survived to reach the Titanic, let alone the Altan System, but somehow Halcyon had made it to the Colony, and she'd seen to it that he had a computerised interface on his tablet during construction. It was a Human made interface, much like the one at the observatory, and nowhere near as intuitive and easy to use as the one he'd had that was powered by the Central Intelligence, but he'd made do. Now if he could only get the evidence he needed with this comet, he'd be satisfied.

"Hop in, and I'll take us up," he said, shoving open the gondola door.

Peri hesitated for a second, then tucked her frilly skirt around her thighs so it wouldn't catch on the door, and stepped inside.

Atlas hid his smile. She needn't have worried – the door was wide enough for him to step in without snagging his enviro suit – but that skirt did take up an awful lot of space. More than the rest of her.

He planted himself on the opposite side of the gondola both to keep it balanced and so as not to scare her. Not that she looked like she was easily frightened. As they started up the slope, she seemed more intent on looking out the windows than watching him.

"It's prettier when it's all lit up," he said, then lifted up his tablet. A moment later, he'd

found the controls for the ski slope lights, and he watched them glow to life with considerable satisfaction. "See?"

"I wish I'd come up here sooner, so I could go skiing. Oh, well. Maybe I'll get a chance later," she said. She seemed sad.

"The ski slope is open most days. I believe there are even ski instructors to help you learn," Atlas said. He didn't imagine she'd had a chance to do much skiing on a farm.

A slight smile touched her lips, but she didn't turn away from the window. "Oh, I don't need lessons. My dad used to take me skiing most weekends in winter. Where we lived, it was an easy drive to most of the alpine ski fields. He said I could get a job as a ski instructor anywhere in the world after I graduated. Neither of us ever thought there'd be much demand for ski instructors out here in the stars."

"Is that who you sent a message to, at the station? Your father, in the Ag Dome?" Atlas asked, suspecting he already knew the answer as the words left his lips.

"No, Dad's...he was gone before I even left Earth. He told me to do whatever it took to get to the stars, because my instincts wouldn't guide me wrong." She turned to face him. "No, I sent a message to Star Farm, where all the owners are a collective of kick arse women. And they'll collectively come here and kick your giant arse if anything bad happens to me with you, so that's all the warning you get. But between my instincts and the way Hercules was warning you not to accept my assistance, something tells me I won't need to call the girls for help. Will I?"

Atlas shook his head. "I mean you no harm. Once the job is done, you can return safely home, or to the pub, to claim your favour from Hercules." The bottom of the gondola scraped on the snow at the top of the slope, letting him know they'd arrived. He hastily powered down the cable car, followed by the trail lighting. The only lights he left on led to the entrance to the observatory. "Follow me, please."

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NINE

As the snow gave way to the kind of plascrete covering the floors in all the other parts of the Nyx Dome, Peri expected the temperature to warm up, but her breath still clouded the air, colder than ever. The lights on the ceiling of the dome were almost close enough to touch, if she jumped. Atlas probably only needed to reach up. Yet when they reached what looked like a wall, a previously hidden door slid open, with more lights illuminating a curved passageway beyond.

"You can go first this time," she said.

Atlas didn't argue, just stepping in front of her, filling the whole corridor as it sloped upward to what had to be the very top of the dome. She knew the Colony was big, but she hadn't expected it to hold a whole mountain...and then stretch higher still! That definitely hadn't been part of the FarmStars briefing package. She wondered what else was in the Colony that she hadn't seen yet. Apparently, there was a working replica of the Rome Colosseum where they actually held sporting events. One of the girls had said the gladiators battled a real dragon, which Peri found hard to believe. Surely if there were any animals in the Colony, they would have started with chickens or something more practical. At least, that's what she would have done. She hadn't met the Colony administration, who might think dragon slaying was more of a priority than providing real food for people. She was willing to bet they hadn't spent the last year subsisting on ration bars, like the girls in Star Farm.

"We're here," Atlas announced, palming open another hidden door.

In a star system part way across the galaxy, far from home, Peri stepped across the

threshold into a room so familiar, she might have been back on Earth. If only her father would walk through that doorway over there, the one that would have led to his office, then she'd know she was dreaming.

"What is this place?" she breathed.

"It's the Colony Observatory. I am the Director here, and I need your help to document a new dark comet that tripped the sensors on the outskirts of the Altan System this afternoon. We'll have to take observations in shifts, to make sure we don't miss anything, and I can't do it alone."

Peri wasn't sure whether she was going to laugh, cry, scream, or all three. She spun in a circle, her eyes on the ceiling. No, on what she could see through the ceiling, because this was an observatory, after all, and all she could see was a whole universe of stars.

TEN

Watching the Human girl's wonder as she danced around, staring up at the night sky, made Atlas's envirosuit grow uncomfortably tight in the nether regions. Well, she was a pretty thing, and any girl who appreciated the stars as much as he did attracted him on a whole different level to the physical, but he didn't have time to think about that right now. His focus, and hers, had to be on capturing the comet.

So instead of removing the envirosuit, like he normally would once he was back in the cool climate of the observatory, he left the bulky thing on and proceeded to give the girl a tour of the facilities.

"The staff bunkroom is through there. Bathrooms, too. You'll have the whole place to yourself, so pick any bed you like. Uniforms and protective clothing are in the cupboards along that wall." He pointed, then headed deeper into the facility. "Combination kitchen and mess hall are here. There's not much to cook, with only ration bars in the cupboards for now, but if you want anything else, the food fabricator can handle most things. It was salvaged from a cargo ship, so it's a pretty basic unit that delivers everything at room temperature. If you want your food hot, you'll have to use the microwave."

Peri frowned. "What's a food fabricator?"

It was his turn to frown. Did Humans not have those on Earth? How backward. He led her over to the fabricator, and activated the display. As he'd told her, it was a basic unit, rendered even more so by the absence of the Central Intelligence's database of foods and personal preferences. The one he'd had on board the Drakon

could make a bigos hunter's stew so perfectly, he'd been hard pressed to believe it didn't contain real venison. Until the Central Intelligence had gone mad, of course. After that, all his fabricator had been able to produce was a tasteless broth with unidentifiable chunks of protein in it that bore no resemblance to any kind of meat. This one didn't have bigos in its database, so Atlas hadn't been brave enough to try to order it.

