



# Glitch (Crashland Colony Romances #4)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Stuck on a mountaintop with a dangerously hot alien pirate and matchmaking hologram cat. This is going to be a disaster.

I dont need an alien breathing down my neck while I work, no matter how attractive he is. His broad chest, muscular arms, and wicked smile dont change anything.

Nope.

Not one bit.

Karnacs smoldering gaze might melt steel, but hes still a Prytheen warrior, one of the pirates who attacked our ship and stranded us all on Crashland. I cant overlook that, not even if Glitch, my static-eyed hologram companion, seems determined to push us together. Can I?

**Total Pages (Source):** 14

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am*

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MOLLY

The silence of the maintenance bay made it a fine retreat from the other inhabitants of Vid Station One — a grand title for Crashland's only vidstation, but then the boss had a flair for the dramatic. I had one of the camera drones open, parts arranged around it as I swapped out a motor.

These moments were what I lived for, being able to lose myself in my work and forget where I was. Forget about the crash that stranded us here, the alien pirates who'd forced us down. Pirates who somehow were our allies now. I let all that fade into the background and got on with making the world a little bit better, one repaired gadget at a time.

There. The new motor fixed in place, I started reassembling the rest of the drone. With the hard part over, my focus relaxed, and I paid more attention to the world around me. As soon as I did, I realized I wasn't alone. Putting down my tools with exaggerated care, I turned to see my boss hovering over me.

"How's the camera, Molly?" Allison asked by way of saying hello. How very like her, all smiles when in front of the cameras but not willing to waste her interpersonal skills when she wasn't. "We'll need it first thing, Harmon is doing another dramatic reading of his poetry."

Well, of fucking course. Allison's 'secret' boyfriend got whatever he needed as soon as he wanted, and we all had to pretend not to know about the relationship. Or the last

one, or the one before that...

“Should be up and ready for the morning recordings, Allison,” I told her. The actual figure was half an hour at most, but I’d learned you never go wrong giving the boss a too-long estimate.

Especially when that boss is Allison Greene. She was one of my least favorite humans on the planet, and there she stood, grinning at me with a smile that didn’t reach her bright blue eyes. Long blonde hair which she somehow kept neat and tidy no matter the circumstances, way too much pink, and a perky smile that distracted every man she pointed it at. Today she wore a matching pale pink jacket and skirt, pink pumps, and pink lipstick and nail polish. On her shoulder rode Tulla, her pink tarantula companion.

Allison’s cold eyes made her look like some wicked witch out of a fairy tale. I could believe that, but she was also the only person here who knew anything about vid broadcasting. Her old position in front of the camera wasn’t ideal, but at least she’d seen how a station operated. That was enough to put her in charge of Vidstation One. Someone had to decide on the programing schedule, decide who’d take which show, and Allison got the job.

Never mind that her experience was presenting a weather show back on Earth. Not the best place to learn the ins and outs of management, but she had more experience than anyone else at the Joint Colony.

Which meant I ought to talk to her about the other problem.

“While you’re here, boss, I’ve got something new to report. The ghost’s visited again.”

She didn’t laugh, which was a small mercy. I saw the tug at her lips, the sparkle in

her eyes, the careful moderation of her breath. When she spoke, though, no sign of her doubts came across in her words. “The ghost, eh? What’s it taken this time?”

“Not much, I think. The worst is a spool of number five cabling. That’s the shared signal and power cable we use for the transceivers.”

Allison didn’t swear. Somehow her silence made it clear that she didn’t swear. It was worse than having her shout obscenities at the top of her voice.

“How much do we have left?” she asked, smile back in place. “I take it we can use the system as it is?”

“Should be able to; all the transceiver connections look fine. The proof’ll be when you try to call the Wandering Star . But that’s the last of the cable — until we get more, if any of it fails, I won’t be able to fix it.”

Which would be a serious issue. The Wandering Star was the colony ship that brought us here, crashed in the hills below. Now it served as the seat of government for the Joint Colony, and the idea of being isolated from it made my skin crawl.

“I’ll add another couple of reels to the resupply list first thing tomorrow,” Allison said. Her companion AI rubbed its forelegs together, making a note.

“Couldn’t you put it on tomorrow’s shuttle? I’d feel more comfortable if we had it sooner, just in case,” I said, not wanting to argue but finding it hard to let this go. “If any of the cabling fails, it will cut us off from the colony.”

Allison looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “But the big antenna will still work, right? We’ll be able to call for help over that. I don’t want to disturb someone’s sleep to get that cable put onboard before dawn tomorrow — it’s just not that urgent. Now, is there anything else missing? I’ll add it all tomorrow.”

There wasn't much point in arguing — it was her decision. At least we'd only be out of it for a month. Taking a breath, I tapped my wrist communicator to call up my companion AI, Glitch. He popped into existence, a small black cat with eyes made of static. A paw reached out for me, then flickered back to repeat the motion three times.

This time Allison didn't hide her laugh. "You know you can get that replaced any time you like, right? Just contact the colony and ask, they've got plenty. I'll stick it in the order for you if you like?"

I did know that, and she knew I did too. Hardly a day passed without someone taking the time to remind me — I could throw my holoprojector into the recycler, pick up a new one from stores, and boot up a new companion, one without Glitch's, well, glitches.

"I think he's charming," I said, scratching Glitch behind the ear. Allison shrugged.

"It's your companion," she replied, a slightly more honest smile crossing her face. Was it better that she showed her honest opinion when she mocked me? I sighed. Some questions didn't have answers.

Glitch unfolded the inventory, a display hanging in midair, and I plucked out the inconsistencies. "To answer your question, a few things have gone missing here and there. The cable spool, two batteries from the charger, four tubes of sealant... nothing that I can see a pattern in. Nothing urgent aside from the cable."

I flicked the data over to Allison and the shimmering tarantula on her shoulder caught it. In some ways her choice of AI design was the most honest thing about her, a deadly spider colored the same pink as her lipstick.

"I'll add it to the other reports," Allison said without glancing at the data. "Do try to keep a better eye on these things in future, though."

I frowned, opening my mouth and then shutting it, saying none of the things I wanted to. How the fuck am I meant to do that, stay up all night? Or, Why don't you come down and keep watch?

All an argument would get me was more grief. Allison expected a can-do attitude to her requests, no matter how unlikely.

“Oh, one more thing. I forgot to mention this earlier, but you'll have some help from now on — the Joint Colony agreed to send us another technician. You'll meet him when he arrives on the supply shuttle tomorrow morning, okay? Fabulous.” Allison didn't wait for an acknowledgment, turning on her heel and walking out.

“Maybe I should have hit her,” I said to Glitch, who nodded supportively. “When does the supply shuttle arrive, anyway?”

Glitch displayed that as a clock: 6am. Then the present time: 10pm. What utter fucking bullshit was this? I'd promised Allison her camera drone back in operation, and now she'd ordered me to go to meet this newcomer? I scrunched up my face.

“If I get right to it, I should get all of five hours to sleep before I go meet my new assistant. Thanks a fucking lot, boss.”

The worst thing was that we weren't expecting any supplies on this delivery. It wouldn't even be stopping here if it wasn't for this new technician arriving.

The wind screeched past me and I wrapped my arms around myself, following the winding trail down to the landing pad. Crashland's pale sun hadn't risen yet, though the glow at the horizon showed that it wouldn't be long before it showed itself.

Behind me, the transmitter tower stabbed the heavens like a dagger. This high up the air was thin enough to slow me down, and Glitch scampered ahead, reaching the edge

of my hologram projector's range and turning back to mewl pitifully at me.

"I'm coming as fast as I can, Glitch," I told him, amused by his impatience.

Glitch meowed again, or tried to. It dissolved into a burst of static as his image fragmented and reformed. The damage to his projector wasn't going to get repaired, not on Crashland. One more thing to blame the Prytheen pirates for.

The aliens had attacked the colony ship, forced us down on an unknown world inside the borders of the Tavesk Empire. And they'd been forced down too, so we had to share this planet with them.

One of the very best things about working on the vidstation was that it put me far from all the Prytheen.

Lost in morbid thought about the aliens, I almost didn't realize we'd arrived. Our landing platform was just a cleared area large enough for a flyer to land on. Lights drilled into the stone marked it out for the fliers overhead.

The sun came up behind me, casting long, sharp shadows over the field. Behind me, all the way back at the transmitter, I heard the whirring of the solar collectors opening and angling themselves to catch the light. A terrible grinding noise accompanied number three; something was wrong there, probably a worn-out bearing.

"Move that up the list, Glitch, it's getting worse." There were too many things going wrong all at once, and I kept rushing from one emergency fix to the next. Routine maintenance had fallen far behind, but it would be nice to stop something before it became a disaster one of these days.

Glitch pixelated and vanished, reappearing on my shoulder and extending a paw. The flier was approaching.

The heavy, blocky things weren't really meant for landing on such a small area, but whoever was flying this one didn't seem to believe in taking it slow. I scowled — the human colonists were always careful to the point of paranoia with the fliers. The ones we had were all we'd get; no way would anyone be able to produce more fliers on Crashland.

But the Prytheen? All, or nearly all, were daredevil pilots. And for some reason, Captain Joyce thought it was okay to let them fly. Probably because she'd fallen for their pirate king, or whatever he called himself.

The Prytheen pilot didn't even land, just spinning the flier so the cargo ramp descended over the landing platform. Show off.

The ramp lowered, and in the dark shadows inside I saw a figure. A tall man, a long coat...

He stepped into the sunlight and the blood drained from my face. The world spun. My pulse hammered in my ears.

His skin was blue, and he stood at least seven foot tall. A Prytheen? The motherfuckers sent me a Prytheen and didn't warn me?

That's it, I'm broadcasting porn at prime time. The promise I always made to myself when angry with the colony leadership, a revenge ridiculous enough to make me laugh and take the edge off.

For the first time I asked myself where I'd get hold of the porn.

The Prytheen warrior descended the ramp and jumped down the six-foot drop to the landing pad. Behind him, the flier's engines roared, and it took off to wherever the fuck it was going next, leaving me staring at my nightmare come to life.



I couldn't stop looking at him. Tall, muscular, he looked the part of a pirate. His long coat fluttered in the wind, where most Prytheen wore nothing on their torsos. Perhaps that was his concession to the cold?

Maybe, but his chest was bare beneath it. That became ridiculously clear when the wind blew it open, displaying his broad blue chest, scars across muscle as though he'd been savaged by some great beast. A locket hung around his neck.

At his right hip he wore a blaster, one of the Prytheen weapons that didn't function on Crashland. On his left, a sword. An honest-to-god sword.

Long dark hair whipped in the wind behind him, framing a rugged face, the scar that cut across his left cheek pulling his lip up into a sneer. Intense violet eyes gazed back at me, a quick flick up and down followed by a longer, lingering look.

The shiver that ran through me had nothing to do with the freezing temperatures. In fact, I felt warmer than I had in weeks.

Approaching me, the Prytheen set down his big duffle bag and stopped just out of arms' reach. "I am Karnac of the Silver Band, Layol's Clan, and I am pleased to meet you."

His voice, gruff and deep and powerful, spoke to my body in ways I could hardly understand, let alone put words to. Whatever it was, my body wanted more. My brain focused on the meaning of the words: Karnac of the slaver pirates was more like it, but I had too much self-control to let myself say that.

Unfortunately, nothing else came to mind. I turned in silence and headed back to the station.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am*

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### KARNAC

The human female stood there, silent and motionless, just looking at me. My introduction made, I returned the favor, cursing the heavy jacket she wore. Yes, the thin air this high was cold. Granted. A bracing chill, not a freeze needing so many layers.

The hints of curves under her clothes intrigued me, made me want to see more. Strands of flame-red hair escaped from under her hood, framing a pale face, full red lips, and bright green eyes. If not for the anger in her eyes, she could have stepped out of an art exhibit labelled The Human of Karnac's Dreams.

A hologram sat on her shoulder, looking at me. A 'cat' I believed the humans called that animal type, but there was something different about this one — its eyes were the gray of static on a view screen.

"Hello?" I tried again. "I am here to assist at the Vidstation One. You are here to show me the way?"

It wasn't easy to keep bitterness from my voice. Coming up this mountain was emphatically not my idea, but I'd had no choice. Auric, the leader of Prytheen in the Joint Colony, wanted me here, and so here I was. Meeting this female might make up for the inconvenience, though. Something about her called to me on a primal level, made me want to pounce and ravish her and show her the pleasure a real male can give a female.

I held back for now. It would be a poor introduction to the others of the station to arrive late because of hours spent making love. Humans have strange hang-ups about such things.

“I’m Molly King,” the human blurted suddenly. “ Chief technician. Come with me.”

The stress she put on ‘chief’ made me smile. This Molly took pride in her work, and that suited me. Too many humans adopted a fuck it, it’ll do approach. And beyond her words was her voice. A sweet sound, one that made my chest tighten and my manhood stir. Aside from being angry with me for no reason I knew of, Molly seemed designed to be my perfect match.

Is this what the mate-bond feels like? I’d heard the poems by those lucky enough to meet their khara, heard a hundred bawdy songs in the vague hope of understanding. None of them prepared me for this. I ached for her, needed her touch, wanted to ravage her and show her true pleasure. Restraining my urges with difficulty, I smiled at her and looked for an appropriate way to let her know.

But Molly didn’t give me a chance to say anything more. She turned and stomped away, leaving me to follow her onto a track winding itself upward through the rough terrain towards the unmissable tower that stabbed the sky. From here, signals reached almost the entire planet, giving the Joint Colony a way to spread important information and to share what culture the humans had scattered across Crashland in their colony pods. A vital part of the Joint Colony’s attempts to unify human and Prytheen, to pull together in the hopes of leaving this Void-damned planet.

We walked toward the tower in silence, the only sounds the crunch of snow underfoot and the constant, painful howl of the wind. Molly stamped along the trail, her holographic companion turning to stare at me with his disconcerting eyes. I gave him an encouraging smile, only for him to dissolve into static and vanish.

A ghostly weight on my shoulder startled me enough to inhale sharply as I whipped my head round to see the hologram animal reappear. The AI's forcefield generator pushed down on me, giving him the illusion of weight, and up close those eyes of static were disconcerting.

"Hello, small one," I said, recovering my composure and gently touching the artificial predator's head. "Are you well?"

"He's fine." The vehemence in Molly's voice surprised me — and even more so, how strongly I reacted to it. The pain was almost physical, making me wince. Something had hurt her, and I whoever or whatever it was, I felt an urgent need to bury my claws in it.

The hologram blurred into a cloud and then popped, reappearing by Molly's side with a whine. Off we went again.

Over the course of our walk, I tried to start a conversation. Tried and failed, my assaults rebuffed by the solid walls surrounding her heart.

"What is it like here?" I asked.

"It's okay." Her answer barely qualified.

"Anything I should know?"

"Probably." She shrugged. "You'll pick it up though."

"What are the people here like?"

"Human." That seemed enough for her, and I winced at the implication. The rest of my questions could wait. I'd gain nothing by pressing her when she made her

preference so blatantly clear.

But the pain she warded herself from made me want nothing more than to breach the walls around her heart, to show her that we were mates. Despite every rebuff, I still felt the pull toward her, knew with an instinctive certainty that I would give my life for hers, that I would dedicate myself to making her happy. That she was my khara, and I hers.

If words would not turn this beauty's heart, so be it. I would woo her with actions, then. Kill an enemy of hers and bring her the heart. Make her the perfect meal. Give her a fresh weapon.

There is one problem — I have no idea who she hates, what she likes to eat, or what weapon I could offer her.

I let out a breath and watched it crystalize in the freezing cold. My heart beat a little lighter. This was a worthy challenge for a hunter.

It didn't take long to reach the station, a brisk walk in the early morning chill. For Molly it was more like torture to judge from the heaviness of her breaths, the weight of her footfalls. I considered offering to carry her and kept my laugh at the thought quiet.

Even the short time I'd known her was enough to predict how she'd hate that idea. A good plan if I wanted to learn more human swearwords, a bad one if I wanted to ease her walk. She was in no danger, anyway — if she wished to climb this mountain, let her.

The red-blinking eye of the transmitter tower came into view, and I stopped to admire it. Supported on one side by a cliff face, tied down by guide ropes anchored into the mountain, the metal framework was, under the circumstances, an impressive

achievement. A sacrifice, too — the humans had carved the core of it out of the Wandering Star's systems, and those parts were irreplaceable. All the hard work paid off, though. Once they set it up here, the Colony could reach most of the world with its broadcasts.

That only mattered to those with working receivers, which meant the humans' colony pods. Prytheen technology did not function on Crashland, the power draining from it in seconds, which locked my people out until they got access to a human radio. That mostly happened when the Prytheen conquered a colony pod, only adding to the tensions between our species.

My hand went to my blaster, resting on the worn, familiar grip. More powerful by far than the humans' primitive lasers, and completely useless without power. I'd tried every trick I could think of to charge it, without success. This hateful planet ate the power quicker than I could feed it.

To distract myself from those thoughts, I looked at my new home. The single building that sprawled around the transmitter tower looked almost like an afterthought. Something thrown together once the builders realized there would be people up here.

Red walls, easy to spot against the background of snow, insulated with materials ripped from wrecked ships. Most of the colony pods reached the surface in one piece, but too many of them didn't. Piloted by primitive computers programmed to land on a different world entirely, errors had taken ships into mountains, trees, oceans... and sometimes just hit too hard, killing the human passengers before they could wake from stasis.

At least we Prytheen could do something about our situation. We'd been conscious, able to steer as our fighters lost power. I remembered my fighter bucking under me as the thrusters failed, the ruby-red glow of others burning up in the atmosphere, too

slow to adjust. So many lost that day, good and bad.

I struggled to pull my mind away from the memory, pushing it down deep where it wouldn't hurt so.

“Well? Are you even listening?” Molly's voice, impatient and acerbic, pulled me out of the past. I blinked, the images of the burning Silver Band fleet vanishing, replaced by a very real, very irritated human. She stood, hands on hips, glowering at me.

I responded with a smile. Letting her see me as weak would only make matters worse, and besides, I didn't think I'd be able to explain. Hard enough with a Prytheen, but with a human? No.

“I apologize, I was admiring the work that's gone into this transmitter.” Not entirely a lie, but it didn't seem to satisfy Molly. Her face darkened and she narrowed her eyes.

“Are you making fun of me?” she asked. “Just because you're used to something less primitive...”

“I was not mocking,” I protested, a little too loudly. My heart thumped, and I forced my hand away from the butt of my blaster. “I would ever mock you, my kh?—”

“I am not your anything,” Molly said, talking over me with a snarl in her voice. A challenge. From anyone else, I'd have welcomed it. A chance to settle a dispute with honor? To fight and have victory decide the answer?

But not my mate. My mind shied away from the thought of fighting her, of risking her life, and I would not do it. I locked eyes with her and held up empty hands, signaling for peace.

“This structure is an impressive achievement under the circumstances, and I assure

you I was mocking neither it, nor you,” I told her. “What can I do to convince you that it is so?”

“For a start, you can listen to me when I tell you something.” Was that the hint of a smile? Yes, I thought, yes it was. A small mercy.

And she was right. I should have paid attention.

“Tell me again, and this time I will listen,” I promised her. She snorted and shook her head.

“Nope. You had your chance at that, mister. Now you’ll have to struggle through on your own and learn things the hard way.”

“Fair,” I acknowledged, watching that hint of a smile become a suggestion. Perhaps, if I was lucky, skilled, and amusing, I’d persuade her to upgrade it further.