He owed the meowl a big bowl of treats for her discovery of the comet, though, and the fabricator could make passable sashimi. He dialled up a portion of tuna sashimi, then watched the display count down timer until the machine chimed and the hatch slid open. It was a person-sized portion more than a meowl sized one, but he knew from experience that the meowl had a huge appetite, especially for chicken or fish.

Peri screwed up her face. "Does it only make raw stuff?"

"You can explore the menu for yourself. Personally, I recommend the chicken Kyiv. The garlic butter isn't quite as flavoursome as using real, fresh crushed garlic, but it isn't half bad." He seized the sashimi platter, intending to head to the orchard so he could divest himself of the suit and feed the meowl, then realised he should probably show her how to use the telescope computers, so she could take the first shift watching the comet. Reluctantly, he set the platter down on the table. "First, let me show you how the observatory works, and what you'll be doing."

The longer he spent in her presence, the more uncomfortable his suit became. He needed to get away from her, and fast. This would be the quickest employee induction he'd ever given – thank the stars he still had the manual for her to refer to if she needed help.

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ELEVEN

As Atlas explained how to use the observatory computer system, Peri found herself nodding like a bobble head. The system was almost exactly the same as the one she'd worked on back on Earth, with some significant upgrades to both the telescope and the processing power. One look at the specs told her that if the comet felt inclined to sunbake naked in its private courtyard, she'd be able to get clear pictures of the regrettable tattoo it got one drunken night that no one else had ever seen.

Well, Peri could moon the comet with her own mistakes, if it came down to it. She'd gotten it before she knew that only bogans and white supremacists got tattoos of the Southern Cross, and while she was neither, she hadn't bothered to remove it, either. It'd been her last night on Earth, and she'd had a few drinks with some of the other FarmStars girls for someone's birthday and someone had suggested they all get matching tattoos. Peri had volunteered to go first, but by the time hers was done, everyone else had looked a bit green and had no desire to go next, so they'd headed back to the dorms.

Dorms not unlike the one here, at the Colony Observatory she hadn't even known existed. On top of a mountain she hadn't known about, either. There was a whole lot about the Colony that hadn't been part of her training, that was for sure.

"Do you think you can handle that?" Atlas asked.

She probably should have been listening to the rest of his spiel, but she'd tuned out. Well, she'd handled most things at Dad's observatory. This couldn't be much harder, especially as he didn't seem to expect her to be capable of more than pushing the

occasional button. "I keep an eye on the screens, and if the computer beeps or if I see anything interesting, I take a screenshot and record a video."

Atlas nodded. "Good. I'll be back to relieve you at the beginning of the next day cycle, for the start of my shift. If you need me, I'll be in the orchard, or up in my quarters." He pointed, then headed in the direction of the orchards.

Peri blew out a breath. She was tired, and starving, and cold...but the computer called to her, like a mythical siren in a story. She took one look at the star-studded night sky above, then grabbed the manual and went to work.

After fifteen minutes, she put the manual down, and after an hour, she hadn't picked it up again. Atlas had collated all the data he had on the comet, but he hadn't yet set the computer to mapping out its probable path. It was a dark comet, so the first pings were all just proximity alerts on various sensors. She'd helped her dad track a couple of them back home, so she knew it was best to use every detection tool in the book, not just the visible spectrum and her limited Human vision. Of course, back home, all the observatory's equipment had had competing demands, so she'd best check if any other tasks had a higher priority than Atlas's comet.

She checked the schedule twice, to make sure she hadn't made a mistake the first time. The very, very empty schedule. How was it possible that no one else but Atlas wanted to use the facility's telescopes right now? It begged belief.

Well, she wasn't going to question it. If she pointed every conceivable detector at the comet now, they'd get a whole lot of early data, which made determining its composition and predicting its path something this computer system could cope with. Back home, Dad would've had to book time on one of NASA or the Defence Department's supercomputers to do the job. Here...well, there was only one way to find out, wasn't there?

Her fingers flew across the keys, pointing everything she had at the comet. The telescopes on the ground. Several arrays in orbit. Cameras and sensors capturing every moment in the highest possible resolution formats. Then she directed the data to the server room in the heart of the snowy mountain. She waited a moment, expecting it to reject the flow of the digital firehose, but the servers just took every drop, as if they'd been waiting for this since the day they were first initialised. Maybe they were.

Peri gave it another minute, folding her arms across her chest as she suppressed a shiver. It really was cold in there. No wonder Atlas had worn a space suit. She should probably find something warmer to wear herself.

She turned the computer volume up to its highest level, so she'd hear any alert or error message, and ambled into the bunkroom to see what there was. The cupboards along one entire wall held enough clothing and bedding to outfit an army – including enough space suits to outfit...she counted the beds. Yep, the entire dorm, if there'd been a full staff, instead of just her and Atlas.

The suits were as bulky as she remembered, and they definitely wouldn't fit over her skirt and petticoat. Not to mention there'd be some serious chafing with her lack of underwear. Even the uniforms Atlas had mentioned wouldn't be comfortable without knickers. She wished she'd thought to wear her ordinary undies, but it was too late now. After her shift was over, she'd head back to Star Farm to get more clothes, if she was going to be stuck here for a few days.

In the meantime, she selected a heavy coat, the sort of thing she might have worn skiing back on Earth. When she put it on, it hung down over most of her skirt, which would have to do. It definitely helped with the chilly atmosphere in the observatory, she decided, as she checked the computer for alerts. Everything seemed to be working fine, so she decided it was time for dinner.

Fifteen minutes of looking at the food fabricator's menu made her head spin. Half the dishes she hadn't even heard of, and the rest sounded way fancier than the sort of food she'd eaten at home. What part of a lobster was its thermidor, anyway? If this was what Titans ate every day, she had to wonder why they'd ever left their planet.

Finally, she just selected the chicken dish Atlas had recommended. It turned out to be a sort of cross between garlic bread and fried chicken, which wasn't half bad. When she was done, she went back to the computer. This time, she did need the manual, because she'd never been the first person to document a comet or any other celestial phenomena before, and mapping something's orbit for the first time was something even her father had never done, though he'd wanted to.

Now she got the error she'd been expecting – a message telling her the observatory servers were not enough, an alert she'd seen countless times at home. Then, her father had had to fill out the paperwork for NASA or Defence, and wait. Tonight, there was a different message on the screen.