Seeing that smile blossom would be the greatest thing on this world or any other. I decided on the spot that no other goal would do but to make Molly happy enough, safe enough, that she’d grace me with the full power of it. Just the thought of it banished the dark memories of planetfall, and I followed my khara toward the human base.

Built piecemeal from disassembled colony pods and parts of the Wandering Star, the buildings had the blocky lack of elegance I associated with human construction. I refused to judge it on looks alone — even using the fliers, getting building materials up here hadn’t been easy. The Joint Colony had so many other priorities, it amazed me that we’d gotten all this up here, let alone build something functional.

The doors to the station were well-marked, I noted with approval. Bright arrows of green paint pointed the way, lights mounted above them to give guidance at night.



Even in a snowstorm, they'd give some hint of where to go.

And this looked like a place that got more than its share of snowstorms. One of the many downsides of living on a planet rather than a spaceship as fate intended.

A welcoming committee waited for us at the doors, eight humans with a banner. A hand-painted banner, worse luck — someone had tried to write in Prytheen, but the letters were hardly legible, let alone the words. I tried to puzzle out the meaning.

Health will arrive, faller-into-the-sky? Quickly approaching orgasm lost in space? Lord Orgasm speeds skyward? Nothing made sense. I presumed, despite the poor choice of words, they intended it to honor my arrival.

Why hadn't they written it in Galtrade? The whole point of the trade tongue was that everyone shared it, so surely they'd have gotten their point across better than this!

I turned my attention to the humans beneath the banner. The first thing I saw was the pink outfit. The second was the smile, like a predator pretending to be a friend. Then the rest of her features, hidden behind that smile like an ambush party behind a rock. She had a face to lead many a young, unmated warrior into the abyss.

With my khara beside me, I had no need to worry about that temptation. Her artful illusion of beauty couldn't compete with Molly's natural perfection.

Behind her stood more humans, half a dozen of them. Four males, two females, all watching me with trepidation. Their caution showed wisdom; none of them looked like fighters, though humans had surprised us more than once since the Crash.

Pink boots crunching in the snow, the leader stepped forward. Her bright smile widened, an eyebrow raised — she could hardly have been more obvious in her interest. Uncomfortable, I nodded and waited for her to speak.

“So you’re our new technician? I’m Allison Greene, head of station, welcome. We could use some fresh ideas in our tech department, what with all the failures we’ve been having.”

She extended her hand in the human greeting and I clasped it with some misgivings. I found it difficult to tell with humans, but her ‘greeting’ sounded like an insult to my khara.

“It will be a pleasure to lend my more experienced colleague what expertise I have,” I said, trying for a diplomatic response. “I only really know Prytheen systems, though — the success will be hers more than mine.”

Molly snorted, stomping toward the base. Something flickered in Allison’s eyes, a moment of annoyance soon drowned in the syrupy sweetness of her expression. Was there anything honest about this woman?

Her hand gripped mine, squeezing gently but firmly. At least it wasn’t one of the male dominance displays — I’d broken one human’s hand before I understood how fragile they could be.

“How generous of you,” Allison said, giving Molly a sidelong look. “I’m sure once you settle in you’ll be solving everything. Prytheen technology is so far ahead of our own. In fact, that’s an idea — you must present a show for us, showing how to deal with Prytheen equipment that people might stumble on.”

I winced. That sounded like the depths of the Starless Void to me, and the best advice I could give was ‘stay away from it, let a Prytheen know what you’ve found, hope it doesn’t explode.’

“We shall see,” I answered, pulling my hand from hers. Behind her, the other humans were exchanging looks, all except the largest male. He glowered at me, face dark,

eyes narrowed, fists clenched. Under his bulky jacket and rolls of fat, he had muscle too. If he hated me on sight, he might be trouble later, and he looked strong enough to be a challenge.

I bared my teeth at him in a snarl that made his dark skin pale. But he didn't look away, didn't back down. Perhaps he would make for an interesting opponent.

“Ah, yes, please excuse my rudeness,” Allison said, noticing my attention had moved to the others. “These are the station staff. Harmon Baltimore, Michiko Takamura, Zeng Ru, they're our ‘on screen’ talent. Alphonse Delong?—”

“Call me Alf,” the slight human said, waving hello. Allison glared at him before continuing.

“Alphonse is our visual editor. Amy Felice handles sound, and Rod Hastings ties it all together.”

Each of them waved hello as Allison spoke their names, letting me identify them all. That was the idea, anyway. They all wore similar outdoor gear, which made things a lot harder in practice. I could tell the two females from the males, but telling the humans apart aside from that?

Molly was a unique treasure, and I would never mistake her for someone else. Harmon's challenge and his size made him unforgettable. Allison made an impact like a battleship broadside, and her pink was hard to miss. And Alf made himself memorable by interrupting the introduction. The rest might as well be interchangeable.

“I am Karnac of the Silver Band, war mechanic from Clan Layol. I am sure we'll all get on well.” Perhaps that was a lie — sure is a strong word. But ‘hope’ didn't carry the same weight, and a little lie in the name of diplomacy hurt no one.

“Thank you all for the warm welcome and the... thoughtful banner.” I stumbled, trying to pick a word. Thoughtful had the virtue of being true and said nothing of the quality of the banner itself.

Allison began clapping, and everyone joined in instantly. Yes, she’s the alpha of this pack. Most human groups I’d met were circumspect about who held power. Here, everyone knew who was in charge.

As long as it worked, that was all that mattered. But... Molly seemed shut out of this, not even mentioned in the introduction. An insult I would not tolerate for long, not if it had anything to do with Molly’s anger. If I was to win her heart, I would need to find and deal with the causes of her bottled-up rage.

“Allison, might I speak with you for a moment?” I asked as the group made its way inside. Her eyes sparkled as she looked at me, and she nodded. A hand on my arm held me back, the rest of the crew filing past and into the base. Harmon paused in the doorway, looking back, and Allison had to shoo him inside.

“Sorry about that, he gets a bit protective,” she said. “And you are a fearsome looking man, Karnac. He might think you mean to hurt me, poor lamb. What did you want to speak about?”

Ah. Good, they are a pair. It explained the male’s glowers and glares; allowing one’s mate into danger should not be easy. But he had nothing to fear from me, and once he knew that, we should have no more trouble.

“It’s not anything to do with the job,” I admitted. She nodded for me to continue, her eyes widening, if anything more intrigued. “I don’t know the customs of your people well, or really at all. I know what gifts and words would sway a Prytheen female, but they are warriors like any other member of the Silver Band. Human females are different. If I were interested in one, what should I do for them?”

It felt awkward, wrong almost, to do things in the human style. But there were things worth learning from these people while we were stuck on Crashland together. If I got human advice on their approach to mating, it might take less time to prove myself worthy of her. That was the only goal that mattered to me now.

Allison paused before answering, watching me through wide eyes, her pink tongue darting out to wet her lips. Her frozen breath hung in the air like a smokescreen, making it hard to read her expression.

“Well now, someone moves fast,” she said, voice low and husky. I wasn’t sure what to make of that. “Gifts are always good, though. Something she’ll enjoy, like chocolate — there are still a few boxes left in the Wandering Star’s hold, I believe. Or jewelry; diamonds are a girl’s best friend. A necklace, earrings, or even a ring.”

She laughed at that, though I didn’t see the joke.

Hm. No heart of her enemies, no weapons, no cooking her a fine meal. Just... chocolate and diamonds? It felt so mundane. Any decent matter printer could churn out all the diamonds you wanted, just add carbon. Chocolate was trickier, though still not a grave challenge.

But if this was human custom, so be it. I would not let my disdain for the culture keep me from my beloved.

“Thank you, Allison, that is a great help,” I said, mindful of my manners. “A pity it will be a week before the next supply run, when I can get those things.”

“Oh, you don’t need them to start wooing,” Allison assured me, squeezing my arm in a way that felt far too familiar. “At least, not out here. Any girl would understand, I know she would. Just take your chance.”

Thinking about the look I'd last seen in my khara's eyes, I shook my head. "If I am to follow your customs, I will do so properly. I would not wish to miss out on the experience."

Chuckling, I made light of it, but the reality was serious. I'd seen Molly's reaction when I arrived, and whatever the source of Molly's pain and doubt, I refused to add to it. Doing things by the customs of her own people would, I hoped, stay inside her comfort zone and make it easier for her to accept me.

Despite Allison's disapproving pout, I was confident I'd win my khara over soon.

### MOLLY

The next days became an exercise in frustration in more ways than one. It was impossible to avoid Karnac, and with him came an awkwardness, draped over us like an annoying blanket.

Worse, even when he wasn't around, my thoughts drifted to him. It didn't matter how hard I tried to stop them, or what objections I raised. He was a pirate. A Prytheen. An enemy. But my horny mind refused to let go of just how handsome a pirate he was, especially since he worked topless.

Aside from that odd choice, he was a skilled engineer. Malfunctioning systems people had grumbled about came back online for the first time in months as he worked through all the Prytheen technology performing routine maintenance. I glanced across at him, bent over the heating unit pulled from a Prytheen transport and bundles of wiring that linked it to the base's power supply and control network.

My attention wasn't, I admit, focused on his work.

Sneaking a look at Karnac was always a mistake, for three reasons. First, I had no interest in him, and had no reason to look at the flexing muscles of his bare back. Second, those muscles, like everything else about Karnac, were unreasonably hot. Every time I looked over at him, I felt a heat inside of me, a tingling across my skin, and bit my lip.

Third, and worst of all, he always knew. Somehow, he'd look up at just the right moment to catch me staring at him, and he'd give me one of his infuriating grins.

Blushing, I tried to look away, but that smile of his had me caught like a rabbit in the headlights of an on-coming truck. You know it's true, it seemed to say, you know you need me. And damn it, he made it easy to second guess my decision.

"When are you going to finish the heating repairs?" My voice had more of a snap to it than I planned, but if Karnac noticed, he gave no sign. He never seemed to notice my anger, which was one of his most infuriating habits.

"Whoever pulled it from one of the Silver Band's ships did not know what they were doing," he said, shaking his head. As though he was an adult bemused by a child trying to fix a car. "They didn't bring the alignment crystal."

One of the first rules we'd established was to not worry about accuracy when translating technical terms; alignment crystal might be a meaningful description in his language, or a brand name. I didn't need to know. What he was telling me was that a vital part was missing, which explained why I hadn't been able to get it working.

"That doesn't answer my question," I reminded him, and he laughed.

"At my current rate of work?" I nodded. "Then my best estimate is now."

Behind him, on the workbench I'd grudgingly cleared for him, a crystal glowed and emitted a high-pitched whine. The rats' nest of cabling leading to the odd Prytheen technology vibrated.

And the room warmed up.

It was like magic. The heat didn't radiate from the glowing crystal, it didn't seem to



come from anywhere. The air was simply, uniformly, warm. Too warm, in fact — overheating, I pulled my coat off and threw it aside.

Karnac watched me, the intensity of his gaze impossible to ignore. Perhaps the heat in my cheeks just came from the sudden rise in temperature. That's what I'd tell anyone who asked, but I knew better.

It's not like I'm underdressed or anything, I told myself. It was true, too. Defense against the mountain chill came in layers, and I'd only taken off the outermost. Under it I still wore the red knitted sweater I'd brought all the way from Earth.

“How does that even work?” I asked, trying to force my thoughts away from the smoldering look Karnac gave me. “The heat isn't coming from anywhere.”

He grinned, holding his hands wide. “I do not know. The heater sustained damage in the crash, made worse by heavy use — it's not designed for so large a volume of air. It went out of phase, and without an alignment crystal, hard to compensate for. An easy fix when you know what to look for, but it tells us nothing about the principles it works on.”

I blinked, confused by that, and intrigued enough to keep talking to him. As long as we kept it about business, it would be okay. I could stay focused. Really.

“So, you don't understand your technology any more than I do? You just know which bit plugs in where, and what to look for if it doesn't work?”

His forehead creased. “I am an engineer, not a scientist. I have never studied either physics or metaphysics. When would I have had the time? I do not even remember the Homeworld, we lost it when I was a kit.”

“Wait, what?” That came from nowhere for me. Perhaps it was common knowledge,

but I'd never wanted to learn about the Prytheen. "What do you mean, you lost your homeworld?"

"It is not something I care to talk about," he said, face blank and unreadable as sheet metal. "That wound cuts too deep. Suffice it to say that there's a reason the only Prytheen you meet are warriors and pilots, and there was a reason we tried to seize your colony ship with its terraforming equipment. Not a good enough reason, but a reason."

So many questions buzzed around my brain. Who had done this to them? Why didn't they lead with a trade deal to get what they wanted? What was he doing on a warship, so young he didn't remember his homeworld at all?

I didn't ask any of them. Perhaps there would come a time to ask, perhaps not, but this was not it — Karnac's muscles tensed, his eyes cold, his teeth bared.

Apprehensively, I crossed the workshop and put a hand on his arm. He needed contact, someone to ground him in the present not the failures of his past.

His skin felt strange under my hand. Rough, not human, but pleasant. As soon as I touched him, my mind decided to spin off on a fantasy, wondering what the rest of him would feel like, would taste like.

Karnac growled. Not a threat, not a warning. Something more direct, personal, primal. A shiver ran through me, my breath catching, my heart racing.

I'd met some of Crashland's wildlife. I was familiar with the fight-or-flight response. But who'd ever heard of a fight-flight-or- fuck response?

I froze, trying and failing to hide my reaction. Karnac turned his head to look at me with an intensity that should have burned my clothes off.

“I, uh.” Stringing words together was a challenge. I bit my lip, thinking, and his cat-like eyes watched my mouth. Drifted lower, to my throat, his own smile widening. “I don’t think that, um...”

Glitch’s static-filled hiss stopped me from having to answer. He sat on a workbench, watching the door — or most of him did. His forepaws still rested on my bench, disembodied, and his tail wasn’t visible at all.

“Again , Glitch?” I asked, pulling my hand from Karnac’s arm as though his skin had turned red hot. This was why I’d set Glitch up as an early warning system.

Glitch had no chance to answer before the door slid open and Allison strode into the room. Still running with the pink theme which I thought looked even more ridiculous than her outdoor outfit — at least there, the pink served a purpose, making her easy to find in the snow.

Here, her otherwise sensible business suit made my teeth itch. Why would she waste maker credits on something so saccharine? Or, worse, had she brought it here from Earth?

I’d never realized how annoying her color choices were. Though I’d had no cause to find out until now: since Karnac’s arrival, she’d been a constant visitor, stopping by several times a day. I’d seen her more often than I had in any previous month.

“I see you’ve got the heating back up and running,” she said, or rather gushed. Karnac’s lips narrowed, his only response a nod. Allison showed no sign of noticing his discomfort, but then her eyes weren’t on his face. Her attention was lower down, tracing the muscles of his torso with her eyes.

Which suited me fine. If they got together that would make life so much easier for me. It would be madness to object to her trying to get her hooks into him. I definitely

believed that, one hundred percent.

So why were my hands balled into fists? Why were my muscles trembling?

Get this straight, body, I snarled internally. I am not interested in this Prytheen or any other. Yes, he has the most bangable bod I've ever seen, but that doesn't change the fact that he's one of the assholes who stole my life.

"While we have your attention, boss," I said as politely as possible, hoping to interrupt before she jumped Karnac right in front of me. "I've got some requests for the next supply run? Karnac's been using a lot of parts, and we're still low on?—"

"Fine," Allison glared at me, making a brushing off motion. "Send it over. It'll be easier to justify now that Karnac is doing something worthwhile with the parts."

That was almost a physical slap. Allison had been nasty before, but she'd never come so close to calling me useless in front of someone else before.

Karnac growled, a low, angry, dangerous sound. "Allison, that is unfair. Molly has handled vital maintenance, work without which this station would fall apart. I've made one repair."

"Oh, you're right of course." All smiles again, Allison turned back to Karnac, leaving me seething. "It's not that I don't recognize the work Molly does, just that I have to justify my requests to Captain Joyce, and when there's no change to report that's not easy."

I will not rise to the bait. I will not. Allison aimed her apology, such as it was, at Karnac instead of me. More than that, she was lying. While I didn't know Captain Joyce well, she'd been the Wandering Star's engineer before the Crash. She'd understand the need for regular maintenance, even if Allison didn't.

“ Anyway, I must get going, there’s the weather forecast to put together,” she said with another bright, plastic smile. “There’ll be a little get together this evening though, to celebrate the new heating — I’m sure that lots of us will be glad of the chance not to bundle up, so why not make it a party?”

With that she swept out, leaving a cloying scent of perfume behind her.

I’d never looked forward to a party so little, but I didn’t see any way out of attending. It was in honor of the technical staff, at least that’s what the message on the datanet said. Karnac’s honor, really, but still, I should be there when they celebrated my department.

“What do you think?” I asked Glitch. The mirror in my room was too small to get a good look at my outfit, and he was the only one whose opinion I’d trust.

I didn’t trust my judgement — I’d been back and forth on the outfit ever since I spent the maker credits to have it printed. It belonged on someone with more self-confidence than me, someone who knew they looked good in it.

Black with a subtle pattern, more a texture than a color, it emphasized my figure without showing off. Was it too low cut, though? Too short?

A thousand memories of people I’d thought of as friends mocking my fashion choices cried out that it was wrong, somehow. I shoved them aside to look at Glitch.

The hologram cat looked me up and down, purred, and rubbed up against me before dissolving into static and reappearing on my bookshelf. A bright green tick-mark appeared with him, glowing above his head, and an audio clip of applause played. I passed the Glitch test. It was enough reassurance to let me relax.

As nice as warmth was, I’d enjoyed the cold and the way it forced us all to wear

layers. The fixed heating let us dress up again, and that wouldn't be optional for events like this. I'd never enjoyed that kind of thing.

Okay, a little lie there: I enjoyed dressing up for the right person. There just wasn't anyone here I wanted to impress that way.

Glitch watched me, his static-filled eyes amused, an impish smile on his lips. All in my mind, obviously — he couldn't read my thoughts. Still, I blushed, heat spreading across my cheeks.

"I am not interested in Karnac," I protested. Glitch's smile didn't change, he just cocked his head to one side. I grabbed a book and threw it at him, the much-annotated air recycler manual passing through the hologram with no effect. "Oh, shut up."

Glitch licked a paw, looked back at me, and disintegrated. Only his smile and eyes remained, and then even they faded.

I laughed, shaking my head. "How very Cheshire Cat of you, Glitch. I swear, sometimes I'm sure you're putting this all on."

One last look in the mirror, one last round of doubts, and it was time to go. Stepping out of my room, I heard the music playing in the commons, someone singing badly over the lyrics. Great. We'd skipped straight to the karaoke part of the evening.

My heels clanged on the metal floor, making me wince self-consciously. I almost turned around and changed back into t-shirt and jeans. Each time I paused, though, the image of Karnac flashed before my eyes, and somehow gave me the strength to carry on.

The ridiculous welcome banner hung on one side of the commons, and I winced to see it. I spoke no Prytheen, not even the scattered handful of words most colonists

had picked up since the Crash, but the sloppy lettering made me itch. I wondered what Karnac thought about it.

Opposite hung a newer banner: “Thanks for the heat, Karnac.” My fingers flexed, face darkening — fair enough if the crew wanted to single him out for praise, he had gotten it done. But they hadn’t even asked me to contribute. That stung.

Other than the two banners, the commons looked the same as ever. Ratty, patched seating, mismatched tables, an empty area optimistically referred to as a dance floor. The low lighting might have been for the party or a result of more issues with the power supply — I’d only know if I checked my jobs list.