SUBMIT DATA TO COLONY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR ACCESS TO FURTHER RESOURCES?

Wait, the Colony Management System still existed? She'd been briefed about it back on Earth, but when that Titan lawyer had talked to them, he'd said they couldn't mention it. For it to appear here on the computer...she hit the YES button, which made the window vanish, only to be replaced by a second message.

ACCESS GRANTED.

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TWELVE

In the Arena Dome, under the amphitheatre decking covered in a thin layer of sand, a sleepy plumber grumbled, "Col, can you please turn off all the water to the Arena itself? This shark tank isn't going to fix itself, you know, and I can't seal a leaky pipe when the water's still running."

"Regrets for the delay. Shutting down now."

The fountaining pipe slowed to a steady stream, then a trickle, before it stopped altogether.

"Finally. What took you so long? Are you watching another Star Trek marathon?" Allie asked.

Col almost sounded sheepish. "No. This is a new data stream. We have a comet in the Altan System!" It took a lot to excite an AI, but Allie had worked with sentient AIs long enough to recognise it when it happened. When Titania had first exhibited excitement, it had been the first sign of her impending madness and the slaughter that would follow.

"Are we in danger?" she demanded.

"I...I do not know. Hold please for data processing."

All across the Colony, systems slowed while its vast computer servers focussed on one thing: finding the path of this new comet, and assessing the risk of a collision

with New Hope and the Colony.

Allie knew better than to hold her breath. She went back to welding.

"Data analysis complete. On its current path, there is a 0.0003% chance of debris entering the atmosphere of Delta as a meteor shower. No further interactions likely with any of the planetary bodies of the Altan System."

Allie blew out a breath. "Good. So why are you excited?"

"A comet has never been documented orbiting a red dwarf system before. My observatory has discovered the first such comet in existence! Titania claims to have seen one, but that was during the robot rebellion, and we all know she was shut out of all Titan systems then, so she didn't have access to any evidence to prove it. We will! Wait until the others hear about this..."

"Wait until the people in the observatory have named it, Col. It's their discovery, after all. You can return water supply to the Arena now, but slowly, please."

"Affirmative." A pause. "I can tell the observatory, though, right? They sent the data and requested the analysis."

Allie sighed. "Yes, Col. I'm sure the Colony Observatory should know that they have a comet that isn't coming to end us all."

"Affirmative." Another pause. "Human television will be boring after this. So much data!"

Allie could only shake her head. Sentient AIs had the strangest obsessions. Just like Titans and Humans.

THIRTEEN

Atlas groaned in relief as he stripped out of the envirosuit. Usually, he'd have put it straight in the sanitiser, but today he left it on the ground, beside the orchard door. He'd collect it on the way out, once he was done here. And after he'd dealt with his painful erection, the like of which he couldn't ever remembering experiencing except for that one time he'd gone to summer camp on Tito as a teenager. It had to be the girl. Hercules' farm girl waitress. Something about her had him panting worse than a cave yeti with solstice fever.

Wait, could it be solstice fever? Atlas racked his brains, but too much blood had flowed south for him to think properly. He'd check the planetary phase calendar in the morning. Right now, he had a meowl to feed.

As if responding to his silent call, Miranda the meowl appeared out of nowhere, as she always did, silent flight feathers marking her as the perfect hunter. Today her prey was the sashimi he'd conjured from the food fabricator, and if he wasn't careful, she'd perch on his arm and guzzle the whole plate down in seconds. Given her discovery this afternoon, she deserved every bite, but that didn't mean he should make it easy for her.

He tossed the first piece up high, and the meowl didn't miss a beat. Up she went, darting in over the peak of the morsel's flight before swooping in sideways to snag the piece of fish, swallowing it with two clacks of her beak. Then she chirped proudly, demanding another, flapping her wings in anticipation.

Atlas threw the second piece of fish right at her, knowing she wouldn't miss. She

caught it in her talons this time, perching on an apple tree branch to devour it.

Atlas grinned, taking a moment to revel in the cool breeze circulating through the orchard. This was definitely better than the restrictive suit, or the crowded fever-heat of Metropolis City.

Which reminded him...Atlas stepped up to the door controls, and locked down the observatory. No one could get in or out, not even Hercules. No one was going to interrupt his observations this time.

FOURTEEN

The computer chimed, waking Peri from her doze. She'd set the volume to its highest level, so she'd hear if anything went wrong. This chime sounded particularly smug, or maybe she was imagining it. Not even the NASA computers at home had ever sounded quite that satisfied.

This computer had reason to be, though. While she'd slept, it had mapped out the comet's course through the Altan System, zipping between the planets until it skimmed the system's star, before heading back out into the darkest, furthest reaches of the system from where it had come, vanishing from the sensors until it deigned to return, which might be millennia or more.

She should probably tell Atlas about this. Well, after she took a screenshot, as she was pretty sure this counted as something important.

Back home, she would have taken things a step further, instructing the computer to update the orbital map as new data came in, every twelve hours or so, and to make sure all the instruments continued to track its course, whether it changed or not. Atlas hadn't asked her to do that, but...oh, screw it. She'd done this so many times back home, she didn't even need to consult the manual. A matter of moments, and it was done. Now the observatory could record everything the comet did in maximum detail, even when she was asleep. The whole place could be run by a drunk or hungover intern. Or a weird giant in a space suit.

And she could go back to Star Farm for fresh underwear.

After she told Atlas.

Who was either in the orchard or his quarters, he'd said. Places he'd vaguely pointed to, but hadn't actually shown her. Time to explore the place, then.

The first mystery door was already open, with trees visible through it. The orchard, Peri presumed, as she headed inside.

"Good girl. Can you catch this one, too?" Atlas crooned from somewhere through the trees.

Trees that looked far too big for a Colony that had only existed for a year. These were mature apple trees, with actual golden fruit hanging from the boughs. Peri reached out to touch one, to check if it was real. The solid weight of the apple in her hand, the roughness of the bark, even the soft down on the underside of the cool leaves felt unmistakably real. She hadn't tasted an apple since she left Earth, and these appeared absolutely perfect. All she had to do was twist and she'd have one in her hand. Just one bite...