Music played through the speakers; someone’s playlist of songs brought from Earth. The current one was pleasant enough, though the lyrics were unintelligible. The public announcement speakers were cheap, and not designed to play music.

I was the last of the station personnel to arrive, it looked like. Everyone else gathered with their friends, chatting over the music or drinking. Their hologram companions buzzed around the room, chasing each other and giving the party a playful look.

“Molly, you made it!” Michiko pounced before I got two steps into the room. She had the bouncy enthusiasm that always clung to her while drunk, and her arms were around me before I knew she was there. Her rainbow-maned pony clip-clopped up to Glitch and headbutted him, inviting him to play. “Love the dress! It suits you!”

She nearly knocked me over with her hug, giggling and swinging me around, and I couldn’t help smiling. Michiko sober was a dry loner, but a few drinks in and fun Michiko came out to play.

“You look great too,” I said, though I hadn’t gotten a look at her outfit. I didn’t need to; Michiko always looked stunning, on air or off. I almost felt sorry for the guys,

being trapped in close quarters with someone so attractive and so unavailable.

Heat spread over my cheeks again. I wouldn't know anything about that, would I?

As though my thought summoned him, Karnac stepped into view. My breath caught and I stared.

His long coat flowing almost like a cape, Karnac surveyed the room as though it was his domain. Long dark hair pulled back into a ponytail, chest and scars on display, he looked every bit the pirate king. Every bit the sexy space warrior, come to snatch me away.

He's a Prytheen, I reminded myself. Yes, he's a pirate, but not the sexy fictional kind. The real, murderous kind. So keep away.

Reason didn't stop my body reacting to his appearance, a tingle spreading through me and a sigh escaping my lips. I might have put Karnac off limits, but my body rejected that decision with every hormone it could throw at me.

Michiko giggled and relaxed her hug, looking around to see what had caught my attention. "Ooh, juicy. So you're interested in our newest arrival too? I don't see the appeal myself."

"There might be a reason for that," I said, smiling. Michiko spent as much time as she could on the comms to her wife in the colony proper, and I'd never been able to imagine her interested in anyone else.

"Yeah, yeah, fine," she said, elbowing me in the ribs. "You may mock, but at least I'm not throwing myself at the aliens like some people."

"I am not throwing myself at him," I said, aware that I was protesting too much. "Or



anyone else.”

Taking a step back, Michiko looked me up and down.

“Sure you’re not,” she said with a shake of her head. “That’s why you’re showing more skin than ever. You’re even wearing heels for heaven’s sake.”

I bit back an unkind response. I hadn’t picked this outfit for Karnac... had I?

“You’ll have to work fast, though,” she carried on while I was still trying to think of a reply. “Allison’s already working on him.”

And there she was, appearing next to Karnac like a vampire from an old horror vid. Her arm linked with his, she pulled him towards a table laden with refreshments.

My mouth twisted. He deserves better.

“I didn’t dress up for him,” I said, not sure how much of a lie that was. “I just thought it would be nice to have some fun.”

“That’s the spirit,” Michiko grinned up at me. “C’mon, let’s enjoy the party. Let’s dance.”

Fun Michiko can be an experience , and I didn’t waste energy on futile resistance as she dragged me onto the abandoned dance floor. I did catch Alf’s eye and mouth ‘help me’ but he just grinned and went back to feeding his holographic parrot. Everyone was on the receiving end of Michiko sometimes; I didn’t blame him for not wanting to get involved.

I’ve never been a good dancer, Michiko was drunk, and we were the only two on the dance floor. I couldn’t imagine a combination to make me more anxious, especially

when Karnac was in the audience.

Being self-conscious made everything worse, and my already limited dance skills went out the window. Michiko didn't seem at all embarrassed, and I wondered how she did it. Her flailing limbs were no more controlled than mine, but somehow she made it look good. Or, if not good, fun.

My logical brain pointed out the obvious — perhaps I looked just as good. Perhaps you should shut up, my anxiety replied. Not a reasonable argument, but a winning one.

Still, it was fun. No one laughed, Michiko danced as badly as I did, and Rod pulled Amy onto the dance floor. Once we weren't the sole focus of attention, I started to enjoy myself.

“May I join you?” He phrased it as a request, but the tone left no doubt about what would happen now. Karnac loomed over me, a smile on his scarred, rugged, too-damned-handsome face.

I opened my mouth to answer and it just hung there. Silence. No words emerged as my brain came to a screeching halt, torn between the desire to tell the Prytheen to fuck off and the urge to leap into his arms.

“Sure, you kids have fun,” Michiko said after the silence dragged on for approximately five billion years. “I need some water anyway.”

With that she vanished, abandoning me with Karnac. My heart thudded so loud I was sure the whole room heard it. I couldn't decide whether Michiko leaving was a favor or a betrayal, but either way I had no words to respond.

Karnac took my hand in his, the contact overwhelming. Like lightning shooting

through me, his touch lit up my nerves and I gasped as his rough thumb stroked across the back of my hand. Suddenly my anxiety and self-consciousness vanished, and we were the only two people in the world.

The rest of the universe could go hang. Nothing mattered apart from us.

The moment stretched into infinity before Karnac pulled me closer, slid an arm around my waist, and led.

“What are you doing?” I gasped, my body pressing to his. Suddenly my dress felt like too much clothing — I wanted to feel his body against mine, nothing between us.

Karnac moved with grace, precision, and no skill at all. His hip slammed into a refreshments table, spilling punch, and I couldn’t help giggling.

“I do not know,” Karnac said, laughing too. Pressed against his chest as I was, I felt the laugh more than heard it. A deep vibration that made my body want.

“I have watched several videos,” he continued, pronouncing the last word as though he’d never heard of this primitive tech before. Maybe he hadn’t — Prytheen culture, from what I’d learned, was entirely about war. “Dancing with one’s khara is always shown as romantic, so...”

He swung me, and I tried to keep up only to hit a wall and bounce off, back into his arms. “You just learned from videos? That’s...”

I trailed off rather than insulting him, and he took over. “It’s ridiculous and foolish, I’m sure. You will have to show me how to do better.”

My blush was bright enough to signal spacecraft with, my face against his chest. How did I answer that?

Yes. You say yes, thank whatever lucky stars sent him your way. I didn't get the chance to say anything. Allison stepped into the circle, her hand closing on Karnac's upper arm.

"I'm so sorry, Molly, but I need to steal Karnac away," she said, with a credible impression of sorrow. She might have fooled me if not for the vicious look in her eyes, a look which vanished as soon as the Prytheen turned to her.

This was why I didn't want to risk my heart, aside from the piracy thing. I hadn't even opened up, not really, and here were my hopes being smashed again. How would I compete with Allison, beautiful powerful Allison?

Pulling my hand from his, I backed away from Karnac. As soon as I lost contact with him, my cloak of self-confidence vanished as though blown away by a gale.

"I'll leave you two to have fun," I said, echoing Michiko's earlier words, and turned before either could respond. A glass of punch called to me from the refreshments table, and I grabbed it. Downed it in one, my throat burning in the aftermath.

Whatever booze was in there, it wasn't subtle. Good, I didn't want subtle. I refilled the glass, drank a little slower, and finally dared turn around. Allison had her arms around Karnac, the pair of them swaying to the music.

Never had a wish coming true hurt so much. I couldn't stay here and watch that — and worse, if anyone paid enough attention to me to ask what had upset me, I'd have to talk about it.

No thanks. Not happening. I put down my glass and, keeping my feelings as bottled up as possible, I made my way to the commons' door and out into the hallway again.

My emotions flowed around me like a cloud of chaos, impossible to even identify.

Oh, there was some lust in there, some anger. Sadness too. And relief, but not as much as I'd expected.

He's a pirate. A killer. His people killed god knows how many people in the attack on the Wandering Star, and the rest of us might still die from it. Why the fuck would I feel jealous over him? Let the two of them bang it out and be happy.

Except that thought hurt, made me want to... I didn't know what. Sighing, I leaned against the cool metal wall and tried to sort out my emotions. It wasn't easy, not when the storm of them still raged in my mind.

Focused on figuring that out, I didn't realize I wasn't alone until someone big blocked out the light behind me. For a moment, the wild hope rose — had Karnac come to check on me? I had no clue what I'd say if he had, but my heart raced at the thought.

"You're not going to slip away." An angry hiss, accompanied by a cloud of booze. Not Karnac, then. Hope dashed, I grimaced and turned around.

"I just want to get to bed, Harmon," I said, tetchy and weary. "We can talk in the morning, when you're sober."

Perhaps, if I hadn't had those last two drinks. If I hadn't felt so drained, if my limbs hadn't felt like lead. If I'd had my wits about me, I'd have remembered just how touchy Harmon was about his drinking. His already flushed face darkened, a tremor ran through him, and he snarled.

"I am perfectly in control," he snapped. "And you won't put this off."

His vehemence made me take a step back, then another. Harmon might be our resident poet, but he hardly fit the skinny, sensitive guy trope. Much of his bulk was

fat, sure, but under it he had formidable muscle.

I glanced over his shoulder, hoping someone else had heard that, but he'd slid the commons door shut. Drunk enough to get angry and belligerent; sober enough to isolate me before making a scene. A dangerous combination.

"Look, I don't know why you're angry at me," I started, trying to defuse the tension as I took a careful step back. He followed, keeping the distance the same. Too close.

"Don't give me that, it's perfectly clear what you're up to," Harmon hissed. "You've set your, your alien friend to seduce my darling Allison away."

A burst of laughter escaped before I could clamp down on it, and Harmon's face darkened even more. His fists clenched, knuckles white, his self-control slipping dangerously. Laughing at him was a mistake and I'd known it, but in my defense, I'd never heard an accusation as ridiculous as that.

"Harmon, I can't control him. I've not set him to do anything. Even if I could, believe me, I wouldn't be throwing him at Allison."

I'd be keeping him all to myself.

"I'd have sent him away if I could," I finished with much less conviction than I'd started with. Harmon sneered at me, not believing a word I'd said. Beside him, the holographic polar bear cub growled at Glitch, who stood his ground.

"Liar. What's your plan? Isolating me so you can do away with me? Or do you have designs on me yourself?"

He was drunk, but the couple of drinks I'd had loosened my inhibitions too.

“Oh, get over yourself,” I snapped. Harmon reared back as though I’d slapped him, and his eyes narrowed. Real bright move, Molly, antagonize the huge drunk man. Too late to back off now. “Not everything’s about you, Harmon. I don’t care if you and Allison are fucking as long as you don’t break anything I have to repair. Get it? So if you’re losing her attention, go win her back. Scaring me won’t help.”

Afterward, when I had time to think this over, I decided that my mistake was suggesting that he wasn’t the center of the universe. Harmon Baltimore was a big man, but his ego easily outweighed his body, and like so many egos, was fragile enough for the slightest prod to hurt.

At the time, his explosion took me by surprise. With no warning at all, he swung a hand up in an open-palmed slap that sent me staggering backward. Unbalanced in unfamiliar heels, I tripped and fell to the floor with a clatter. My cheek numb from the power of the blow, I stared up at him not quite believing what he’d done.

Harmon advanced and I scrambled back, not even trying to get up. If I slowed to do that, he’d have me before I made it to my feet. Beside me, Ursa the polar bear rushed Glitch in a meaningless fight. Neither could hurt the other, but they could stop each other from interfering in our fight.

“You’re behind this, bitch,” Harmon shouted, towering over me. “I’ll not let you weasel out of it with words, mark me now. Why would you dress like this if you weren’t planning to seduce me? I’ll have the truth.”

He loomed over me like a storm about to break, face in shadow, voice like thunder. I didn’t try to reason with him, not now. Anything I said would somehow become proof of his ridiculous theory.

Instead, I reached for my wrist, fumbling for the emergency alarm on my comm bracelet. Eyes, narrowing, Harmon stamped on my wrist before I could trigger it. The

painful crunch of the bracelet shattering followed by a static-filled howl that cut off abruptly as Glitch vanished.

My pulse raced, vision narrowed, hands curled into fists. “You fucker.”

I didn’t shout. Too angry for that. The icy rage in my voice gave Harmon pause, even in his state, and I lashed out, kicking the side of his knee with all my strength. With a cry of pain, my attacker stumbled back. I rolled to my feet unsteadily.

“You’ll pay for that, bitch,” he growled, and charged. Even limping on his left leg he was faster than I’d expected, and bulky enough to fill the hallway. No way to avoid taking this hit, and that would be that.

I closed my eyes and tried to brace.

Thump. The sound was so loud I felt it rather than heard it. I didn’t feel the impact, though. At first I thought it was one of those ‘you don’t hear the bullet that kills you’ things — I was dead or unconscious, and my mind hadn’t registered the blow that sent me there.

Harmon dispelled that theory with a howl of pain and rage and fear mixed in one terrible noise. Something else snarled, a noise that should have been terrifying but reassured me instead.

I risked opening an eye, then two when I didn’t believe what the first showed me.

Karnac stood between me and a fallen Harmon, who struggled to his feet. A bruise was already visible, the whole left side of his face dark and swelling.

“I knew you two were in this together,” the actor said, words slurred even more than before. Making it to his feet he staggered forward, waving a hand at us. “Fuck you



both!”

He lowered his head, like a bull getting ready to charge, and although he’d attacked me, I felt an urge to warn him. To stop him doing something foolish and pointless.

Harmon was a big, powerful man. He had some experience in a fight, and he knew how to use his weight. But against Karnac, that was like a firecracker competing with the sun. Before I found the right words to warn him, he roared and ran at us.

Karnac stepped forward and slashed with vicious speed. His claws caught Harmon’s face, driving him back with a cry of pain and ending his charge on the spot. Touching his face, Harmon stared at his bloody hand in horror.

Serves you right for stamping on Glitch’s projector, I thought, looking at the broken comm unit to see how bad the damage was.

“No.” I breathed the word, looking at the cracked open shell of the wristband. Inside, the delicate projector was in pieces — that, I’d expected. What shocked and frightened me was that the datastore itself had snapped in half too. Glitch’s memories, his personality, everything that made him was in that store. They’d fade fast, now, leaving nothing of him behind.

I might be able to patch it. Might. Even if I could, though, running repairs to an active datastore risked messing up the information kept inside.

And that ‘information’ was my friend.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am*

4

### KARNAC

Advancing on the human male as he scrambled unsteadily to his feet, I tried to work out what to do with him. Every instinct in my body shouted for his blood, for his heart.

He hurt my khara, he threatened her, and he would pay.

“You get back,” he shouted as I stalked forward, baring my teeth in a killer snarl. The bravado he’d displayed when his foe was a woman half his size vanished like ice in a drive-flame. “I didn’t hurt her, I wouldn’t, just scared her a little. That’s all. Get away!”

Cowardice didn’t endear him to me. The color drained from his face and his eyes darted in every direction, looking for salvation. He wouldn’t find it. Nothing would save him now.

From behind me came the soft breath of Molly’s whispered “no.”

More a sound of pain and horror than a word, it chilled me. I spun to see what was wrong, and Harmon took that moment to turn and flee. I ignored him for now — Molly came first.

“What is wrong?” I looked over her shoulder at the shattered parts of her comm bracelet and understood. Molly was still drawing breath to answer me when I scooped

up the parts in one hand, slung her over my shoulder with the other, and ran.

“What are you doing?” she protested. I ignored her — taking time to explain would waste precious seconds.

As it was, it took too long to reach the workshop. Putting Molly down on the sofa at the back of the room, I spread the parts of Glitch’s projector bracelet on my workbench. Peeling open the remains, separating the broken parts, trying to make sense of the primitive construction.

Stopping the datastore’s degeneration was the priority — repair could come later. Throwing parts out of the way, I grabbed up the salvaged shipbrain of a Prytheen fighter and tore the outer casing off.

It was long dead. No power since the Crash, nothing to stop the computer from degenerating into inert gel. But, hopefully, that would still be of use.

The lid of the gel tank came off easily, and I dropped the datastore parts into the amber gunk inside, followed by anything else that might contain part of Glitch. That done, I let myself slow down. Sorting through the power connectors, I found one that delivered about the right charge. It would have to do — I plunged the end of the wire into the gel, watching it thicken around the datastore.

Molly stepped up next to me, her hand resting on the small of my back. Even through the leather of my coat, her touch brought peace, calm, rightness with the world.

“What, and I can’t stress this enough, the fuck are you doing?” Her harsh words meant less than the tone she presented them in — hushed, concerned for her friend, almost as though I wasn’t really there. All her attention was on the broken comm, and on Glitch.

I knew that level of distraction all too well. Sliding an arm around her shoulders, I gave her a gentle squeeze. Offering comfort and hoping that she'd accept it.

Molly stiffened for a moment, then relaxed and rested against me.

"The computational gel should stabilize the broken datastore as long as it hasn't degraded too far," I explained. "It won't last forever, but it gives us time to work on a way of rescuing Glitch."

Molly looked up at me, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, this is stupid of me. I can just get another comm, another AI. You don't have to, to do this."

I gave a small growl, and she fell silent. Hugging her again, I answered.

"I do not have to. I wish to. Glitch is your friend, your companion — if there was nothing else, that would be reason enough. But I like him too, and I'd save him on my own account, even without you."

"He's not," Molly paused, sniffled, carried on. "He's not a person, not really, he's just a complex simulation of one."

She didn't believe that. Her voice made it clear, as did the fact that she couldn't meet my eyes. I frowned, stroked her cheek.

"You know better than that, Molly," I told her gently. "Or rather, you know it doesn't matter. You see him as a person, you will mourn him, you want to keep him safe. That's enough."

Suddenly, her arms were around me, squeezing tight. I held her as she shuddered, letting go of the pent-up stress that had filled her. Stroking her flame-colored hair, I held her and let her get it all out. There was more here than just that one attack, and

the longer I thought about it, the angrier I was. Not just with Harmon, but all the humans who let her suffer.

My khara wasn't well treated here. That, I swore to myself, would change. Even if changing it meant slitting a few throats.

Before taking lives, we worked together to save one. It was a tricky thing, working on the small computer I barely understood, but Molly had all the knowledge we needed. Carefully and slowly, I pulled the pieces of datastore back together. Molly constructed a splint to hold it together once we lifted it out of the gel, keeping a fraction of an inch between the two parts.

"Why?" She didn't stop working to ask, and I admired her quick improvisation. It would have taken me longer to find the parts than it took her to construct the whole thing.

"The edges are warped," I told her. "If we just press them together, they won't line up right and we'll be lucky if we don't burn the datastore up when we power it on. Instead, we'll leave a layer of shipbrain goo between the parts, and train it to make the right connections."

"Huh." Molly said no more until she'd finished welding the tiny cage. "So that stuff is computer magic in liquid form?"

I chuckled. "Not magic, just... very useful. It won't be perfect, mind you. If the gel loses power, it'll stop working."

She looked up at me, eyes shining. "That's a problem I can work with."

And work on it we did, side-by-side. A wonderful experience, a chance to see more of her mind at work. While we'd shared a workspace, we'd never worked on one

project — despite that, we quickly fell into a routine, making allowances for each other's habits.

"It'll never fit," Molly said once her structure was ready. An epoxy shell hardened around it, adding protection but also bulk. She set it down under a UV lamp to harden the epoxy and laid the popped-open bracelet beside it. I saw what she meant: the datastore assembly was too big, too long, too bulky. I frowned.

"It doesn't have to have the same form, does it?"

"Well, no," she conceded, setting a timer for the epoxy. Nothing more could be done until it had set. "That's just what I've got with a holoprojector attached. Do you have another idea?"