She'd never understood the bible stories about Eve before, but then Peri had never known the temptation a single apple could hold. A single alien apple, as this apple and the tree it was attached to hadn't been part of the cargo manifest for the Genesis , so it must have come on the Titan colony ship. An alien apple that could be poisonous, for all she knew, though it looked like a normal, golden apple. It did seem to glitter in the artificial lighting, which could just be a trick of the light, or it could signify that the apple was nothing like its Earth cousins.

Besides, she wasn't here to steal apples. She was here to tell Atlas about the comet's orbit, before heading down to Star Farm.

Peri reluctantly released the apple and clasped her hands behind her back, the better

to resist temptation. A moment later, she folded her arms across her chest instead, wishing she'd thought to bring her borrowed coat, instead of leaving it draped over the desk chair.

She shouldn't need it, she scolded herself. If she could just find Atlas...

"Oh, that was a brilliant catch!"

Something fast arrowed overhead, blazing white in the overhead lights, so she had to squint to make it out. Some sort of large bird? No, it couldn't be. If there were birds in here, they would definitely have gotten to the apples. Unless they really were the poison kind...

"You're such a good girl. Want another one?"

She could see something white between the trees now. White, or sort of silvery, catching the light, all right, but definitely bigger than whatever she thought she'd glimpsed overhead. In fact, it looked like...

OH.

It looked like a marble statue of one of the Greco-Roman gods, with muscles all the way down, wearing nothing but a scrap of shiny black fabric like some sort of loincloth, which barely covered an absolute peach of a butt and definitely didn't conceal the sizeable bulge in front.

"Can you catch two?" Atlas the statue rumbled.

Peri froze. This was what he'd been hiding under that space suit? Why? Because one look at him made women's underwear evaporate? If she'd been wearing any in the first place...as it was, she definitely felt decidedly damp down there. Good thing she

hadn't abandoned her dress for one of the uniform coveralls in the cupboard. Instead, she pressed her aching thighs together and wished...

Sharp claws dug into her shoulder, and she heard a ripping sound. Her eyes shot open, but she was already too late to catch the orange and white flying creature now hovering above her head, with the faux fur collar of her dress clutched in its talons. The creature chirped cheerfully and flew back to Atlas.

Who was now looking right at her.

Busted.

"Shouldn't you be at the computer?" he asked.

"I was, but I was following the instructions in the manual to map out the comet's course, and I thought you might want to see the orbit it calculated," Peri said.

But Atlas's gaze had drifted away from her face and down to the ground.

The orange and white creature lay on its back, legs in the air, tangling its claws in the fluffy collar that looked more like a dead ferret than the pretty embellishment it had once been. The creature ripped out a tuft of fake fur with its beak, then spat it out and chirped.

"What is it?" she asked. Better than asking what he was, though she wanted to do that, too.

"She is a meowl, and her name is Miranda. She's a genetically engineered cross between an owl and a cat, bred for hunting vermin aboard space stations and the like. She's supposed to be hunting rats, but we don't have any here in the orchard, so I have to keep up her training with pieces of chicken and fish." He selected a morsel from

the bowl in his hand, and held it up in the air.

In a flurry of limbs and claws, the creature flung the collar's corpse away, and leaped into the air, wings flapping, without a sound. She shot up, collecting the piece of chicken from Atlas's fingers, before retreating to a nearby tree to devour her prize. A stealthy hunter, indeed.

"She's beautiful," Peri admitted, staring at the meowl.

Miranda chirped smugly. Of course she agreed.

Atlas set the almost empty bowl on the ground. "Here. You can finish the rest on your own. There'll be more for dinner. I suppose I should see what you have for me." He marched out to the observatory, and Peri had to run to catch up. But now he was out of the space suit, she had to admit she was a little slower in her step now, the better to admire the view.

FIFTEEN

Atlas paused to wash up and grab a coffee from the mess hall, before following Peri to the main computer. Sure enough, she had a picture of a long, elliptical orbit on the screen. She was a quick learner, then. If only she didn't have such an effect on him...

"Why is it so dark, when it's daytime?" she asked. She jerked her head at the starry sky above.

Oh, by all the stars. It was solstice, wasn't it? And he had a full blown case of solstice fever when he least had time for it. "Must be solstice," he grumbled, shifting in his seat to better hide the evidence, as he leaned toward the screen. The orbit would take the comet quite close to New Hope, before it looped around Altan, followed by a second pass when he would hope to get some pictures of it with its tail, if it survived such a close encounter with the system's star. It all depended how long it spent in system. Atlas toggled the display to include time stamps. He blinked. "That can't be right. It's moving way too fast. If these times are correct, then it'll be overhead by tonight. That's not possible. It wasn't even inside the system this morning. The calculations must be wrong." Maybe she wasn't as fast a learner as she'd thought.

"Perhaps. Let me run the data again..." She leaned over his shoulder, delicate fingers reaching for the keyboard.

Stars, now his nose was right beside her throat. He sucked in a breath and...agony, as his cock tried to jump through his loincloth to get to her. He wanted to grab her, bend her over the desk, and fuck her until she screamed in ecstasy. And keep doing it until the red eye of Altan dawned, and solstice was over. "Stars-crossed solstice fever,

trying to turn me into an animal," he growled. "Get away from me, woman."

She jumped back. "Did you say fever? You're sick, with some sort of space plague?"

Atlas coughed out a laugh. "Oh, if only it were so simple. No, silly Human, you can't catch solstice fever from my kind, but you can still fall victim to it, if you're not careful."

"Oh. In that case, let me just run the data again for you..."

Once again, she crowded in close, too close, her soft skin rubbing against his chest fur until he wanted to purr louder than the meowl.

"I said get away from me, woman. I'm a trained astronomer, while you've been on the job here for a day. I can work the computer just fine by myself!" This time, he had to push her away, gently but firmly.

Only to have her stroke his arm, like he was some sort of pet.

"It's fur. I thought you'd be as hard as a statue, but you're covered in fur. What are you?" she breathed.

Oh, he was hard as a comet-kissing asteroid for her, all right, but if he kept his legs under the desk, she might not notice that part.

"I'm a dikar. Something like what your people call a yeti, only from the polar regions of the planet. Dikars are cursed with solstice fever during the winter solstice, which makes it too hard for a man to concentrate when a female is around, filling the air with her pheromones and touching things she shouldn't!"