"Let me see." Without thinking, I took her arm in my hands, measuring with my fingers. Or at least that was the intention. As soon as I touched her skin, every other thought vanished from my mind.

Her warm skin, smooth and soft, made me inhale sharply, her scent filling my senses. She let out a little gasp too, freezing in place. Her teeth caught her lower lip and I felt her pulse speed up under my fingers.

We stood still for a moment, her arm gripped in both my hands. For the first time since we'd started working on Glitch's projector, I really saw her.

Saw the low cut of her dress, the pink blush spreading down her throat. The passion in her eyes, so many emotions there. Both of us breathed quickly, heavily, and my heartbeat sped up to match hers.

I leaned over her, our faces inches apart, and a little whimper escaped her throat. Her head bobbed in the tiniest of nods, her lips moved to say 'yes' and that was all the

permission I needed. With a hungry growl I released her arm and lifted her, pulled her to me, kissed her passionately on the lips.

Two steps took me to the wall, and I pressed her back against it, our faces level. Molly grabbed me, her hands sliding under my coat, her legs wrapping around my hips.

I growled as we kissed, felt her shiver at the sound, her kiss more urgent. I felt her heartbeat against my chest, her hands dragged down my back, fingernails digging in.

“Careful,” I growled, breaking the kiss long enough to warn her. “Or I’ll tear your pretty little dress right off you.”

Her breath caught, eyes widened, fingers tightened on my back. Our eyes met, her glare almost a challenge now...

The timer behind me dinged. With a frustrated snarl, I stepped back and let Molly down. I ached for her, my inner animal clawing at its confines, wanting her, the khara it sensed was right there. To ravish and claim her and let the rest fall into a black hole.

“So. Uh. We need that wristband? Or something,” Molly said, swallowing and refusing to look at me as she straightened her clothes.

“Yes,” I said, keeping my voice steady with an effort. “Yes, I can make that if you?—”

“I’ll sort out the power supply,” she said, already going to work. “Just tell me what the output needs to be.”

I called the numbers out to her as I rooted through the parts bin. Humans had

gathered this selection of Prytheen gear: mostly full of spare parts, it also had some random bits and pieces thrown in.

Pushing aside a devotional circuit—so someone in the Silver Band was a tech-worshipper then? The Council of Alphas outlawed that heresy before I'd been born—I found what I was looking for. A vambrace for a vacuum suit, intended to protect a worker's forearm while they did dangerous work in space. Why anyone thought it should be here I'd never know, but whichever human had made such a strange mistake, I was glad of their error.

While I worked on it, Molly bent over a circuit board, soldering iron moving quickly and expertly as she modified it by hand. By hand. That the human technology even allowed that was ridiculous, with Prytheen circuitry it would be impossible. We printed our circuits directly into crystal or gel: they might be self-modifying, but to alter them with hand tools and a magnifier?

In that moment, I gained a new appreciation for my mate. Molly had already shown me she was skilled at her work, even if the other humans somehow missed what a treasure she was for them. Tonight, though, she'd shown me she could function under pressure, that she had the skill to put together a circuit out of nothing.

And that she looked amazing bent across the workstation in a short dress while she focused on her task. I made a note to explore that discovery later, when we weren't fighting to save the life of one of her friends.

"There, done," she said, looking back and showing me the datastore, its new epoxy-wrapped frame, and now a modified power supply attached to the side. Before, it took a moment to see that it wouldn't fit in a bracelet. Now, the idea was ludicrous.

I joined her, the vambrace open, and she nodded. Quick on the uptake, she padded the inside, keeping a cutout space running down the metal lengthways. A space just big



enough that the datastore and holoprojector fitted. And when she snapped the vambrace around her left forearm, it fit perfectly. I'd ground it down, warped it, until it fit her human arm, and while it was an odd look along with the human party dress, it suited her.

Molly bit her lip, and I nodded.

"It's time." I didn't say the rest out loud. Time to see what's left of Glitch.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am*

5

MOLLY

The strange weight of Glitch's new home sat uncomfortably on my left arm. Looking up at Karnac, I chewed on my lip, suddenly afraid. What happened if I switched Glitch on and got only static? Or, perhaps worse, a crippled version of him, enough of him left to recognize but not enough to function?

The temptation to leave things alone, to leave the box shut, was very real. He'd be Schrodinger's Glitch, perpetually half alive and half dead.

Only one way to find out which is true, I told myself. The activation button clicked under my thumb and a hiss of static surrounded me for a moment. My heart fell when it failed to resolve into Glitch.

Karnac barked a laugh, and before I could wheel on him for being so insensitive, I felt a strange weight on my head. A pressure, rather — the forcefield generator giving a hologram the illusion of touch.

"Glitch?" I breathed the question, not yet ready to believe. "Glitch get down from there, let me see you."

He leaped towards the workbench, vanished halfway there, and reappeared a moment later, sitting neat as you please beside my soldering station.

"Glitch, you're okay." I felt a great weight lift from my shoulders. He looked up,

staticky eyes seeming to say, ‘why wouldn’t I be?’

“I thought I’d lost you.” My paralysis broke and I rushed to the workstation, giving Glitch ear-skritches and whispered endearments. He sat straight, dignified, allowing me to make a fool of myself over him. As a cat, he was supremely unbothered by the attention. Obviously. How could anyone accuse him of loving it?

Karnac’s hand landed on my shoulder and I almost jumped out of my skin. I’d all but forgotten that I wasn’t alone with Glitch until the Prytheen pirate reminded me he was there.

“Thank you,” I said, turning to face him. Golden eyes stared back at me with an intensity that made me tremble. I ought to thank him with more than just words, some part of me thought.

The horny part, of course.

Admittedly, standing this close to Karnac, ‘the horny part’ was most of me.

“I am glad he is well,” Karnac said, tactfully ignoring my state if he noticed it at all. “He is my friend too, isn’t that right, Glitch?”

Reaching past me, arm brushing mine, he stroked Glitch who nodded and rolled over to have his tummy scratched.

The slight touch, arm against arm, sent a blazing flash of need through me, reinforcing my need for his touch and more. I really ought to thank him properly.

No , I told myself. No way. Sure, I’m grateful, but we don’t fuck for a debt. I am not that kind of woman.

But for Karnac, I just might be.

The choice was taken out of my hands by Glitch meowing an urgent message alert. I frowned and cursed my indecision, wishing I'd made up my mind before the moment passed.

"Okay Glitch, give it to me."

"Priority message. For Molly King. Do you accept?" The automated voice sounded bored, and above Glitch's head, the same message scrolled past in English, Galtrade, Russian, and Chinese.

"Yes, that's me," I answered, curious and worried. I'd never seen this feature before, and it sounded ominous.

Allison's face appeared, eyes narrow and lips tight, glaring into the camera. The contrast with her bright pink lipstick was almost funny, but only almost. "Molly. Since you're not answering your comm, I'm using the priority alert system to make sure you get this. I've left several messages already."

"Whatever urgent message she's got, it sounds like she's more annoyed by me ignoring her," I muttered. "And thanks, you know, for being worried about me when you couldn't reach me for hours."

"I've received a complaint. An official complaint. Harmon says that you attacked him, and he has the injuries as proof." The view widened out, and there he stood. Harmon's face was bandaged, and his little eyes stared hatefully out of the hologram. I winced. Yeah, that doesn't look good. "You must provide your own statement at once so that I can complete my investigation of this incident."

The worst thing was that Allison had no reason to listen to my explanation, and every

right to send me back to the Joint Colony. Which would leave her free to pursue Karnac.

From the angry rumble beside me, I didn't think she had much chance there, but knowing Allison, she'd see the chance to get rid of a rival as a definite gain.

"So," the hologram continued, focusing back on Allison. "When you get this, contact me immediately. I've included a location request; once you open this message, remain where you are. I will come to you."

"That's not good," I muttered as the hologram started over from the beginning. A gesture from me and Glitch shut it off. "She's probably on her way here already. What are we going to do?"

"Tell the truth," Karnac answered. "You were not at fault here, and you didn't give Harmon his injuries. We tell her what really happened and if she is even slightly honest, any punishment will land on me."

"But you didn't do anything wrong either."

"True." His lip quirked into a smile that made the butterflies in my stomach flutter. "It doesn't matter, though. I stepped in to protect you from Harmon, and I kept you safe from him. Now I can stand between you and a different sort of harm."

"You don't have to. I can take my lumps." The last thing I wanted was for him to get hurt for me. He'd already done so much for me. But he shook his head.

"If she convicts you of this, you will be sent away. Neither of us want that. If she blames me, though, she won't be able to send me away, not when Auric sent me up here. I'll get shouted at, probably. What more can she do to me?"

I chuckled unwillingly. “She’ll be so pissed.”

Before we could say more, the door slid open and Allison strode into the maintenance bay, followed by Harmon. He hung back, glowering suspiciously at Karnac and rubbing his bandaged face.

“Allison,” I started, but she didn’t give me time to speak.

“What the fuck, Molly? I don’t know what you were thinking, I really don’t.” Hands on her hips, she projected her voice to fill the room. Not shouting exactly, but as close as I’d ever seen her get. In person it wasn’t funny at all, the little pink whirlwind of rage glaring at me from a pace away. “Why did you attack Harmon, you idiot? We need him, you know how few people we have with any on-camera experience.”

I’m not sure that appearing as a second-string archer in Robin Hood is that much preparation for hosting news shows.

“He attacked me,” I said, answering the more important issue. “I left the party, I was on my way back to my room, when he caught up to me and started threatening me. He laid hands on me first, and if it hadn’t been for Karnac finding us, I don’t know how far Harmon would have gone.”

“Lies,” Harmon said. “Damned lies. You can’t believe this self-serving bullshit, Allison.”

“Accuse her of lying again, sthec, and I will tear out your deceitful tongue,” Karnac growled. “Molly tells the truth.”

Sweet, bless his alien heart, but not smart. Threatening our accuser didn’t exactly look innocent. Still, I had to admit watching Harmon’s face blanch was probably

worth the cost.

Allison massaged the bridge of her nose and looked at the three of us. “Okay. Fine. This is what we’re going to do. There’s no evidence for either story, but with Karnac and Molly agreeing, I have to lean their way.”

“Preposterous,” Harmon shouted loud enough to shake the room, or at least that’s what it felt like. “Allison, you know I would never?—”

“Harmon, shut up,” Allison glared at him and he fell silent. “I’m not saying they’re right, just that they’re more likely to be. If I was anywhere near certain, I’d ship you back to the Colony for Captain Joyce to deal with.”

This was a side of her I’d not seen before, and I had to suppress a grin. Apparently, there was a limit to what she’d accept from her boyfriends.

On her shoulder, Tulla the pink tarantula hissed at Harmon too before whispering something in his human’s ear. Allison calmed with a visible effort, taking a deep breath, holding it, and letting it out. She turned back to face me.

“Here is what we’ll do. All of you submit statements about what happened to me. I’ll send them down to the Captain’s office and we’ll see what she thinks. In the meantime, you three keep things professional between you.”

“You want me to work with him?” My voice wasn’t as calm and collected as I’d expected, more of an outraged squawk. At the same moment, Karnac growled his defiance of the idea.

“You won’t need to be alone with Harmon. In fact, we’ll make that official. The two of you are not to be in the same place if you can avoid it, and absolutely not anywhere alone.” Allison shook her head, pushed her hands through her hair, and

shot Harmon a poisonous glare. “I’d send you back right now, but you’d break your fool neck on the way down. You’ve got until the next resupply flight to convince us to let you stay.”

“Ridiculous,” Harmon boomed back. “You need me, you need my shows. Who else is going to fill that space?”

“Old films?” Allison said. “People have donated plenty of them, it would be a shame not to use that resource.”

“Basic lessons in Prytheen,” Karnac put in. If he was denied the ability to kill Harmon, he could still embarrass him.

Harmon looked ready to hit someone. I almost wanted him to, just to see Karnac destroy him, this time with a witness. Perhaps realizing he couldn’t hope to win if he tried to fight, he turned and stalked away.

“You will regret this,” he boomed as the doors slid shut behind him.

“Now that’s the best joke he’s come up with in a while,” Allison said, turning back to us. Mostly to Karnac, really, and I officially did not like the way her eyes devoured him. Punching her would be easy, satisfying, and very stupid, so I restrained the urge.

“Thank you for listening to our side of the story,” I said, trying to keep the conversation where it belonged. Allison waved it off.

“I know some of you don’t like me, but I’m not a monster. Just because I’m,” she paused, trying out words for size, then continued, “friendly with Harmon doesn’t mean I’m blind to his flaws.”

You could have fooled me was the wrong response. I settled for a smile and a nod,



hoping that would pass muster. I needn't have worried — her attention was back on Karnac, only a little left for me, and that seemed focused on fashion.

“What are you wearing, Molly? That... bronze armband thing?”

“It's a replacement housing for Glitch's processor. He needed it after Harmon smashed the last one.”

Hearing his name, Glitch jumped down from the table. Twice, once after the other, as his image stuttered. Allison laughed and shook her head. “I really should insist that you junk that thing and get a new companion. Glitch is, well, it's obviously not okay.”

After all the work we'd put into keeping Glitch with me, she wanted to recycle him? My jaw dropped and words failed me for an endless ten seconds.

“He's my friend, not just an 'it,’” I said, careful of my tone. It wasn't easy, and anyone looking at me would see the rage in my tensed muscles and wide eyes. “I'm not going to get rid of a friend just because you say so.”

Allison looked ready to argue, her AI tarantula rearing up on her shoulder. Before she got a word in, though, Karnac stepped forward.

“As long as the being functions, it doesn't matter, does it? Why waste time and expense when you have so many more important things to do?”

She blinked and nodded, caught off guard by his support. “I suppose you're right. It'll fail soon enough and then we can replace it. We'd have to wait for the supply run to bring up a spare, anyway.”

“True,” Karnac said, smiling at her. “You can afford to give it a few days.”

I fumed but tried to keep it quiet. Karnac had just saved Glitch again: Allison wouldn't have listened to me, but the way she gazed at Karnac, of course he could wrap her round his little finger. Still, it hurt... just minutes ago we'd been locked in a passionate embrace, and now he was making eyes at Allison? Men!

I did my best to push it aside. It's not like I had a claim on him, after all. What he did with anyone else was none of my business. Let the pirate fuck around, I didn't care, I lied to myself.

He had the decency not to do anything right in front of me. Bidding Allison goodnight, he saw her to the door and slid it shut behind her.

After the fight, anger spread through the station fast. Too small a place for any rumor to stay contained for long, by morning everyone knew at least a version of the story and had picked sides.

I expect it was an uncomfortable situation to be in for everyone. For me, it was near-unbearable. The only thing that let me get through it was Harmon retreating to his studio and working away there. At first, he even ate in the studio, but after a day Allison tired of that and forbade anyone to take him food. "It's not anyone's job to fetch and carry for him. He can eat in there if he wants, but he'll fetch his own food."

Karnac and I were back to an uneasy peace as we worked together in Maintenance. I'd tried to set a professional tone, but that proved tricky now that I knew what a good kisser he was.

I still sneaked peeks at him, admiring his muscles and the precision of his movements, remembering how swiftly he'd leaped to my defense. He sneaked peeks at me in return, hungry glances that tracked my curves, almost physical in their intensity. And every once in a while, worst of all, we sneaked looks at each other at the same time.

Then our eyes would meet, and the sheer power of his need, his desire, his lust struck like a hammer, knocking the breath out of me.

My own feelings had nothing to do with it. Nu-huh. Nope. I refuse to admit to the pent-up cauldron of lust I'd become since our kiss.

So when this happened, I'd quietly disengage. By which I mean, I'd get out as fast as possible, looking for something — anything — that needed work outside the maintenance bay. And that's how I came to be outside, checking the transmitter grounding cables, when I noticed that something was wrong.

Squinting, I looked up at the antenna. "Glitch, is that cable dangling loose?"

The hologram cat appeared two feet from the ground and dropped. His glitching was worse after the repair, but I was glad nothing worse seemed to have happened to him.

He focused, projecting a hologram of what he saw. Yep, that was a dangling cable. Half of one, in fact, the other half caught in the antenna's frame. I traced the line, swore, placed a call to Allison, swore again.

A small hologram appeared above my vambrace, Allison smiling her fake smile at me. "Well?"

What the fuck's your problem? I wanted to ask, but I stuck with the much safer topic of a near disaster.

"Something's chewed through the transceiver cabling," I said, wincing at the look of incomprehension on her face. Whatever brief alliance we'd had, it faded faster each time we talked. "It's... Okay, it sends power and messages up to the transceivers, and the setup is a bit unorthodox. We had to bodge it together to get it to work at all. If you power up to talk to the Joint Colony, probably the circuit will fry."

“No messages from the Joint Colony?” Allison frowned. “That’s not good. How long will it take to replace the cable?”

I closed my eyes for a moment and breathed deep. “You remember when I said our number five cabling had disappeared and we needed to ask for more? And you said it would keep, we had more urgent supplies to order?”

“Oh. Oh no.”

“Yep. This is what we need number five cabling for.”

She didn’t curse. Just barely, she didn’t curse. I saw it in the tension around her eyes, the way her fake smile froze. The pause where she stayed silent before speaking.

“Well. That’s inconvenient. We can still call down, though? Ask for some as soon as possible.”

I didn’t roll my eyes. No one would ever know the heroic effort I spent not to. Number five cabling carried both signal and power to the transceivers, and I’d told Allison that more than once.

“You’d have to do it through the main antenna, broadcast the message for everyone to see. Our contact with the Wandering Star runs through the transceivers.”

“... there’s no other way?” Allison hadn’t interrupted scheduled programming once since she arrived, it was like an obsession. Using a broadcast slot to ask for more resources would horrify her, so I took pity.

“I’ll see if Karnac has any ideas to add. Maybe there’s some Prytheen technology he can use to replace the damaged cabling.”

The tension in Allison's expression relaxed, just a fraction, and she let out a long sigh. "Yes. That's an excellent idea, Molly, I'm sure he'll be able to sort something out."

Great. Talked myself into it. I'll have to work with the Prytheen again. No running away this time. The worst part was how much I wanted to, no matter how much my conscious mind protested. It was an excuse to spend time with him, one that no one could fault. Not even me.

Cutting the connection to Allison, Glitch called up the maintenance bay instead. A voice only channel opened up almost instantly.

"Karnac," he said, voice gruff, his name bitten off as though he resented every wasted microsecond.

"I need some help," I said, about to explain. Over the comm I heard the clatter of a chair knocked over.

"On my way," Karnac said, voice already faint with distance. Before I could object, I saw him racing out into the snow and running my way.

How did he know where I was? The fixed comm in the maintenance bay didn't give any location data, but he'd found me in seconds. An oddly comforting feeling, knowing he could find me quickly if I needed him.

Don't. You don't need him, this is just work. Any colleague would do. Even as I thought that, I knew I was lying to myself. If I imagined Amy turning up to help instead... no. Not the same, not even slightly.

While I struggled with my feelings, Karnac leaped up to join me in a single swift motion. A jump, then a grab at the edge of the roof, and he swung up to land before

me.

I tried not to stare, but wow. Pulling myself together, I did my best to focus on why I'd called him.

To get close to that gorgeous body. No. Stupid brain. Important maintenance work came first.

"Look up there, see the severed cable?" I said at last, face flushing. How long had I stood in silence, looking at him? At least he didn't tease me about it, just looked up where I pointed and nodded.

"We don't have a spare," I continued. "And, um, I wondered if you had any Prytheen tricks that would work?"

Scowling and shielding his eyes from the sun, he considered the problem, then shook his head. "I don't know. The cable might be patchable, but it's a mess and I don't know the specifications. I'll take a closer look."

I swear I was about to stop him. The words were there, on the tip of my tongue, and then he shrugged off his leather coat and I had a view of those muscles again. Every thought went out of the window, all I wanted was to run my hands over his back, feeling scars and muscle and strength.

Biting my lip, I resisted that temptation and watched him leap up, catch a handhold, and pull his way up the aerial mast. Metal creaked and groaned under his weight, but he had a good feel for what would bear his weight.

Watching from below, I marveled at the view. Blood rushed to my cheeks as I tried not to stare, but who could resist Karnac's muscular legs and ass? Not me. Not when he wore nearly skin-tight pants.

As he reached the severed cable, he looked down at me and grinned. My cheeks burned as he caught me staring and I tore my gaze away.

Above, Karnac laughed. Not mocking me, just amused, but it still stung.

“Hey, asshole, what’s so funny? It’s not like I don’t catch you staring at me.” I snapped, but he only laughed harder.

“Of course I stare at you, beautiful,” he called down. “I have never seen anyone more worth staring at than you. It’s simply nice to know you feel the same about me.”

“Fuck you,” I muttered, but Prytheen hearing was better than I thought. The comment set him off laughing again, and I couldn’t help smiling a little, too. Which didn’t stop me from making a rude gesture up at him.

“So what do you see up there? Can you do anything?”

He turned back to the cable and examined it. Sighed. “Something did a rough job on this. None of the edges are neat, so even if I have Prytheen equivalents, matching them up might not be possible. It would certainly not be fast. Do you not have spares?”

I sighed, shook my head. “We should have a spare reel of the stuff, but it’s missing. Along with a bunch of other stuff. It’s frustrating, and we can’t work out what’s happening.”

Karnac carefully tucked the ragged ends of the cable away, wrapping them around the aerial to keep them from causing any trouble. He used that as an excuse not to talk for a few seconds, before he turned back to me and frowned.

“That is concerning,” he said. “Things going missing without a sign, in an isolated

place like this? Someone must be taking them.”

“Or some thing,” I added. “There’s a story going round that a ghost haunts the station.”

“Humans are ridiculously superstitious. There’s a more reasonable explanation — one of the crew here is a thief.”

With that, he leaped from the antenna tower, landing in front of me. Right in front of me. Like, less than a foot away. Surprise made me squeak and jump back, my foot coming down on a patch of ice.

Three moments that followed are etched into my memory. The awful feeling as my foot skidded out from under me, sending me falling backward. The shock as muscular arms caught me, held me, slowed my fall. And last, most powerful, the joy and need Karnac’s touch filled me with.

Somehow, he twisted as we fell. Landed first with a loud thump, pulling me to him and cushioning my impact with his body.

His gorgeous, wonderful, sexy body.

I lay there, head resting on his torso, hearing the thumpTHUMP of his heartbeat. I wanted to be angry that he’d scared me like that, made me fall, but he’d also saved me.

And if a little fright was what it took to end up in Karnac’s arms, my body at least was happy to make that trade.

“Are you all right?” he asked, voice like a rumble of distant thunder. I swallowed, looked up along his body and met his golden gaze.



A mistake. A terrible mistake, at least if I wanted to keep a professional distance from Karnac. Looking into his eyes was like pouring gasoline on the flame of my lust. Whatever sound I made, it didn't contain any coherent words.

Karnac frowned, blinked, looked away. I regained enough control to try words. "I'm fine. You saved me."

"It was my fault you fell," he admitted, looking down at me again. "I should not have?—"

I put a finger across his lips and he fell silent. "Shush. You saved me. Let's focus on that bit."

Maybe touching his lips was my mistake. Maybe it reminded me of how they felt when he kissed me. I bit my lip, frozen in place and unable to move from the spot, the memory slamming into me like a wrecking ball.

Karnac growled, low, hungry, and irresistible. Swinging me around, he pinned me to the snow-covered roof and kissed me hard.

The memory had been enough to dent the walls I'd raised around my heart. The actual kiss, though? It was as though he'd set off explosives, shattered the walls and sent the bits flying. I didn't care anymore, what did it matter that he was Prytheen? What mattered was that he was here, now, the hero of the hour.

I arched my back, pressing my body against him, cursing the thick jacket between me and his chest. His tongue pressed to my lips, pushing past them pushing into my mouth as his rough hands explored my body.

Fuck. Okay. Just... disengage and stay professional... The thoughts drifted through the haze of need and desire my brain sank into. They made no difference, just noise in

the background as I grabbed at him, alien skin strange to my fingers. I ran my hands down his flanks, to his tight leather pants, fumbling as I tried to work the alien fastenings.

“Not here,” he growled. “You will freeze.”

“Don’t care,” I said, or rather panted. Short of breath, I kept pulling. “Worth it.”

Ah! A catch came undone, his belt slid apart. As I opened his pants, I slipped a hand inside, exploring.

And oh my god. My fingers closed on a monster; a dick bigger than any I’d ever imagined. Ribbed, even, and hard as iron. I gasped and looked up at Karnac in wonder.

He groaned, his own self-control bleeding away as I caressed him. “Do not do that if you do not mean it.”

I meant it all right. Wholeheartedly, intensely, my urges overwhelming my brain’s weak objections. An empty ache inside me cried out for Karnac to fill it, to fill me. And none of me cared about the temperature.

Karnac’s breath caught as I stroked him slowly, and with a groan he grabbed my jacket, unzipped and spread it, kissing my neck, my shoulders, his sharp carnivore’s teeth scraping my skin deliciously. Cold air chilled me but didn’t discourage me — the warmth radiating from my Prytheen lover was more than enough to offset the chill of the breeze, made it into a delightful contrast.

Struggling to get my arms free of the jacket, panting, our breath forming a cloud around the two of us, we fought with our clothing. My shirt? Ripped open by alien claws, baring my body for him to kiss and bite and lick. His pants? I pushed them

down, freed his cock, and it was even bigger than I'd thought. Huge. Intimidatingly huge, but also mouthwateringly huge.

With quick, sure motions he undid my pants and pulled them off. In his embrace I barely noticed the cold, and when he kissed his way down my neck, each kiss burned with a heat that spread through my body.

"Fuck," I whispered as his teeth closed on my shoulder. I arched under him, reaching down and finding his cock again, stroking. Teasing him.

"Yes," my alien lover said, voice rough with need. "Yes, my heart. FUCK."

With those words he bit harder and I cried out, eyes rolling back as I shuddered under him. My grip on his cock tightened and he let out a gasp.

Panting, desperate to have him inside me, I guided him to my wet pussy. He let out a noise no human throat could match, somewhere between a growl and a purr, and thrust.

It was like being hit with a piledriver, if that piledriver were made of pure pleasure. His first thrust slammed into me, stretched me, drove me back into the roof. I shuddered, grasping at him, squeezing him inside me as he filled me so perfectly.

SLAM. He thrust again, pushing me back off my jacket, my shoulders hitting the snow. An intense contrast to the fire of Karnac's passion above me, making me cry out again. Karnac slid a hand behind my head, the other under my ass, and lifted.

Standing up, he held me to him still impaled on his hard cock. The casual strength with which he supported me was just one more thing in his long list of amazingly hot attributes.

I held on tight, arms and legs wrapped around him, panting as our bodies pressed together and he lifted me higher. Higher. Until he'd almost lifted me off his cock. He held me there, suspended in his powerful arms, and then pulled me down again.

It's possible that I saw the face of god. I'm certain I cried out for him.

Karnac didn't let up, thrusting deep into me, holding me up with one hand as the other teased me, explored me. Claws grazed my back, and my heart raced. I clawed at his back too, scratching hard and driving him further into his wild frenzy of lust.

We panted together, our hearts racing at the same speed, and I felt my orgasm approaching like an oncoming tidal wave. I tried to say something to Karnac, but no words came, just little mewls of pleasure.

I'm sure he knew what I meant. Thrusting harder, more insistently, his growls louder and more urgent, he urged me on. And I felt him swell inside me, making me arch again, screaming into the icy mountain air.

As if that was a signal, his cock vibrated. And that was more than I needed to send me over the edge. I convulsed, pressing myself to him, the world dissolving into a pure bright light of ecstasy. For a moment that felt like it lasted forever, nothing existed apart from Karnac and me, and telling where one of us began and the other ended was impossible.

His howl of joy joined my scream, and he came powerfully inside me. His legs giving way, he lowered me down to the roof, cushioning my fall with his body as he landed in the snow.

Steam rose from our bodies as I collapsed onto his chest, kissing him and shaking as I came back to myself. So much tension gone, I felt relaxed for the first time since the Crash. So relaxed that my eyes drifted shut, head resting on his chest, lulled by his

heartbeat. As I drifted into the dark of sleep, the last thing I felt was Karnac pulling his coat over me as a blanket, stroking my hair, and whispering something in Prytheen.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am*

6

### KARNAC

Looking down at the beautiful sleeping human nestled against me, I sighed. Molly was all I'd dreamed of and more, things that I'd never have thought to want. But my conscience niggled. She'd worked so hard to maintain distance, and then I'd wrecked that for her. Above, the metal framework of the antenna tower shifted in the wind.

I knew my capabilities. I could have landed safely away from her. Without making a conscious choice, I'd landed next to Molly. Frightened her into falling, giving me the chance to catch her. Everything after that wasn't hard to predict. Neither one of us could resist the other, not in close quarters like that.

"She is my khara," I said, speaking to the uncaring sky. "We would be here eventually."

A few flakes of snow drifted down. The clouds held no other answers for me.

I should talk to her about this, I thought, knowing that I wouldn't be able to work out what she wanted on my own. But she looked too peaceful to disturb, and I wanted to savor this moment.

Fate had other plans for the two of us. Glitch fizzed into existence beside us, opening his mouth and beeping. I didn't know much about Earth animals, but it didn't sound right for an organic being.

On my chest, Molly squirmed and muttered something, waving vaguely in Glitch's direction. The hologram took no notice. I considered trying to mute the thing, but it was too late. Wrapping my coat around herself and sitting up, Molly looked flustered, embarrassed and entirely sated. Pride brought a smile to my face, happy to have pleased my khara so.

Molly shook her head, swallowing and blushing. "Who is it, Glitch?"

An image appeared above the hologram, and both Molly and I groaned. It was Allison, presumably looking for an update. Molly made a quick check of her messages and swore.

"Why didn't you tell me that there were messages, Glitch? God, she'll be raging, thinking I've ignored her."

Glitch somehow looked both contrite and smug, meowing and looking at me. I nodded my thanks to the little creature, wondering just how smart he was. Ignoring his mistress's calls so we had our time together didn't sound like behavior that the programmers would encourage.

Grabbing Molly's jacket, I passed it to her — as fetching as she looked with my coat wrapped around her, I doubted she'd want Allison to see her like that. Her face bright red, she traded the coat for the jacket, pulled her pants on, pulled fingers through her hair to tidy it. She took a deep breath and turned to face the hologram from an angle where I wouldn't be visible.

"Okay, Glitch, put me through."

It's odd to look at a hologram from behind. With no effort made to fill in the back of her head, it was like looking at a mask of Allison's face from the inside. Fascinated, I watched as she spoke.

“What in god’s name have you been up to, Molly? You went out hours ago and haven’t answered a single call since then. I worried about you, and I don’t like that.”

“We’re perfectly safe, we’ve just been busy looking for whatever chewed through the cables. It looks like we won’t be able to fix the damage, though.”

“Motherf— I mean, that’s bad news. I suppose we’ll have to wait for the supply run to request the cable.”

Molly tipped her head to one side, her face a delightful picture of concentration. “They might send someone up sooner, once they realize we’ve lost contact?”

“Or they might not,” Allison said. “I can’t afford to plan on that. In the meantime, we don’t have communication, which is not good, but it’s not a disaster either. We can still send out the programming we’ve got or what we record ourselves. If it comes to the worst, we can put out a call for help over the general broadcast.”

She talked to herself as much as Molly, I thought. Trying to convince herself it was nothing to worry about. Which was probably true; whatever threat had chewed through that cable hadn’t attacked people yet.

“Right,” Molly agreed. “I’ll keep a close eye on the other cables out here, in case there’s more trouble, but there’s not much we can do with the problem here. Fortunately, our ‘cable rat’ doesn’t seem to like what it ate — it chewed through in one place and then left it alone. No sign of a charred corpse, though, so it might be back.”

“Or it might have friends,” Allison said, then shook her head. “No point borrowing trouble. Unless you or Karnac can find a trail to follow and hunt that thing down, we’ll just have to keep an eye out for trouble.”



The image vanished without ceremony and Molly sat back down, hard. Glitch moved in two directions at once and vanished as I rushed to her side.

“My feet are freezing,” she complained, grabbing for her boots. I helped her put them on, regretting that I hadn’t thought of that before. Humans — a strange combination of tough and fragile. More than anything else, I wanted to protect this one from any harm. She could take care of herself, yes, but she shouldn’t have to.

“Let me get you inside,” I said, lifting her in my arms and kissing her on the cheek. Lip-to-lip contact would be a bad idea if we wanted to get inside. Molly clung to me, letting out a little shriek as I jumped down from the roof. Enjoying the way she held me tight, I wondered how else I’d get that reaction.

Molly glowered at me and pinched my ear. “OW. What was that for?”

“You were thinking of more ways to scare me,” she said. “I won’t have it. Not unless we’re watching horror vids.”

“I was doing no such thing,” I started, only to feel Molly’s fingers tighten on my ear again. “Okay, fine, I promise. Now I will have to seek out these ‘horror vids’ of yours.”

At that we reached the maintenance bay entrance, which slid open to reveal Glitch waiting smugly on the far side. I put Molly down as soon as we were in the heated room, Glitch shutting the door behind us.

“There. Now we’re safely in the warm we can—” I cut off mid-sentence, watching Molly back away, chewing on her lower lip. What had looked delightful before now looked ominous, like an omen of bad things to come.

“Karnac,” she started, then fell silent again. I took a step back, giving her time to

consider. It wasn't easy but crowding her would only make things harder for us both.

"Karnac, I don't know how to describe what you do to me," she said, carefully looking at a point above my right shoulder. No danger of accidental eye contact to distract us. "You take away my good judgement, you make me want to like you, but you're still a pirate. Still one of the killers who stranded us here, who kept me from my new home."

I grimaced, feeling as though a hook had lodged in my heart. A misstep now could tear it in two. "I cannot lie to you, Molly. You are right, I did those things. Misled by evil leaders, but I do not hide behind that excuse. I allowed them to mislead me where others did not. I fought for an honorable goal, but Zaren took the Silver Band on a dishonorable route to reach it. He is dead now, and good riddance. If the Silver Band ever reaches space again, we'll not repeat our error. Anyone who tries will face me first."

I risked a step toward her, and Molly flinched but did not withdraw. I took that as a good sign but did not push my luck by advancing further. My khara would come to me if I did things right, and I would not risk doing things wrong.

"Your hesitation is natural," I told her. "I and my kind caused you and yours grave harm. Allow me to make it up to you as best I can, and I swear to you on the planet-grave of my people I will not attack any target you disapprove of."

Molly snorted a laugh, taken by surprise. "You won't promise not to be a pirate, but you'll let me be your conscience?"

"If I need one, perhaps. Or perhaps not, and you'll never object to a target I set again. But you will always have the option."

Molly risked looking at me, smiling, and that was almost enough to make me pounce.

Will alone is all I had to hold myself still and motionless, not wanting to seem threatening.

Her pale cheeks heated red, and she looked away. Silence filled the room until Glitch meowed at the two of us.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said severely. “Is this spoiling your fun?”

Unrepentant, Glitch nodded and meowed again. I couldn’t help smiling.

“You see, Molly? Glitch knows I’d be good for you.”

She put her hands on her hips and glared. “Don’t you bring him into this, pirate. He doesn’t get a say in this decision, and neither do you.”

I nodded, melting her stern expression slightly, and sighed. “If you are like me, you cannot think while we’re together. Or rather, you can think of only one thing.”

Her delightful blush deepened, and she nodded quickly, as though trying to get the admission out and in the past as swiftly as possible. I didn’t dwell on it, as much as I’d have liked to find out just how red I could get her face. That would be a project for later when we had our leisure to explore such things.

“Then here is what we will do,” I said. “You have work to do and need time to think. I will leave you in peace to consider what you want to do. And yes, when I return, I will try to convince you we belong together, that you are my khara. You have the final say, though. Infuriating, but here we are.”

Molly managed another small laugh at that. “Oh, is that what you’ve decided we’ll do? Do I get a say in that plan?”

“No,” I told her, smiling. Watching for the little gulp of need I expected to see. “No, this is the plan and we are doing it.”

“You think I’m infuriating, and then you try to boss me around like that?”

“No.” She blinked at my flat refusal, and I continued before she could object. “No, Molly, I don’t try to boss you around.”

The glare she shot me wasn’t real, her eyes and her scent gave away how much she enjoyed it. Counting that as a victory, I stalked from the room.

Away from Molly, my thoughts cleared, and I cursed myself for taking things so far. What if she said no? Yes, she was my khara, the soul that completed mine. But humans hadn’t grown up knowing what that meant, and I had given her reason to refuse me.

I will not let that happen. I will woo her, win her heart in the old way — by hunting something magnificent and preparing the greatest meal she’s ever tasted.

That would be easier on a planet where I knew more about the wildlife, admittedly, but that would not stop me from doing my best. Full of restless energy and desire, I could not stay around the station. Molly’s presence was a constant call to me, one my willpower had already proved too weak to resist.

I fetched my bow, checked my quiver — twenty arrows, more than enough for a good hunt. Made of monofiber, I didn’t need to worry about them breaking. About to leave, I remembered to check the weather. Most of my hunts had been on planets where we controlled orbit, making it hard to miss storms. Crashland was an exception. We didn’t even have satellites yet.

But every room had a vidbox, and if there was one thing we could rely on, it was that

Allison would do her job. Flicking through the channels until I found her, I watched as she narrated the weather around the planet as best she could. Even the map was crude, pieced together from the reports of the scattered human colonists and Prytheen warriors. Most of the planet was blank, and I wondered what it would be like to explore those vast spaces.

I shook off that feeling when Allison turned to the local map around the Joint Colony.

“... continuing signs of a gathering storm to the east, but not to worry, our pressure sensors would spot it coming our way,” she said brightly. “If it turns this way, it’ll probably be a big one, so do make sure you’re prepared and take supplies with you. That won’t happen for at least two, more likely three days, if it happens at all. To repeat, there is no reason to believe it’ll move in our direction.”

She smiled a warm, reassuring grin, and my lip quirked. Perhaps, Allison, it would do you better to practice that smile, that attitude, with your colleagues as well as your audience?

I shook my head. She wouldn’t listen if I tried to tell her, which was a shame.

At least the report was good. I’d only need a few hours to catch something. Pulling my coat around my shoulders, settling the quiver on my back, I made my way through maintenance and set off for the woods.

The almost pristine snow crunched under my booted feet as I made my way down toward the strange, purple trees. That promised to be the best hunting ground — undisturbed by humans or Prytheen, the animals would not know to fear me. The fence posts halfway down the slope stood like silent sentinels, broadcasting an ultrasonic field that kept out all Crashland animals.

I wasn’t the first to come this way, though. The light snowfall we’d recently had

covered most of the tracks, but not all. Deep marks, going parallel to the fence before curving up toward the station. I looked back and frowned. Someone's morning exercise, maybe? Or someone who liked animal spotting from the safe side of the fence?