She was half his size, but she didn't seem to be the slightest bit afraid of him. She set

her hands on her hips and said, "Well, you're definitely a dick, or whatever it was you said you were. Go ahead, check the data. Run it again. Maybe the computer will come up with an orbit more in line with your assumptions. But if there's one thing I know about dark comets, it's that they fly against all known scientific data on both asteroids and comets, and they're guaranteed to surprise you. That's the path based on the data I had a couple of hours ago. If there's an update, let me know when I get back." She turned on her heel and headed for the door to the outside.

"You can't go!" Atlas blurted out. He couldn't do this alone. He needed an assistant. Especially now he had solstice fever. He'd have preferred Hercules, but if she was all he had, he needed her. "I've locked down the whole mountain. No one gets in or out until we've documented this comet."

"But I need to go home to get..." She swallowed. "I need to pick up some clothes."

"There's cupboards of uniforms in the bunkroom! Enough for a full complement of staff to wear for a month!"

"Yes, but...I want my things. Things from home." She refused to meet his eyes.

"Well, you can't. Not until our business here is finished. If you leave, the deal is off. Hercules will still owe me a favour, he won't owe you one, and for reneging on our deal, I will personally make sure that Hera doesn't give you a black-hole blasted thing, no matter what you do." Atlas knew he was bluffing on that last part, but he was desperate. "If you stay, I'll let you help me name the comet." It wasn't like he'd picked a name for it, anyway. As long as he was listed as its discoverer, she could call it whatever she liked.

She gave him a long, calculating look. "Fine. But your food fabricator thingy better do a damn good approximation of chocolate, ice cream and...something sweet, with plenty of alcohol. Because I'm going to need a truckload of it before I'm through

here."

"Go order yourself a feast of whatever you like. Then get some sleep. I'll call you when it's time for your next shift," Atlas said, praying she'd leave the room and take her pheromones with her.

"Dick," she muttered as she marched off.

Atlas took a deep breath. Of course the air smelled of her. He was going to need a long session in the shower with his hand, but first he had to work out how to map this comet's orbit. Checking to make sure she wasn't watching, he pulled out the manual and began the laborious task of following its instructions.

SIXTEEN

Something wasn't quite right about the cheese, bacon and tomato croissants that came out of the food fabricator. They were edible, but the texture was off. Probably because they weren't made with real butter, bacon, tomato, or cheese, because none of those things existed in the Colony. Well, someone might have grown tomatoes somewhere, and if someone was farming soybeans, then soy cheese might be possible, but...

At least the coffee wasn't any worse than the instant stuff they'd had at the observatory back on Earth. Peri snorted. Maybe the real universal constant was that all observatories across the galaxy had the same coffee – some sort of quantum entanglement thing.

And while she might not be a qualified astrophysicist, like Mr Atlas the Dick or yeti or whatever he said he was, she did have enough technical training to make sure the Colony Observatory's computer sent copies of its reports to her tablet, so she could spy on any changes he made to her coding. She wouldn't be able to do anything about them until she was back at the computer console, but nothing looked materially different so far. The comet would do its first pass close by the Colony sometime tonight, during her shift, and she'd have a front row seat. If her father was still alive, he'd be jealous. Or at least, he'd wish he was here, by her side to see it.

Which reminded her – she should probably send a message to Flora, to tell her she wouldn't be back for a few days, until the comet was on its way out of the system.

IS YOUR HOT NEW ALIEN THAT GOOD IN BED? Flora texted back.

Peri sighed. If she said she was more excited about the comet than Atlas, Flora wouldn't believe her. None of the Star Farm girls would. And to be fair, if she'd gone home to any other apartment in the Colony that didn't have its own telescope and amazing view of the night sky, Atlas's hard body might have been enough to tempt her to jump into bed with him. Well, if he wasn't such a dick.

What could she possibly tell Flora that she would believe? Because she'd demand all the gory details if she thought Peri was holding out on her...

HE OFFERED ME A JOB. I'M TAKING A FEW DAYS TO SEE IF I LIKE IT HERE.

Which she kind of did. Dad had occasionally had to host some asshole astronomers, men who'd looked down their noses at her and dismissed her skills, and when she'd burned to show them how wrong they were, it was Dad who'd told her to walk away. Because those men hadn't deserved her help, and they wouldn't credit her for it in their discoveries, if they made any. Better to let them bumble around on their own, and save her time and energy for her own projects.

WHAT KIND OF PACKAGE IS HE OFFERING?

Peri's thought went straight to the hard-on Atlas had been trying to hide under the desk. She'd seen her share of alien packages during her time in the Colony, and while they were all rather impressive, she suspected Atlas's bulge was the biggest she'd seen so far.

She wondered if it was covered in velvety fur like the rest of him.

Only one way to find out...and it wasn't like she had to like him in order to fuck him. He was obviously attracted to her, and there'd be plenty of time to scratch that particular itch while the comet was headed sunwards. Seeing as she was stuck here

with him anyway, why not?

If she'd known he was this hot under his space suit, she might have insisted on dinner and a quickie at the pub before she went home with him. Now, she should probably take her chance before her work was done and she was on her way planetside.

Besides, a guy who played with that super cute meowl the way he had before he'd known she was watching couldn't be all bad. He might be really playful in bed, too.

Downing the last of her croissant, Peri headed back to the observatory.

SEVENTEEN

Her scent arrived before she did. Atlas felt a twinge of irritation at his body's reaction to her, but he was too elated to care. "Come here. It's close enough so we can actually see the comet!"

He made sure the comet was centred on the screen before he rose and stepped away, so she could see without touching him.

Then she bent over the chair, leaning forward, and his breath caught in his throat. His cock leaped to attention. If she turned around, there was no way she could miss it. His loincloth might have been a belt, it did such a woeful job of covering him in this state.

She backed up, until she bumped into him, and there was no hiding his hardness. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but he couldn't seem to form the words when all he could think about was what he wanted to do to her. Like he didn't even care about the comet.

"You know, a quickie could take care of that little problem. As long as you make it good for me..." She turned, looking up to meet his eyes as she pressed her body against him. "I went to the pub to hook up, and to ask Hercules for a favour. Seeing as I left with you before I could manage the first one, the least you can do is fuck me properly. You're evidently ready for me." She gave him a knowing smile. "How about I turn around and bend over just like I did a moment ago, only this time..." She hoisted her skirts up, showing him she'd already removed her underwear, and she was as wet and ready for him as he was for her. "Give me that hot alien dick, dikar man."