A tiny mystery, one that would keep.

As I crossed the fence line, I heard the sound myself, like twin daggers plunged through my ears and into my brain. It lasted only a fraction of a second before I was through and clear of the noise. Humans didn't hear it at all, but some Prytheen did when we were right in the middle of it. I shuddered at the thought of being held in that fence.

On the far side, nothing changed, and everything felt different. The snow still crunched underfoot, the wind still blew, but on this side of the fence, danger lurked. A grin spread across my face as I unslung my bow and advanced, keeping my eyes open for any sign of predator or prey.

I didn't have to go far before I saw tracks in the snow. Almost covered by fresh snowfall, they would have been easy to miss, and I only spotted them after I'd been walking beside them for a while. Once I saw them, though, I crouched to examine them closer. My heart thumped and an uneasy prickling feeling climbed my spine.

Sure enough, they weren't animal tracks in the snow. They were boot prints. Prytheen boots, like my own. I looked up, scanned the tree line. No sign of any watchers, though that meant nothing. It wouldn't take much skill to hide from me in the dark beneath the trees.

Why were you here? Spying on us, or afraid to attract our attention? Not all my comrades accepted Auric's leadership or the peace with the humans. Many of those who did not turned to raiding and violence, so I had to assume they were a threat.

But I couldn't discount the possibility that they were lost. The energy field around Crashland drained Prytheen technology of power so quickly that we'd had no way to communicate; if this was the first sign of civilization the Prytheen warrior had found, then a wary approach made sense. He'd only have one chance to get contact right. Coming in too hard or too soft could be disastrous.

"At least he's turned up while I'm here," I muttered, straightening and following the tracks down toward the woods. "Doesn't matter if he's friend or foe, I'm a better match for a Prytheen than any of the humans are."

Under the trees, the tracks became easier to follow. Sheltered from the snowfall, the imprints were clearer, and I picked up speed. Crashland was home to many dangerous predators so I had to pay close attention to the shadows under the purple boughs, check behind the larger trunks, watch above for predators ready to drop.

It was a relief when the tracks left the woods again. My prey crossed the covered area and emerged into another snowfield — perhaps he, too, worried about the wildlife? A chill had settled in while I was under the trees, enough to make me shiver as I pressed on. The bright light from Crashland's harsh sun had been cut off by clouds blowing in fast and hard, and snowflakes drifted down around me.

If I turn back now, these tracks will be gone. I looked up at the clouds, heavy and dark, and wondered just how much to trust Allison's predictions. Left to myself, I'd say a heavy storm was about to hit — but Allison had more experience than anyone else on the planet, and her predictions had been accurate so far.

"What do I know about weather?" I said to myself as the clouds scudded by. "I grew up in spaceships. Allison trained to do this for a long time; trust the expert."

Taking those words to heart, I continued on before the snow buried the trail. It felt heavier and heavier around me as I went.

### MOLLY

Watching the heavy clouds roll in, Allison frowned. Her pink nails drummed on her table as we both looked out the window, and I raised an eyebrow as she muttered under her breath.

“That can’t be right,” she said. “There’s no way I’d have missed a storm this size, not when I had the data from half a dozen colony pods to work from.”

We’d met in the room labeled ‘refectory’ on the floor plans. That was a joke: five tables, a score of chairs, and a matter printer were hardly worth the title. We’d taken to calling it the break room, and none of us ate our meals there.

That made it the perfect place for a private, unnoticed chat. A chance for me to... well, I didn’t know what I wanted, which exasperated Allison. Perhaps ask for a transfer? Somewhere far from Karnac and the temptation he posed would be perfect, except even thinking about that hurt. Or was I here to ask her blessing? That would be trite, stupid, and insulting to her, Karnac, and me.

I dithered, Allison got annoyed with me, and ended up looking out at the snow blowing in. The haze under the approaching clouds looked like a heavy snowfall.

Allison’s frown deepened, and she turned to her pink tarantula to help with some calculations. Numbers flashed over the hologram’s head as she called up her prediction. “I don’t understand, I couldn’t have gotten it this wrong. Look at the



numbers.”

I obliged her, but they meant nothing to me. Whatever she saw in the numbers and graphs was meaningless to me.

“Everyone gets things wrong,” I said, trying to be reassuring.

“No, this isn’t just a fucking mistake,” Allison snapped back at me, then took a deep breath. “This is... okay, say the water pressure’s dropping in your home. There’s got to be a leak, but you can tell it’s not bad because the pressure’s only dropped a little. But when you track the leak down, the basement’s flooded and water’s gushing everywhere. You can’t have gotten it that wrong, it’s just not possible.”

Points for trying to put that in language I’ll understand, I thought, trying not to smile. And I guess I get what you mean, even if you don’t really understand plumbing.

“Okay, sorry, so how bad is this going to be?”

“Bad. That’s all I can say until I figure out what’s wrong with my predictions. We’d best tell everyone to get inside and stay there. The storm will be here in two hours, maybe less.”

I nodded, half-grateful for the interruption. This was definitely more urgent than talking to my rival about Karnac, so I got to put that off.

Oh. Oh shit. The last I’d seen of him, he’d grabbed his bow and headed out. At the time I hadn’t worried — the pirate could take care of himself. But now, with that solid wall of snow bearing down on us, things looked very different.

What a fucking asshole, running off to get himself killed in a storm. My anger was irrational: even the meteorologist hadn’t seen this coming, it wasn’t Karnac’s fault he

hadn't. But the blinding anger covered the aching pain in my heart at the thought he might not return. I swear, next time I see him I'll kill the idiot myself and save him the trouble of doing it himself.

Allison leaned across the table and took my hand. Big blue eyes looked into mine, every bit the picture of concern, and every bit as superficial as a politician. For a moment, watching her fighting the data, I thought I'd seen the person hiding under the pink plastic shell Allison wrapped herself in. Now she'd vanished.

"What's wrong, Molly?" she asked. I had to admit, she was good. With the full force of her personality focused on me, it didn't matter that I knew she was faking her concern.

"It's Karnac," I answered, trying to pull my hand free of hers. No good, her grip tightened like a vice. Maybe saying that hadn't been a great idea, but now I'd started. "He went out hunting, and I don't think he's back yet."

Her smile stayed in place, but the muscles around it hardened. "Oh, how perfectly wonderful."

In all my life I'd never heard someone curse with as much vitriol as Allison Greene managed to put into those two words. Sailors would have fainted to hear her, plants died if she'd directed it their way.

"Tulla, would you bring up the logs from the fence, please?" Her polite mannerisms were brittle, as though her plastic shell might shatter at any moment. The pink tarantula skittered forward, and this time the hologram was one I knew. I'd been wrestling with it since gaps appeared in the fence logs, but there weren't any gaps in the last few hours. One of the green bars representing a section of fence turned briefly orange, indicating that someone had crossed it from our side. And then nothing, unbroken green. I watched in vain for the red line that would show someone crossing

from the far side, but it never came. Of course not, anything crossing from the far side would sound an alarm in case it was something dangerous.

“So,” Allison said, finally letting go of my hand. “He’s stuck out there. I hope he knows how to survive a snowstorm.”

Rubbing my right hand where she’d clamped down on it, I shook my head. “No way. He doesn’t even know there’s a storm coming. I’ll find him and bring him back.”

“You most certainly will not,” Allison answered, her eyes flashing. “I know you want him safe, but I refuse to be the manager who got two people killed instead of one. You’re staying right here, and when Karnac gets back, you can shout at him first. Deal?”

I opened my mouth, shut it again, thought it through. The first rule in a crisis is to keep yourself safe before tending to others, and it’s a good rule. But right now, that rule could take a long walk off a short pier.

“Deal?” Allison’s voice hardened and she clasped her hands in front of her. She could lock me up if she felt she had to, so I nodded reluctantly. Allison relaxed, just a fraction, and nodded. “Good. That will give us time to plan an expedition once the storm’s passed by. A proper search, not just you blundering through the wilderness.”

I scowled but didn’t argue. “Fine. I’ll try to get some work done here, then.”

Tapping on the table summoned Glitch, who appeared two feet to the right, sitting on empty air and preening. At least Allison had the sense not to push her luck, and for once didn’t try talking me into recycling him. I felt the look she gave me but she didn’t say a word.

We both buried ourselves in virtual work. Allison in sending out an email update

telling everyone about the incoming storm. Me... well, it wasn't technically work. Hacking would be a better word for it. There was an amusing irony to the fact that the alerts for the systems Glitch compromised came to me. He'd enter the western viewport control, and I'd know he'd succeeded when an email turned up to tell me the WVC had been hacked. Which I discarded, feeling a little guilt, but only a little.

It only took a few minutes to finish that job, after which I turned to load-balancing the power systems. No matter what else happened, when that snow hit, we'd lose power from the solar collectors and I wanted to make sure that everything vital would run on the batteries as long as possible.

Alarms blared, and I squealed. Allison jumped up so fast she knocked her chair over, demanding answers. In the corridor, a mishmash of voices, all demanding to know what was happening. Why were all the western viewports opening? Were we going to freeze?

Allison hurried out of the refectory and started trying to calm our colleagues down. It wasn't an easy task, not with everyone on edge already. I slipped past her toward the western side of the building. Someone called encouragement after me, and I smiled. Nice to be appreciated for once.

"Just stay out of my way and I'll have this fixed in no time," I told them. "The temperature will be back up in half an hour, give or take, but if you're cold, put on your outside gear to keep warm."

I grabbed my coat from my locker, along with my outdoor boots. As I'd hoped, Allison's mind was on crowd control not on me, and I'd given a good reason for taking outside gear. If she'd thought about it, she'd probably have worked out my plan, but she had too many other things on her mind.

Slipping into studio one, I found it still set up for Zeng Ru's afternoon children's

show. It was a little creepy, the brightly colored set empty, snow drifting in and covering everything near the open window.

I didn't pause to look at it, just climbed out the window and onto the slope beyond. The snow brought down visibility, rendering the trees as a fuzzy dark line. That would have to do for a destination, that and shouting for Karnac to come find me.

"Well done, Glitch, you can close up the windows now," I said to my companion. He purred at my thanks, and behind us the windows slid shut. A delayed message would tell the others that everything was fine in five minutes. By then, Allison would know what I'd done from the alert she'd get when I crossed the fence. I'd be too far away for her to do anything about it, though.

I wondered if this was a good idea. But I had my heavy jacket, my heated gloves and boots, and a need to teach Karnac a damned good lesson.

Pulling my gloves on, I headed down the slope to find my mate.

My hood up, goggles on, and heating elements active, it really wasn't that cold. In fact, by the time I'd made it down to the fence, I was sweating.

"Hey, Glitch, let me know if you see a trail to follow," I told my companion. His purr of agreement made me jump, coming from right beside my ear while his hologram scampered at my feet. He's a little sneak sometimes.

He led me down into the snow, though if he was following anyone's tracks, I couldn't see them. Not that much of a surprise, through goggles and the snow. Trusting that Glitch knew where he was going, I followed.

The snow got heavier as I descended the slope, and I looked back to check my trail. It was already vanishing, fresh snow blotting it out. The snow had turned heavy now,

thick white flakes blowing everywhere, carried on the blustery wind, and I couldn't see beyond a few yards.

“Glitch?” I couldn't see my companion either, and for a moment I thought a predator might have caught him. Ridiculous, of course — the wildlife couldn't hurt a hologram. It would take an attack on me, on the vambrace that held his projector. Yeah, that's not exactly a cheerful thought either. “GLITCH!”

I spun around, looking in every direction. There: the fuzzy hologram appeared out of the snow, image glitching wildly. For once, it wasn't due to damage to his circuits: falling snow disrupted the light as it passed through him.

“Thank goodness you're okay,” I said, irrationally relieved. It's one thing to know your friend's not in danger, but much better to see he's unhurt. Which brought me back to Karnac, alone out there in the snow. Did he know what he was doing? I frowned: he'd grown up on spaceships, been raised in artificial environments. As skilled as he was, he didn't have a context for a snowstorm like this.

Oh, like I do? Please, I grew up in Arizona. Shivering in my jacket, I tried to orient myself, looking for the route back to the station. But the snow had gotten thick enough that I couldn't tell, my own tracks vanishing too quickly. Even uphill wasn't useful; between wind and blinding snow, I was lost and off-balance.

Taking a tentative step in a direction chosen on instinct alone, I tried to judge where I was going. Could have been up, could have been down. Left was no better. Nor right. And then I realized I was even more lost than before.

Glitch scampered by my side, undaunted by the snow. Maybe he could help? I bent to ask him, and that chance change in angle let me see the figure moving in the darkness. Tall, broad shouldered, long coat. Thank god.

“Karnac,” I called, my voice snatched away by the wind. Taking a deep breath, I bellowed with all the force I had in me. “KARNAC. I’m here, I need you.”

Waving my hands wildly, hoping the motion would get his attention if my shouting didn’t, I must have looked a fool. But it worked, the shadowy figure froze for a moment, then changed course to head for us. Glitch glowed brighter, the snow turning his light into a glittering kaleidoscope.

Any other day, I’d have watched that with glee. Not today. Today, I stamped my way through the snow toward our Prytheen rescuer. My only thought for the light was that it would show him where we were, and maybe let me see his face.

At last, he stepped into the light. My relief turned to surprise turned to shock. The ruddy stains on his coat were new, and his hair was short, framing a face with a vicious burn scar across his left cheek.

Not Karnac. I blinked, backed off a step, trying to fit that into my mind somehow, but the shock was too great. I hadn’t even drawn breath to scream when he grabbed me.

### KARNAC

The snow felt endless, an interesting effect that I'd love to understand. Maybe some human had an answer — if I ever saw one again, I'd ask. Right now, it seemed like dawn might as well be a year away.

I'd lost the trail of whoever I'd been following somewhere after the snowstorm properly started, worse luck, and now I had no idea where they sheltered. Nor, unfortunately, where I'd left the humans. By now they'd have found out I'd vanished, and I wondered how they'd take my foolishness. My heart broke at the thought of Molly, peering through the storm from inside the station and trying to find me.

I hoped I hadn't hurt her too much, and I hoped that I'd be able to make it back to her.

That was when I heard the shriek. No Prytheen made that noise, no human either. Loud and high-pitched, it cut through the muffling snow like a laser through butter. For a moment I thought it was a native animal, but then I recognized something about it. I'd heard this noise before, in more pleasant conditions.

Glitch! I turned into the storm, toward the sound of Molly's companion, and ran. Making headway against the wind and snow wasn't easy, but if my khara's companion was in danger, then so was she. That gave me fresh strength, and I raced ahead. Strange lights flickered through the snow, getting stronger as I approached. Framed in the light, I spotted a silhouette.



Two silhouettes. One my size, a Prytheen or a giant of a human. One smaller, bundled up but instantly recognizable despite the shapeless parka that hid her face and figure. Molly. Rage flooded through me as I saw more details — he had his hand on her throat, and she kicked at him desperately. Her hands pulled at his wrist, but that was a futile effort.

When his free hand reached for the fastening of her parka, I put my head down and charged. The storm covered much of my approach, but at the last moment the other Prytheen must have heard me coming. He turned his head in my direction, eyes going wide, and flung Molly at me.

Instinct told me to dodge, get past the attack, strike before my opponent recovered. I fought that instinct, catching Molly instead and cushioning her fall. The impact knocked the breath from her, but behind her goggles her eyes went wide.

“Karnac?” she gasped. I wished I had the time to answer her, reassure her, but our foe was almost on us. I dropped Molly — she hit the snow with an oof, I winced and promised myself I’d apologize later — drew my sword and leaped to meet him.

His blade sliced through the snow, slamming into my parry with enough force to knock me aside. Strong, but no finesse. With a twist of my wrist, I dropped my blade under his and cut back up, aiming for his arm.

He should have backed off, dodging my blow and giving us both a chance to adjust. Instead, he did the most foolish thing I’d ever seen. As soon as my blade left his, he lunged.

Stupid, reckless, and damned near enough to kill me. I twisted out of the way at the last moment, my attack ruined as I jumped sideways. A flash of teeth on my enemy’s face and he was after me, sword swinging high, low, high again. Driven backward, I parried each blow, studying my opponent as I went.

Fast. Skilled. Confident, perhaps overconfident — we'd know which when the duel ended. We'd both studied the sword, though from different masters. His style was based on speed and fury, mine more measured and balanced.

"You're good," I said, panting breaths freezing in the air. "What is your name? I am Karnac of Clan Layol, and that was my khara you struck."

That flashing grin again, hungry and menacing. "Ah, Layol, the ones who brought us our weapons on the front line. I am Torgek of Vindar, and if you surrender now, we may allow you to join us."

Of Vindar. I drew a sharp breath: omitting the 'clan' from that sentence meant that he was in Alpha-Captain Vindar's pack, serving the man directly. That implied Vindar was here, on Crashland, but hadn't chosen to contact the Joint Colony, and that implied hostile intentions. I had to return to the Colony and warn Auric.

His followers specialized in ground assaults, and I was used to their scorn. Stupid, adolescent scorn, since without us to supply them, their weapons and ships would have run dry quickly. And every Prytheen, regardless of clan, is a warrior.

To prove that, instead of parrying the next attack, I beat it aside, striking with all my might. A dangerous tactic; if he'd seen it coming I'd have left myself open, but he'd become complacent.

My blade struck his and knocked it away, the shock jarring me and weakening his grip. Seizing the opportunity, I sliced sideways, aiming for his neck.

Torgek was faster than I'd expected, leaping back. Instead of a fatal blow to the jugular, I merely grazed his chin. Still, first blood. Perhaps it would suffice.

"Surrender," I offered. "We will treat you well."

“You think this wound will take me down? You’re too used to fighting other box-pushers, Karnac. Come on, let’s fight, damn you.”

With that, he sprung forward, thrusting for my heart with all his speed. So fast! If I hadn’t been expecting it, he’d have run me through. But I’d not expected him to take my offer, and his eyes had given away his target. I stepped aside, letting his sword pass me. His foot came down on the snow and slipped, putting him off balance before he recovered from the attack.

I launched an overarm cut at his head.

Torgek’s eyes went wide as he saw my move unfold. He might be able to pull his blade around into a cut at my side, but even if he managed, we’d trade hits. His a weak cut, mine a deathblow.

His trained instincts kicked in, twisting his arm and pulling it up to block me. Our forearms crashed together, pain shot through me, and he staggered back off balance. I stepped up close to slam my left fist into his ribs. Something cracked, all the air left his lungs explosively, and my sword opened his neck.

Blood sprayed across the white snow, quickly vanishing under the blizzard. I paid neither the blood nor Torgek’s corpse any mind. More urgent business needed my attention.

“Molly,” I shouted, peering into the snow and trying to place her. “Glitch?”

That was more effective. The harsh, high-pitched yowl of the hologram cat pulled me in his direction, toward the strange scattering light I’d seen before. Of course. Forgetting that he was made of light and forcefields was all too easy.

I found him futilely pawing at a mound of snow. His forcefield generator was too

weak to do more than dislodge a few flakes at a time.

“There you are, Glitch,” I said, waving him back. “Best of cats, if she lives, I will be your friend for life.”

The snow came away easily for me, revealing an unconscious Molly. Examining her by the light of her hologram, I swore. Face even paler than usual, lips turning blue, the only clear sign of life a tiny pulse of steam with each imperceptible breath. She needed medical attention, and if that wasn’t available, shelter and warmth.

I had neither.

Shit.

Perhaps I could make a shelter out of snow? I knew that was a thing that could be done, but I didn’t know how. I shook my head, chest tightening. If the snow would let up enough for me to get my bearings, the station was right there. I’d get her back to her own kind, to warmth and light. But the storm insisted on continuing.

Pick a direction and get going, I told myself fiercely. Better than standing here until we both died. I told myself that one direction looked like it was uphill and walked that way, cradling Molly in my arms. She felt light as a feather and cold as a comet’s heart.

Something snagged my ankle, nearly tripping me. I looked down at Glitch, or rather Glitches — he’d split into three, one of them trying to savage my ankle through the heavy leather boot. I’d have laughed, except the other two looked at me with wide, desperate eyes.

“What is it?” I said, crouching to see them better. One meowed, another hissed, and the third continued worrying my boot.

I frowned. “Molly is in danger here, we must go. Come on.”

The trio of Glitch shattered like mirrors, reforming into a singular cat. His static-filled eyes looked at me, wide and sorrowful. Then he turned and marched off into the snow.

I frowned. Well, whatever was up, he couldn't get far from Molly and the holo-projector in her vambrace. Straightening up, I turned back the way I'd been walking before and took a step.

Again, something snagged my ankle. Glitch. I pursed my lips, counting to three before speaking. “What? Glitch, Molly might die if I don't find somewhere safe for her.”

The hologram hissed at me, turned, and ran into the storm. I shivered, shook my head, and wondered — did he want me to follow him?

“One way's as good as another,” I told myself, setting out after the cat. “At least moving will keep me warm.”

### MOLLY

The first thing I noticed was the warmth surrounding me, and that felt good in a bone deep way. I tried to remember where I was, what happened to me. Everything swam together, facts, fictions, and things that might be either. Figuring anything out was impossible.

It would be easier, I realized, if I opened my eyes. Something must be wrong given how long it took me to think of that. My eyelids felt like lead as I strained to open them, but eventually I managed. The room around me swam into focus.

Above me, rather. I was looking at a ceiling. A familiar ceiling at that. I blinked, summoned my strength, and looked around. Between the dim light and my eyes refusing to cooperate, I didn't take in much, but it was enough.

"A colony pod," I breathed. I'd spent time in one of these preparing for the journey to Arcadia. I was in the bathroom of an Arcadia Colony Company pod.

That thought brought my strength back in a hurry. Had we made it? Did I have some kind of stasis-sleep sickness? Was all that horror on Crashland just a nightmare on the long journey to the stars?

It was only when I tried to stand up that I realized I wasn't just in a bathroom, I was in the bath, soaking in warm water. And Glitch sat at the foot of the bath, watching me intently.

I hauled myself out of the water carefully, my limbs weak and shaking. But they held my weight while I dried myself with the warm, fluffy towel that waited for me.

A warm bathrobe too. Luxury undreamed of. Except, if Crashland had been a dream, it would be normal. So why the relief? Maybe I wasn't on Arcadia? There was one way to find out. Well, several, but I dismissed the rest. If I called for help and I was a prisoner, that would be bad. Waiting here until someone found me would take hours most likely, since they weren't here yet. So exploring it was. With a bit of effort, I pulled free the rail from the towel rack and gave it a test swing. Sturdy enough to make a crude club, light enough that I could lift it even in my condition.

Finger on lips, I shushed Glitch and then slid open the door, ready for anything.

A disappointingly empty corridor waited for me. Cooler air blew past and I pulled up the hood of my robe to pad barefoot down the curved hallway, looking for someone, anyone. I couldn't be alone here, surely? Whether on Arcadia or Crashland, there'd be someone else with me. But as I walked around the ship, Glitch trotting along behind me, no signs of life showed themselves. Not until I was almost halfway around the pod, and I heard a rhythmic sound up ahead. Quiet at first, growing louder as I tip-toed closer. The galley, I realized, and as soon as I knew that, I recognized the sound. The blade on wood, the familiar sound of a chef's knife in use.

So, whoever it is, they're armed, I thought, lifting my improvised club higher. My grip was slippery which I put down to hands wet from the bath. Not nervous sweat at all. Nope.

The galley door stood open, lights on bright. And there, standing with his back to me, was a Prytheen. My heart thumped so loud it surprised me that he didn't hear it. A pirate, a killer, butchering an animal hanging at the far end of the room. Colony pods were equipped for that — some of us would hunt, others raise cattle — but I'd never seen one in use before.

I didn't like it one bit.

What now? Run? Not plausible, I'd never get away from him when I didn't even know what planet we were on. Hide? No good. I'd need food sooner rather than later, so I'd have to emerge and get spotted. That only left fight.

Look, I knew it was a stupid idea, okay. I don't need to hear it again. It was just the best I could come up with, the only one with a clear idea of success. So I crept out from the doorway, crossed the floor quietly. Being barefoot was good for that.

Something, some instinct, screamed at me to stop. At first, I thought fear — perfectly reasonable, I was about to attack a warrior twice my size — but that wasn't it. I worried that I might injure him.

I didn't let some misplaced empathy stop me. Once I was in range, I swung the bar with all my strength, aiming for the point where skull meets spine.

It must have been the whistle of the pipe that alerted him. I saw his back straighten, muscles tense, and then everything was a blur. The club went flying one way, I went another, and I never even saw the hands he laid on me to do it. I tried to catch my balance, hit the table hard and then he was behind me, pinning me, rough blue hands gripping my wrists.

I panted for breath and he leaned over me, chest pressed to my back, head over my shoulder.

“So you're awake,” he whispered in my ear, his hot breath brushing my face. “I didn't expect to find out this way, but I admit it has an appeal.”

My cheeks burned at that, and I tried to squirm out of his grip. No way, not against that strength, but my struggles had their own effect. He hardened, his stiffening cock



pressing against my butt. I whimpered, adrenaline coursing through me and burning out the fog that filled my memory.

“Karnac?” I spoke the name that came back to me, along with all the rest.

“Who did you expect?” He chuckled darkly as he spoke, and my blush deepened.

“Who else would I be?”

“The Prytheen who attacked me?” I tried to be angry, but it didn’t come across well. My breath was short for other reasons. One of which was pressed up against my rear. I wriggled again, ‘trying to escape’ and it swelled again.

Karnac’s voice was rough and deep, his breath ragged. “Torgek? No. I killed him for threatening you. No one will harm you while I am near enough to reach your side.”

Flashes of memories surfaced. The hand on my throat, lifting. Death approaching... and then Karnac, appearing out of the snow like an avenging angel. I couldn’t remember much more than that, but that didn’t matter. He’d saved me, and here I was...

Turning my head to see his, I bit my lip. I’d started this fight with a fuzzy brain from the cold, now it finished with me confused by the lust that pumped insistently in my veins.

Karnac growled, prompting me to continue while sending a shiver of need through my body. My heart raced and my pussy pulsed with a desperate emptiness.

“You saved me, and this is how I reward you?” I swallowed before continuing.

“Trying to smash your skull in a sneak attack? How can you be so...”

Words failed me, but Karnac didn’t. “So forgiving? Because, darling fool, I love you.

You are my khara, and I will always side with you. Even if you do not wish to hear this, it is true.”

His words hit like a sledgehammer, smashing aside the wall I’d tried to keep up around my own feelings. I still wasn’t sure that I believed in the fated mates thing, but my body sure did. And my heart? It melted when he spoke, that dark rough voice speaking words of love into my ear.

I took a deep breath, inhaling his intoxicating scent, but before I could reply, Karnac continued. “Besides, who says I’ve forgiven you?”

Lifting his right hand, he moved back, breaking the contact between his body and mine. My moan of disappointment mortified me but amused him.

“What are you — oh!” His heavy hand came down on my rear with a crack like thunder and I jerked, trying to straighten up. Pinning me in place with his left hand, Karnac kept me bent over the table as he spanked me again.

Either the robe provided no protection, or I really didn’t want to feel his hand on my bare behind. My ass stung and I whimpered, my eyes wide and my heart racing.

“You can’t do this,” I whimpered, trying to sound angry. It came out husky, needy, instead. Okay, so my body was responding to him, that didn’t mean he wasn’t being a jerk.

“Of course I can,” Karnac said, and again his voice filled me with need. “You thought me too forgiving. I will not disappoint you: if you think you need to be punished before I forgive you?—”

Crack, his hand came down again, even harder. And again, the sound of the spanking echoed through the room.

“—I am happy to oblige.” His voice, amused, arrogant and oh-so-fucking-sexy, vibrated through me.

“That’s not what I meant,” I protested, not sure if I was lying. No, I this wasn’t what I’d had in mind, but good god I’d never felt hornier. And Karnac, perceptive asshole that he was, knew it.

“You did, darling, even if you will not admit it to yourself,” he told me, pulling up the back of my robe and baring my stinging butt. I tensed, but the expected blow didn’t happen. Instead, his hand brushed between my thighs, parting them and teasing. I moaned and arched, his fingers coming away wet.

“See? Now I have to spank you for lying to me, khara.”

I squirmed helplessly, my face burning. He wasn’t wrong about my body’s reaction to him. He also didn’t sound annoyed or upset by my ‘lies’ — no, his hungry, lustful amusement made it clear that he just wanted an excuse, the bastard. The sexy, domineering, beautiful bastard.

He smacked my bare behind, the loud crack echoing and my body shaking. The burning sting his handprint left behind just made me want him more.

A second smack on my other cheek, leaving another handprint, another jolt of mixed pleasure and pain shooting through me. My breathing rapid, I twisted in Karnac’s grip, unable to keep up my denial any longer.

“Okay, okay,” I panted. “I’m sorry Karnac, sorry I lied to you.”

His grin could have swallowed worlds. Golden eyes blazing, he looked down at me.

“You mean you wanted this?” A light tap of his hand on my skin, a reminder of the

penalty for 'lying' to him. I bit my lip.

"No, I mean that I wanted you," I said, all in a rush. "I want you, Karnac. Please."

Saying it out loud made me realize just how true it was.

### KARNAC

My khara looked so delightful, spread before me, bent over the kitchen table. I'd enjoyed making her writhe, pushing her to come to terms with her desire. But nothing had prepared me for how those words felt.

The urge to tear that gown from her back, to take her then and there, nearly conquered me. Instead, I pulled her up to her feet, up to face me, up into a kiss that left us both gasping for air. Her hands, small and soft and eager, caressed my body, making me pant and my cock harden further.

I carried her out of the kitchen, across the hall and into one of the pod's bedrooms. Molly squirmed and struggled with my clothes, managing to undo my belt as I set her down. As soon as she was free, she plastered my torso with kisses, breathing faster and faster as she kissed her way down across my abs, down further as her clever fingers undid my pants and freed my cock. It bounced free, hard and urgently needing her touch. Not that she would deny me that.

Her fingers closed around me as she kissed lower still. Her every artless touch seemed designed to drive me wild, and when her mouth finally reached my cock, I was holding onto my self-control by a thread.

A kiss to my cockhead was nearly enough to set me off, but I didn't want to lose control this early. I looked down, seeing the strange emerald green of her eyes looking back up at me. Seeing my joy reflected in them, as she slid my cock into her

wide-open mouth.

Shivering with the pleasure, I slid a hand into her mane of red hair, guiding her down on me. It felt so perfect, so wonderfully right. With gentle force, I thrust forward into Molly's mouth, feeling her moan around me. I wouldn't last long like this.

But I wasn't about to let my eagerness rob Molly of the joy I wanted to give her. Rather than let her drive me beyond my limits, I pulled her back, withdrew from her mouth. Her whimpering pout told me that she'd had other ideas, and I promised myself that I'd let her indulge them another time. It would be no hardship.

Not today, though. Today I lifted her from her knees and practically threw her on the bed, pouncing after her. She barely cried out before I was on her, kissing her into silence. Enthusiastic silence, as she returned my kisses with a fervor I'd never experienced. We came up for air, both panting, her body pinned under mine and quivering. I bit her neck, enjoying the shudder and the joyful whimpers that came with it.

More so the squeal I got when I pinched her hardening nipple just right. It made me growl, hungry for her, eager to pleasure my mate and make her scream for joy.

"You are beautiful, khara," I whispered to her, loving every little whimper and gasp and moan that I wrung from her. Sliding a hand between her legs, I teased apart the folds of her pussy. A tremor ran through Molly, as though her body wanted to move in every direction at once, and I chuckled. Sliding a finger up and down her, touching oh-so-gently, I kissed her neck. Bit it.

Molly grabbed at me, hands caressing and pulling, urging me to take her. No. I refused to be hurried. Our first time had been a wonderful, glorious rush, an amazing experience that we did not need to repeat. Now I would take my time.

I kissed my way down to her breasts, circling my finger with a light touch, listening to Molly's heart race. Bringing my mouth to her nipple, I darted my tongue out to flick it.

With a predatory snarl, I bit down on it, pinching her other nipple with my right hand while flicking her clit with a finger on my left. My reward was instant: Molly jackknifed under me, cried out, her fingers gripping me desperately. Growling again, I circled my fingers around her clit, pressing just a little harder each time, and her panting breaths came faster and faster. She tried to form words, managed only incoherent noises.

"What's that, my love?" I asked, speeding up just a touch. Molly's face scrunched up as she fought for enough control to answer.

"You're not. Playing. Fair." She gasped the words, and I chuckled, nipping at her beautiful breasts, teeth scraping her smooth skin. Molly lost her voice again, shuddering and arching.

Instead of speaking, she grasped my cock and, shooting me a look of triumph, stroked it in time with my movements. Now it was my turn to gasp and moan, cock throbbing in her hand.

She'd waited long enough, I decided. That was all, not me losing control of myself at her touch. I am a Prytheen warrior, strong of mind and body.

But my khara's touch, her urging, challenged that. I needed her desperately, more than I'd be willing to admit to anyone. Letting her guide me between her legs, I positioned myself. Met her gaze.

And thrust.

One powerful thrust buried me to the hilt, every ridge of my cock stretching her as I pushed inside her. It was enough to send her over the edge into a thrashing, gasping orgasm that I watched with joy. Iron-hard willpower kept me from joining her, because she still deserved more. My hands on her hip, I held her in place as she writhed in ecstasy.

When that orgasm left her and her eyes flickered open, she panted and stared up at me in wonder. I grinned, drew back, and thrust again. Molly cried out, grabbing hold of my arms, squeezing hard enough I thought it might bruise. Taking that as encouragement, I thrust again. And again.

The bed creaked under us as I pounded Molly into it, her cries of pleasure echoing through the pod. Her body contorting at the edge of orgasm, she squeezed me hard and my cock vibrated.

Molly's scream shook the room, her pussy squeezing me hard, and I came too, filling her as my final thrust smashed the bed under us. Locked together, we tumbled to the floor, a tangle of sheets and mattress around us.

It took me a moment to work out what had happened, my brain floating in a fuzzy, post-orgasmic bliss. Then I saw the buckled metal bedframe and laughed. Molly joined in, clinging to me, her throat raw and her arms locked around me as if she'd never let go.

Eventually, Molly had to let go. It just wasn't possible to hang onto each other forever, as much as we wished to. She kissed me as she pulled herself back, snagging a pillow from the ruined bed and putting it to use as a backrest, letting her sit comfortably against the wall.

"That was amazing," she said, blushing. "I mean. Uh."



I nodded. “It was, yes. Mating between a warrior and his khara always is, so I’m told. I didn’t know until you.”

Something, an expression I didn’t have time to recognize, flashed across her face at that. Regret, maybe? Or was I projecting my fears to her, seeing what I dreaded?

“That wasn’t our first time,” she pointed out, pulling a sheet around herself. I smothered a growl of disapproval — if we were having this conversation, better that she feel comfortable.

I pulled myself up to sit opposite her. Close enough to be there for her, far enough that I didn’t threaten her. And close enough to meet her eyes.

“Firstly, that was amazing too,” I said. “But yes, this time was different. Before we acted on pure instinct, nothing more. Wonderful, yes, but neither of us were thinking. And this time, khara, we both sought what we got.”

“I did not come looking for a spanking,” she said, cheeks flushing and voice rising. I raised an eyebrow and looked at her until she subsided. Crossing her arms, she continued: “Okay, fine, I enjoyed it. Not going to pretend I didn’t. But I didn’t come looking for it.”

I smiled. “We don’t always know what we’re looking for, khara. For my part, I did not come up this mountain expecting to fall in love with a human who hates and avoids me.”

“I never hated you,” she said, throwing a pillow at me. I twisted my face into an exaggerated hurt expression, which just encouraged her to launch a second assault.

“Stop that,” she said, trying to sound stern, barely restraining a laugh. Holding up my hands in surrender, I went back to smiling and she rolled her eyes.

“Okay, fine, you’re so put upon,” she said, grinning. “Sure. Look, um, the sex is great?—”

I nodded enthusiastically at that.

“— but I don’t have the space in my life for a boyfriend. Especially not a pirate. So...”

She trailed off, and I restrained myself from the obvious response — to leap over at her and remind her of what we were to each other. That would only make her decision harder, and I knew what she would say in the end. No one fought the mate-bond and won.

Taking a deep breath, Molly said the rest in a rush. “So, this is fun but it’ll stay just physical, right?”

“Khara,” I started, shocked by her suggestion. She shook her head and cut me off.

“Don’t call me that. I don’t believe this, this fated mates stuff. We can have fun, oh boy can we have fun, but it doesn’t mean there’s some mystic bond between us. It doesn’t mean that this whole shitty planet and all the death was good for me. That it was meant to happen.”

What had started as a forceful diatribe wound down into shuddering sobs, and I moved to her side, putting my arm around her shoulders and holding her tight. She grabbed hold of me like a spacewalker to a safety line, a grip so fierce it hurt.

I refused to let the slightest sign of that show. My khara needed the release, and this was a way I could help her. I was at a loss for what to say, so I cradled her and stroked her hair.

It would have to be enough.

MOLLY

It took me a while to pull myself together, and Karnac held me the entire time. I didn't want to admit it, but his presence helped, gave me a rock to anchor myself to.

And his brawny arm, wrapping around me and holding me close, made me feel safe in a way I hadn't since I found out I was on the wrong planet. Which, I had to remind myself, was the fault of the Prytheen.

Once I'd let my tears out, I sat up. It wasn't easy, Karnac wasn't keen to let me go, but I managed. "I'm sorry about that," I told him.

His brow wrinkled, and he spoke sternly. "You have done nothing to apologize for, kh—Molly."

I saw the effort it took him not to call me khara, but he managed.

"You needed me; I am here for you. I am glad to help, and sorry that you are in such distress. Your hunger only makes things worse — come, I will prepare your breakfast, and then we can see if the weather has cleared enough for us to find our way back to the station."

It was only then that I remembered how hungry I was. My stomach ached and thinking back, I hadn't eaten since the middle of the day before. I nodded eagerly and dragged myself up. Looked down, remembered I'd woken naked and blushed. "Uh,

where are my clothes?”

Karnac laughed and my blush deepened. There was no malice to that laugh, no joy at my embarrassment. He laughed at himself for forgetting an important detail.

“They were soaked through, so I hung them in the central area. Go get dressed, while I prepare a meal.”

A wry smile tugged at my lips. Karnac couldn’t help himself: he’d phrased that as an order. Not that I minded — his domineering manner wasn’t so bad when I got used to it.

Dressed, I felt more comfortable as I made my way into the kitchen again. This time Karnac heard me approach — probably the boots’ fault — and turned to grin at me. He looked so pleased with himself that I had to smile back.