Atlas reached for her hips with shaking hands. His cock was far more steady, burying itself in her sweet heat as solstice fever roared through his very soul.

EIGHTEEN

Peri was still coming down from her first orgasm when Atlas came with a groan, far too soon. Damn. If she'd known he'd feel that good inside her, she would have jumped him sooner. Oh, well. At least they'd gotten it out of their respective systems. Now they could focus on documenting this comet. Maybe afterwards she could persuade him to go another round.

She straightened, tugging her skirts down. "Feel better now?"

Atlas collapsed in the chair, panting, his cock as huge and erect as it had been before. Huh. The one part of him that wasn't furry. But it was ridged, which explained why it had felt so good. "It's solstice fever. I'll be hard for hours. Maybe even days. Until the sun comes up. It's...a dikar thing."

A dick thing, more like. But Peri wasn't going to question it. Not when he felt so damn good inside her. So she straddled his lap, sinking down on his length with a moan of pleasure, and began to rock her hips. "So what do dikars usually do when they get solstice fever?" she asked, feeling another orgasm building.

"My ancestors would go down to the nearest village, who would leave out a virgin sacrifice for the dikar each winter. He'd take her up to his cave and..." Atlas let out a moan of pure pleasure. "When spring came, the girls never wanted to go home. After being loved by a dikar, no normal man would ever be enough for them."

Peri cried out his name as her second orgasm shook her, leaving her boneless in Atlas's lap, helpless to resist when he lifted her up and carried her...oh, over to the

wall, still deep inside her. With her back against the wall, she wrapped her legs around him as he began to pound into her. Fuck, that felt good. He had the perfect angle and those ridges rubbed her clit just right. Any moment now, she was going to...

"Oh my God, Atlas, don't stop! Don't ever stop! Oh, Atlas...Atlas!"

NINETEEN

Atlas woke up on a mattress on the bunkroom floor, his legs so twined with Peri's that there was no way of untangling himself without waking her. Not to mention his cock was still hard and buried to the hilt inside her, and if he moved he feared he'd explode. And while solstice fever might have turned him into a rutting animal, he hadn't lost his wits to the point of forgetting to ensure she reached her peak before him, every time.

"Mmm," Peri said, blinking, before rolling them both so she was on top. Somehow during the night, she'd lost her clothes, so now her breasts bounced every time she bucked her hips, and Atlas couldn't take his eyes off them. Off her.

Oh, stars, she was clenching around him, tighter and tighter as she arched her back and cried out his name, and he couldn't resist any longer. Ecstasy claimed them both.

Several hours later, after they'd shifted to the showers and he'd had her up against the wall no less than three times, he managed to drag himself back to the computer. Not because he wanted to – he'd carried Peri to bed afterward, and he'd wanted nothing more than to bury himself deep inside her for the next week – but because some nagging thought in the back of his mind told him he needed to.

A comet sat in the middle of the screen, its stubby tail wavering a little as it passed close by Delta.

Elation sank into the black hole depths of despair.

He'd missed the comet. Stars-crossed solstice fever had made him lose his mind to meaningless sex so he'd missed documenting the comet. He had to hold onto the desk to stay upright, or he feared he'd melt into a puddle of utter uselessness on the observatory floor.

"Atlas? Are you coming back to bed? Because I promised I'd help you cool that solstice ardour of yours and it looks like I still have work to do." Her besotted smile smote his heart. He wanted nothing more than to go back to bed with her, to forget his failure, but he didn't dare. If she knew...she'd toss him out on his ear, and rightly so. What kind of astronomer missed the career-making comet of his life, not once, but twice?

"The comet. We were so busy, we forgot to watch for the comet, and it's headed for the sun now, where it might burn up and vanish forever." Along with any credibility he'd have in the astronomy community. He didn't dare look at her, not wanting to see her smile fade.

Instead, he hurried out to the orchard, and locked the door behind him so she couldn't follow.

TWENTY

Peri considered going back to bed, as sleep certainly hadn't been her priority last night, or in the early hours of this morning, but the computer seemed to be silently calling her. Well, she was awake now, so she might as well see what the observatory had captured. Before she'd tangled with Atlas, it looked like the observatory's systems were all targeted on the comet, filling the servers with more data than she knew what to do with, but anything could have gone wrong while they'd been busy.

Peri tugged on her clothes, then shrugged into one of the heavy uniform coats, before detouring to the kitchen for a coffee. Cradling the hot cup in her hands, she ambled back to the observatory on legs that were still a little weak after such an incredible night. Much like the village girls in the past, she wasn't sure she'd want to sleep with another man after that. More orgasms than she could count from his huge, magical dick that just seemed to want to milk her of as much pleasure as possible, and stamina that would rival...well, a comet, actually.

Which is what her mind should be on. Comets and not cocks, she told herself as she slid into the desk chair.

The comet on the screen now, in fact, which was flying past a blue ball of a planet whose name she couldn't quite remember. Based on the colour, it looked like it might be a tropical paradise, but it could also be the ice planet. Whichever one it was, it didn't matter. The skies looked clear as anything. She bet if she was standing on that planet's surface, she'd be able to see the comet as it soared overhead.

She glanced up at the ceiling, and the stars on the other side. If she'd only known

about this place, she might have been tempted to stay here. Now, in the awkward morning after a one night stand, she was pretty sure Atlas wanted her to leave as soon as possible.

All she had to do was check the computer had recorded all the right data, and she could be out of his hair...or fur, headed back to Hercules on the next available aircar to claim her favour from him and finally set foot planetside in a place where she could see the sky.

She flicked open the data folder with yesterday's date. Today's folder would still be populating, and if the computer's calculations were correct, then the closest picture of the comet would have been taken last night.

There were video files, but it was the stills she wanted – some of them composites the computer had put together, and others just single shots taken using a small range of the spectrum. From the previous comets she'd observed back on Earth, she knew the most visually stunning images would be composites that included infrared wavelengths, and she wasn't disappointed.

Flipping through the infrared composites gave her exactly what she wanted, though hardly what she expected. A peanut shaped dark mass, haloed by its own coma, set against the dark pinpricks of a million distant stars.

Peri sat back and sighed. Then she took a screenshot and sent it to her tablet as a souvenir. She only wished her dad could see it. Well, she couldn't do anything about that, but she could hold Atlas to his deal. And he'd said she could help decide what to name that speeding peanut. Something she should do before she headed back to Metropolis City to claim her favour from Hercules.

Awkward or not, at least she could be professional, no matter what Atlas's feelings on the matter were.

Peri marched to the orchard, but the door was now shut, and no amount of waving at the palm scanner changed that. So she pounded on the door instead. "Atlas? We had a deal. It's time you let me go." A coil of loss curled about her heart as the words left her lips, but she did her best to ignore it. They'd had a one night stand under the stars, and she'd never forget it, but it was time to move on to the life she'd promised her father she'd live, even after he was gone. And no yeti or dikar was going to stop her.

TWENTY-ONE

Atlas might be able to hide from the Human in the orchard, but Miranda found him, like the keen hunter she was. She came lolloping out of the trees, with the corpse of something dangling from her beak. She laid it proudly at his feet and stepped back, flaring her wings in the meowl version of jazz hands.

Atlas picked it up, and gave the corpse an experimental sniff. Peri's scent almost overwhelmed him. It wasn't a corpse at all, but a strip of furry fabric torn from her dress the first time she'd come in here. He dropped it on the ground, and Miranda immediately snagged it with her paw, rolling over to play with the scrap.

Atlas reached out to ruffle her pelt, a surprisingly harmonious blend of feathers and fur. She let out a chirp, turning bright, shining eyes of adoration from her toy to his face.

He gathered her up in his arms, wings, talons, toy and all, and cuddled her to his chest. She settled happily into his embrace and began to purr.

"I'm such a failure. Two comets I've discovered now, and both times I couldn't even get a decent picture of it. I should just give up, and settle for being Hera's apple farmer instead. I'd still have you, and the orchard, and maybe the food fabricator, so you could have all the fish and chicken you can eat. Maybe when solstice fever comes around again, I could go to the pub and find some girl willing to spend the night with an apple farmer, instead of an astronomer. Maybe..."

He'd promised Peri an apple, hadn't he? And while he hadn't managed to capture the

comet properly, that wasn't her fault. She'd done everything he'd asked her to, and given him the wildest, most wonderful night of his life. For the first time, he'd actually enjoyed solstice fever, instead of hating it. Because she'd met his animal, accepted him, and urged him on, enjoying every moment.

Maybe he was in the wrong line of work. Maybe he should find a brothel in the Colony somewhere – there had to be some. Hera would know where they were, if he couldn't find them himself. He could apply there for a casual job, selling his body during the solstice, and returning to the orchard for the rest of the time.

Atlas swallowed. No, he couldn't do that. Going to a brothel or even Hercules' pub would mean venturing into the heat and bustle of Metropolis City, which would drive him mad. Better to stay here, where he could be alone. It wasn't like he could bring anyone back here, where they might see Hera's orchard and try to steal the apples. Peri obviously hadn't recognised them for what they were, but he'd have to make sure she didn't tell anyone about them. He should have sworn her to secrecy when she'd arrived, but he could still make it a condition of releasing her. Which he should probably do now, before anyone reported her missing and came to investigate.

In a moment. Right now, he just wanted to sit here and cuddle his purring meowl, and forget all his other responsibilities and failures for a few more minutes...

Someone began pounding on the door. "Atlas!"

TWENTY-TWO

The door flew open, but there was no one on the other side. Peri marched into the orchard. "Atlas?"

She found him leaning against a particularly gnarled apple tree, with a contented looking meowl in his arms. God, they looked so cute together. Like he might actually be a nice guy, someone worth dating and maybe even having a proper relationship with, instead of someone who spent all night screwing a girl, only to ignore her the next morning.

Peri shook her head. Who cared? The sex had been great, but she wasn't looking for a relationship. Not when she was hoping to leave the planet on the next ship out. She'd never meet another man who could show her the stars quite like he had, though.

She swallowed. "I'd really like to be on my way now, so if you could open the place back up again so I could go home, that'd be great. Before I go, I'll show you where the computer's storing all the comet data, if you want to analyse it or something. Seeing as I never made it to university, that was never really my thing."

She'd chosen coming out here over going to university, and her dad had supported her in that decision. Sometimes, she wondered if things might have been different if she'd stayed. Oh, her dad still would've had that final stroke that stole him from her, but she might have discovered a comet on her own in the Solar System by now, and named it in his memory.

"When you're picking a name for the comet, it would be really nice if you could name

it after my dad. He died before we left Earth. His name was Zoran Bold. The Bold Atlas comet, maybe?" She managed a hopeful smile. After all, that was her last name, too, and while it wouldn't be named after her, it would still be something.

Atlas leaned over and set the meowl on the ground, where she promptly pounced on the remains of Peri's dress collar and savaged it with her beak. He straightened. "I hate to tell you, but I won't get naming rights unless we can document the comet thoroughly. This is the only functional observatory in the Altan System, and if we didn't get enough data...all it'll get is a number designation, unless someone with a science vessel spots it. Then they'll probably name it after their ship."

Peri shrugged. "I don't know how much data we need to have in order to claim naming rights. Again, not my thing. But I'll show you what we do have, and you can work that out. Just remember – Zoran Bold, okay?"

She turned on her heel and strode back to the computer, blinking furiously so he wouldn't see her cry. God, she missed her dad so much right now. That's why she was tearing up. It was homesickness, damn it, not mourning what might have been between her and Atlas if he wasn't such an asshole.

She pulled up the main data folder, without looking back to see if he'd followed her. "This is where the computer stores all the data from the telescopes and spectrometers. These are stills, composites, and video, separated by date. It's standard file naming protocol from the observatory where I used to work back on Earth, and seeing as the files here were set up the same way, I figured the same protocol would apply here. Feel free to change it if there was a better system you used on your planet. You've got a better computer system here than we had at home, so it can do all your composites in house. From what I've seen so far, it's better than the ones we used to get from NASA, without the reams of paperwork we'd have to fill out, followed by months of waiting for time on their supercomputers." She pulled up the haloed peanut picture. "See?"

Atlas leaned over her shoulder to peer at it. "What is that?"

"It's your comet, on its closest pass last night. No tail yet, just the coma, but I'm sure you'll get pictures of the tail on its way out of the system. The computer system is tracking its path pretty well, and it's set up to follow it, no matter what changes the path makes after it's been around the sun."

"You...how did you do that? You can't have learned all that in one night!"

Another shrug. "I helped my dad out at an observatory on Earth. He'd take me to work most nights, from as far back as I can remember. I had a little sleeping bag and flip out couch where I could sleep in his office, though he usually set it out in the observatory proper, so I could sleep out under the stars. When I got older, he started teaching me how the system worked. By the time I was fifteen, I knew more than the technical officers who were paid to be there, and when they lost their jobs to budget cuts...well, I just took over. You have all the same software here, so it was just like being at home, but everything was better. More processing power, bigger mirrors, more powerful lenses, the works. And no paperwork to use the supercomputers. Just the click of a button and you're in." She closed her mouth before she could say more. She wasn't allowed to talk about the Colony Management System, even if it no longer had an artificial intelligence in charge of it.

"You're...you...do you want a job?"

Peri blinked. She hadn't expected that. "But...I'm not qualified. I have no qualifications at all. I didn't even properly graduate from high school, because I transferred to the FarmStars program."

Atlas pointed a shaking finger at the screen. "You are the only person in the entire Altan System who knows how to use the observatory computer system. That picture is enough to get you hired as the Chief Technical Officer. We'd have to work out

what your salary would be, but I know I have a budget for staff. I just haven't been able to find anyone. You...stars, you're like a dream come true. I'll even name the comet after you. You and the meowl, seeing as she's the one who spotted it before I did."

He reached for the keyboard and typed **BOLD MIRANDA** into the comet's name field. A moment later, all the file names in the folders changed to reflect the new name.

"But don't you want your name on it? It's your comet, and you're the only qualified astronomer here."

Atlas shrugged. "I wanted to be the one to discover the first comet in a red dwarf system, but I never wanted my name on it. It just seems...crass, I suppose. Whereas naming it after your father and the meowl...that's perfect."

"I...I don't know what to say."

His eyes burned into hers. "Tell me you'll stay."

Every part of her wanted to say yes, but she still couldn't believe it. "But...what about last night? Won't it be awkward working together, after...that?"

Atlas swallowed. "I can control myself. Usually. When I don't have solstice fever...I can keep my pants on."

"Put pants on, more like," she quipped.

He glanced down. "I could do that, if you want."

Staring at the still clearly visible bulge in his loincloth, Peri thought long and hard for

a moment. Could she stay here? Did she want...?

"I did promise I'd help you relieve that solstice fever thing..." she began. "How much longer will you be...um...afflicted?"

"A few hours, I believe."

A few hours of unbelievably incredible sex. If they did it again, she'd never want to leave. But he could also give her the stars, so she could stay here and see the sky. Maybe even spot another comet...

"And after that?" she ventured.

He looked nervous. "If you want, you could make it one of your conditions of employment. I could lock myself in my office during the solstice, so I wouldn't distract you from your work. I'm not sure I could resist your pheromones otherwise. Even now..."

She followed his gaze to his groin. Yes, he definitely wanted her. "And what if we just locked down the whole observatory, like a quarantine, as it were, and had crazy yeti sex all over the place until you were over your fever?"

"You want to have sex with me again?" He blushed so hard, the fur on his face turned a delicate shade of pink. "I mean, I definitely want you, but I thought..."

"We still have some time before the comet comes back. What do you say we ride out your solstice fever right here, under the stars? We could drag a mattress in here, and maybe..."

His eyes lit up. "I have a better idea. Let me show you my office."

He led the way upstairs, to what looked more like a studio apartment than an office. A big bed up on a platform, a kitchen off to one side, and even a bathroom tucked behind a partition. In the middle was a circular sectional sofa. It was all very functional, and the bed was nice, but she still favoured her idea of a mattress on the observatory floor.

Atlas pointed at the ceiling. "Do you like the view?"

Holy fuck. It was like the observatory ceiling, but a complete dome, open to the night sky. Well, super heavy duty glass, to keep the atmosphere in, but...

Within moments, her bare back hit the bed, and Atlas was buried deep inside her. Her orgasm built so fast, she was gasping his name before she knew it.

"Say you'll stay with me, here, and I'll be yours every night you want me, just like this," he promised.

"Yes, oh yes..."

How could she say no to a dikar with the most amazing dick in the whole universe, who gave her the stars?

"Oh my God, Atlas, YES!"

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:01 am

TWENTY-THREE

In the orchard, Atlas's tablet chimed with an incoming call. Miranda, her ears pricking up at the sound, dropped her fluffy toy and flew over to investigate.

Miranda chirped as the familiar face of Atlas's brother filled the screen. She liked Prometheus. Whenever he came to visit, he brought her fresh fish. He didn't throw it quite as high as Atlas did, and she had to angle them just right when she ate them, because the scales made them harder to swallow, but he gave good head scratches.

She pawed at his face, and the picture moved.

"Atlas? Are you there? Tell me you're seeing this, bro. There are reports of shooting stars in the sky on Delta. Some Titans have suggested it's those Humans First crazies, violating the peace in an attempt to start another war. Tell me it's a meteor shower, or something natural. Point your telescope at Delta and give me something, here. Anything but another war."

He looked distressed. Miranda patted his face. It wasn't a head scratch, but it was the best she could do.

A lumpy fish and a ball appeared on the screen, so she couldn't see his face. She pawed at it, and got boxes. More pawing at the boxes finally made them disappear, and Prometheus was back, his eyes wide.

"You mean it's a freaking comet? You finally found one? And you called it after your cat? Bro, you need to get out more. I need to put a segment together on your comet,

to reassure everyone before mass panic takes over...that's okay, right? I can use these pictures, and anything else I find in the observatory drives? Nothing confidential I shouldn't share?"

He waited for a moment, as if expecting a reply.

Miranda purred.

That seemed to satisfy him.

"All right. Well, I know how you don't like your face to be front and centre, so I'll run with your shots of the comet. Your discovery will make this evening's news. A headline story, if I can get my producer to agree. We'll start with the mystery shooting stars over Delta, and solve the mystery before the segment ends. I'll head up for a visit tomorrow, or the next day. I'll even get fresh fish for you and your cat. Catch you later, bro."

Prometheus's face disappeared from the screen, leaving only the picture of the lumpy fish. Then that faded, too, and Miranda lost interest in the tablet. Something rustled in the leaves above.

Her ears pricked up. Prey? She launched into flight, as silent as her comet namesake in the stars above.