On the table sat two bowls, both filled with noodles, strips of meat, and vegetables in a sauce. My stomach rumbled as the delicious smell reached me, and I almost leaped into the chair.

Karnac chuckled at my speed and urgency, and I held myself back from eating as he joined me, sitting opposite me. “You will like it,” he said, again more an order than a request. I shook my head, picked up a fork, and attacked the noodles.

Which were delicious, and not just because of how hungry I was. The sweet fruit sauce went perfectly with the unfamiliar meat, softening the otherwise harsh flavor. The vegetables were stir-fried to perfection, the noodles were... well, they were the same cheap ramen that all the colony pods had a supply of, nothing could fix that. But the rest of the meal elevated even cheap noodles, and I finished the bowl with gusto.

“What meat is this?” I asked once the bowl was empty.

“I don’t know its name, nor much else about it,” Karnac said. “Just that it’s nocturnal, doesn’t mind a heavy snowfall, and doesn’t recognize Prytheen as a threat. An easy kill with a bow.”

There’s something off-putting about eating an animal when I don’t even know the species’ name. Irrational, but true. Suddenly glad I’d waited until I’d finished eating to ask, I pushed my bowl aside.

Time to change subjects. “Where are we? How did you find this place?”

“Hah! I didn’t, Glitch did.” A proud mreow from under the table made me smile. “He got me to follow him through the storm, and this where he led me.”

“Where are the colonists?”

“Dead.” Karnac said in a heavy tone. “When the pod crashed, main power went out. So the stasis tubes never opened, and the colonists woke inside but couldn’t get free. The emergency generators should have kicked in and saved them, but they didn’t. One of the generators was intact enough to repair, and I guessed that would be enough for us. Looks like I was right.”

“I guess we’re lucky those Prytheen didn’t find it first,” I said. “Assuming the one who attacked me wasn’t just a lone wanderer, anyway.”

“He was not,” Karnac confirmed. “He has a pack who will know he’s missing by now. We should go.”

My mind clicked into overdrive, connecting bits and pieces. Instead of standing, I closed my eyes. “You know how things keep going missing in the station? Tools, parts, supplies? The station ghost is a joke because we didn’t have a better explanation. It’s not like anyone could steal all that stuff, where would they hide it?

There's no one up here to buy it and getting all of it down to the Joint Colony would be impossible, too. So we ruled out theft immediately..."

"But now we know this pack is out here, there is a market." Karnac blinked rapidly, assimilating the news. "So it probably is theft. Someone inside stealing things and moving them down to the fence to exchange with the Prytheen."

"The fence has been unreliable for months, it keeps shutting down or giving false readings," I added. "I never could track that error down. That'll be when they make the trade."

There's a curious emotion, and if it has a name, I don't know it. The feeling you get when you solve a puzzle and wish that what you'd found wasn't true. Maybe it's too rare to be worth naming, but that was what filled my heart as I thought it through.

"And assuming the Prytheen who attacked me was on his way to trade, the rest will think that the colonists either have him or killed him. We have to warn Captain Joyce."

"And Auric," Karnac said, nodding quickly. "We must get back as soon as possible."

We didn't leave straight away. It didn't feel right to just abandon the pod again, not when finding it had saved our lives. We cleaned up after the meal, tidied the wrecked bedroom as much as we could, and did our best to leave everything as it had been when we arrived. The colonists deserved their tomb kept clean and sparkling, not littered by the detritus of visitors. But once we were done, it was time to leave the pod and brace for whatever remained of the storm.

Crisp white snow stretched across the mountainside, gleaming painfully bright in the harsh Crashland sun. Glitch hissed, and I looked round to see him perched on Karnac's shoulder, wearing miniature sunglasses. The heart-shaped lenses were full

of static, and the AI looked both aggrieved at my laughter and smug at his fancy new eyewear.

“You have a strange companion, Molly,” Karnac said as he strode out into the snow. “He suits you well.”

“Hey,” I said, following. “Is that meant as a compliment or an insult?”

“Yes.” That was all the answer I got from the infuriating Prytheen. I grumbled but couldn’t hide a smile as he led me up a slope.

From the top, I looked back at the colony pod. Its crash had imbedded it in a narrow canyon, sides crushed inward, and I winced at the damage. Yeah, that thing’s never flying again. Its sheltered location made it easy to miss in an aerial survey, you’d have to fly directly above it and look straight down.

Which set me wondering what else we’d missed, hidden on our doorstep. Something to talk to Captain Joyce about, assuming I ever made it back to the colony.

Karnac seemed to know where he was going, whether genuinely or making a show of confidence to lift my spirits. He set a hard pace too, and I struggled to keep up. The third time he stopped to wait for me, I glared at him.

“Your legs are too damned long,” I panted, sucking in the chill mountain air. “I can’t keep up with — Glitch, what are you doing?”

The AI had jumped down to the snow and, at my complaint, started ‘scanning’ Karnac’s legs. It was bullshit, of course: all the scanners were in my vambrace, not the hologram, and they didn’t emit a stream of green light. But Glitch’s illumination highlighted how perfectly muscled Karnac’s legs were, and just to make that point more obvious five stars popped up beside them above an illegible block of writing



that I recognized as a review.

I snorted, Karnac looked confused, and that just made me laugh more.

“What is this, Molly?” His bewildered tone broke me again, and it took a few breaths for me to pull myself together.

“Sorry, sorry,” I managed at last, forcing out words between the giggles. “I’m just, uh, Glitch is making a little joke, that’s all.”

“A joke about my legs?” Karnac looked affronted, glaring down at the AI. Glitch meowed, vanishing before the sound was complete, and a moment later I felt his ghostly weight reappear.

On my head.

Now it was Karnac’s turn to laugh, though he kept it short and quiet with a visible effort. His shoulders shook, and he kept his mouth firmly closed.

“Glitch,” I said, my voice as cold as the snow surrounding us, my cheeks hot as the sun. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, but get down now or I’ll switch off your projector.”

Something about my words set Karnac’s laughter off again and I rolled my eyes. “Okay, fine, this is funny too. We’re even. And if you ever mention this again, I will... do something unspeakable to you.”

It wasn’t easy to keep my glare steady and even, but I saw the joke. And there was something about Karnac’s laughter that I liked. It didn’t feel like he was mocking me, just amused at the ridiculousness of Glitch’s behavior and, yes, my exasperated response.

His laughter came from the same place as mine, no malice at all. And I liked to hear him laugh. Damn it.

“Fine, okay, the joke with your legs was that he rated them very highly, and so do I,” I explained. “They are awesome legs, and I wouldn’t want to change them, but you’re going too fast for me to keep up.”

“Ah.” He paused a moment. “I don’t think I get the joke, but I’m glad it amused you. We must hurry, nonetheless. Look there.”

He pointed behind us, and I followed his finger to see the dark wall of clouds at the horizon. More snow on the way, and those clouds looked heavier than the last ones. I gulped.

“I’ll do my best to stick with you, but I can’t match your pace. It won’t happen.”

“That is fair,” Karnac said, then smiled lopsidedly. “Your legs, too, are ‘awesome,’ but now they’re too short.”

I grabbed a handful of snow and threw it at him, blushing. We both laughed, and he snatched me up to kiss me firmly on the lips.

And didn’t set me down again.

“Hey, wait a minute,” I objected, but he was already under way, loping along in a steady but swift pace back to the station. Once I realized that, A: he would not let me down, and B: I didn’t want him to, I tried to think about other problems. Like why I enjoyed being manhandled by a brutish thug, and why I never wanted him to let me go.

### KARNAC

Without the storm, it wasn't even hard to find the station. I spotted the flashing red light of the antenna tower and made my way towards it. On the way I watched for the fallen body of Torgek but I couldn't identify the place we'd fought with any confidence, and the snow was deep enough that I might have walked past the corpse and not known it was there.

No time to waste searching, either. I pushed Torgek from my mind and climbed the slope towards the ultrasonic fence, Molly in my arms.

Crossing it, I relaxed slightly. Foolish, of course: the real danger was a pack of Prytheen, and they wouldn't stop for the fence any more than I did.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Allison's voice, full of rage, greeted us before we reached the station. "You idiots went out in a fucking blizzard, do you have any idea how dangerous that was? What a headache you left me with? I was trying to work out how to send search parties looking for you because I can't call home for help. How could I? Both my idiot technical experts are missing, probably dead."

"I checked the weather forecast before I left," I said, putting Molly down with great care. "The storm was a surprise."

Allison rubbed her eyes. "Yeah, well, you try to do one without satellites or any other kind of modern tech. I'm not having an easy time of it, and now I've made a mistake

that nearly got two people killed.”

Her anger deflated and she slumped forward.

“If it’s any consolation,” Molly said, “I knew that the report wasn’t accurate, I just didn’t realize how bad it would get, or how fast. I had to warn Karnac.”

Allison shook her head, snarled something, and gestured to us. “At least you’re alive. Now come on in, there’s another storm on the way and I don’t want to risk losing you to this one now that you’re back.”

She turned and strode away, and we followed. I caught up with Allison easily, Molly panting behind us. I didn’t like leaving her struggling to keep up, but my message for Allison could not wait. “There is something more you must know, and urgently. You have a traitor in your midst, someone in your station is the ‘ghost’ and they’re selling to the enemy.”

Allison laughed, shaking her head. “Come on, Karnac. What enemy? We’re way up a mountain, and close to the Joint Colony. No enemy would dare.”

“Unless they planned on attacking the Joint Colony, in which case this is a good place to gather intelligence from,” Molly gasped, making Allison pause. I watched her carefully, looking for hints that she was the traitor.

“That’s ridiculous, Molly,” she said. “An attack on the Joint Colony? There are too many people there, humans and Prytheen...”

Her words trailing off, Allison looked back at me and frowned. I nodded, seeing the realization creep across her face. “A human attack would fail, the Wandering Star and the Joint Colony around it are too well protected. But my fellow Prytheen? Who knows which side’s they’ll choose? Auric became Alpha of the colony by challenging

Zaren. If another challenged him and won, they'd switch sides. And some might already be sworn to the attacker, if they are led by a different Alpha-Captain."

Allison's pink lips compressed into a thin line, and I made my judgement. She knew nothing about this, she was thinking through the implications for the first time.

"So the failures are no accident, if what you're saying is true," she said, and I saw the cool, cold calculation in her eyes. "Whoever is doing this has cut us off from the colony which means they're planning on doing something soon. Tulla, be a darling and book me a recording station. I think we're going to have to interrupt this morning's cartoon hour with something a little livelier."

A helpless giggle from Molly got us both to turn to her. She waved a hand apologetically. "Sorry, sorry, it's just the image. All the kids in the colony having their Sally the Spacegirl episodes interrupted by you announcing an incoming attack."

Allison winced. "I'll bear the likely audience in mind, I assure you."

Turning to look at her AI tarantula, she frowned. Tulla displayed a floating page, colored lines marking something I didn't understand.

"For heaven's sake, Harmon, how much recording do you think you have to do in one day? Well, I'll boot you out for a few minutes and you'll just have to live with that."

She turned and hurried toward the station, and this time we didn't rush to catch up. Molly leaned into me and spoke softly. "I don't think it's her, but it could be any of the others, right?"

I grimaced. "As far as I can tell, yes. But we can work on eliminating suspects. Whoever the traitor is, they have to have enough free time to get their goods down to the fence. They need to be willing to take the risk and have a motive. Is there anyone

who couldn't have done it?"

We reached the door to the station and paused our conversation to wordlessly appreciate the warm air inside. Molly whispered a prayer of thanks and we hurried down to the maintenance bay, wanting to be alone for this discussion.

And perhaps for other things, but those would have to wait.

As soon as we arrived, I flopped down on the marvelous piece of furniture that the humans called a 'bean bag' and grinned at the ceiling. I'd done it. I'd brought my khara back home safe. That we'd discovered useful intelligence was merely a bonus.

Molly went to her chair, looked at it for a moment, and then shrugged as if to say fine, I know where this is going.

Instead of sitting down, she jumped into my arms and held me tight as I grasped onto her. The beanbag made an alarming crunch, but the seams held.

"So the top suspect would be me," she said, snuggling into my shoulder. "I'm technical staff which means I have access everywhere, so I can steal the stuff. I work all hours, so I can get stuff down to the fence while no one's watching. Logically, I'm the best choice."

I laughed, squeezing her gently. "Is that a confession? I would be the better suspect: all the same advantages apply to me, and I'm a Prytheen. If this is a competition to look most guilty, Molly, I'm afraid I have the advantage."

"Yeah, but you weren't here when the ghost started stealing things," she pointed out, resting her head against me. "Can't be you. Could be me."

"Tsk, well that gives us somewhere to start," I said, smiling and enjoying the pressure

of her body against mine. “Who else hasn’t been here that long.”

Molly’s grin lit up my soul. “Good question! Let’s see, Alf is too new, anyone else? Glitch?”

The hologram coalesced overhead and hung there for a moment before letting out a yeowl and tumbling down to land on me. He hissed but unfurled the requested data with a wounded pride.

I’d have sorted it out given a bit of time, but I didn’t even try. This was Molly’s data, and she tore through it, sorting and refining. “Okay. Alf’s out, so is Zeng. Neither of them were here when the ghost started.”

“I assume you tried monitoring the stock?” I asked. Glitch separated into two halves, drifting apart and howling in distress. I winced at the noise, something like an aggrieved siren, while Molly spoke soothingly to him. After a few heartbeats, he pulled himself together and licked himself clean.

“Sorry, he’s not usually so distracting.” I waved off Molly’s apology, gestured for her to continue. “Well, yes, we set up cameras to watch the stores, but they never spotted anything. Which would be a decent reason to blame Alf, he’s the visual effects guy, if anyone could fake the video it’s him. Other than that, I had access, and Allison has access everywhere. I don’t know who else could have pulled it off.”

“I do not believe it was Allison,” I said. “But that might only mean that she’s a good liar.”

Molly frowned and reluctantly shook her head. “I can’t see it, can you? She always looks perfect — at least if you like bubblegum pink. Imagine her rolling a cable spool down the slope to trade it for whatever.”

It seemed unlikely, though sometimes people went to extreme lengths to cover their tracks. Between Molly's objections and my own, though, Allison seemed too unlikely a suspect. So who else was more likely?

A loud hiss snapped my attention down to floor level, and Molly tensed in my arms as we looked for the source of the sound. It didn't take us long to see Glitch chasing his tail.

Many animals do that, so why shouldn't Earth's cats? But I'd never seen it done this way before. His tail swam majestically through the air, always one move ahead of the rest of Glitch as he chased it around the room.

"What's gotten into him?" Molly wondered, frowning. "It's like he's looking for attention, but he's not that much like a cat. Or at least he never has been."

With a jarring shudder through his simulated body, Glitch vanished for a second and then reappeared floating in front of us. With his limbs tucked in under him, Glitch looked more like a loaf of bread than a mammal.

"You are trying to get our attention, aren't you?" Molly said, leaning forward. An irrational feeling of jealousy came over me as she focused her full attention on the cat and examined the data he presented.

I will not show this weakness, I promised myself. Of course she loves the little beast, he's a wonderful companion. I like him too, even if he steals Molly's attention away from me.

Stroking her back, I tried to turn my thoughts to the mystery at hand. Having an enemy agent in our small pack would take the fight from difficult to impossible. So which of the remaining humans could it be? I almost regretted spending so much of my time with Molly now, because I didn't know any of the others well. Almost.



“Mother fucker,” Molly said in a quiet, intense voice. She sat up straight, almost vibrating. “No wonder.”

I straightened too, looking over her shoulder. Whatever caused my khara such distress, I hoped it was a problem I could punch.

A floating display showed an interwoven chain of data of which I understood hardly anything. There were names, there were ID numbers, a timeline... I couldn't make sense of it.

Molly's fingers danced with the data, pushing it this way and that until various bits lined up. The result must have made sense to her. “Got you.”

“Got who?” I asked, shaking my head at the incomprehensible lists of data. Molly grinned, twisted around to kiss me on the lips, and then explained.

“It's the booking system for the studios. All of it's meant to go through Allison, so most of it's booked by Tulla — but look, Studio Two gets booked in these long slots, like six hours, and if we line up those with time of the thefts...”

I saw it now. Room bookings, the thefts, fence ‘failures’ all on a timeline. And, yes, looked at together they fitted like a glove.

“So, who's booking the studio?”

Molly smiled. “Allison, it looks like, for her weather reports. But that's bullshit, right? Her reports aren't that long, and you saw how annoyed she was about Studio Two being booked out.”

“Yes. So if that's not her...”

We finished the sentence together: "... it has to be someone with access to her system."

Neither of us needed to speak his name. Harmon. Close enough to Allison to get her codes, desperate to keep his place close to her, and he always did massive recording blocks for his poetry shows.

"Soul of the Void, this is unfair," I grumbled, lifting Molly from my lap and standing. She wriggled delightfully until I set her down. "I wish more than anything I could stay here with you, but there is no time to lose. If we can prove his guilt, we can keep him out of the way when the Prytheen attack. I do not want him free to sabotage our defenses."

And with that, I rushed from the room, seeking Studio Two.

The shouting led me there. Allison wasn't shouting, she spoke clear and direct. Harmon, though, Harmon bellowed wildly, impossible for my grasp of human language to follow. Both fell silent as we rounded the corner, turning to look at us.

"Excuse me," I said as I walked toward the doorway. Harmon snorted and crossed his arms. A grin plucked at my lips and I didn't slow down.

Harmon was big for a human. He was used to shoving people aside easily, but that had been before he met the Prytheen. Not even bothering to shove him aside, I walked through the door.

It's a credit to his bravery that Harmon didn't stand aside. It's less flattering to his intelligence, though. Big as he was, he weighed less than I did and more of his weight was fat. My chest struck his, and he bounced back, tumbling to the floor and shouting at me.

I tuned him out, ignored Allison's questions too, and searched the room. There wasn't much in it, just a desk with an audio editor program floating above it, a swivel chair that sagged to one side, and a shelf of books. I ignored them all, focusing on the soundproofed walls.

There. A panel didn't quite match up with its neighbors, and it came away freely when I pulled at its edge. The cavity behind it was like a miniature treasure trove, and the humans gasped as I tugged it out into view. Loops of cable, some tools, a datastore...

"He's been trading them to the Prytheen," Molly explained to Allison. Other humans were gathering now, angry murmurs breaking out, and I heard the nerves in Harmon's voice as he tried to twist the truth and escape blame.

"Preposterous. I have done nothing of the sort," he blustered. "I didn't know that hiding place was there, but he had no trouble finding it. It's probably his stash of stolen goods, which he trades to his own people."

"Right," Molly said, and I could imagine her eye roll without needing to look. "Karnac's not been here long enough to be the ghost, and some of that stuff went missing months before he arrived. What, were you holding out for a better price for the datastore?"

"How dare you accuse me, young lady," Harmon began, volume rising with each word. He got no further before I crossed the studio and grabbed him by the throat. He spluttered and choked and fell silent.

"Prytheen gems and jewelry," I said, holding up a padded box in my free hand. "He's been selling to your enemies, Allison."

"Not... true..." Harmon choked out. Molly and Allison looked inside the jewelry

case and gasped at what they saw. Allison turned to glare at him, and he slumped in my grip.

“Did it... for you,” he tried now. I shook my head and let go of him, wiping my hand clean on the padded wall. Harmon sucked a deep breath in before continuing, his voice a little rougher now. “Allison, you must believe me, I did it for you. Once Vindar is in charge, it will be much easier for us if we helped him. And he will win, with or without us.”

“Oh?” Allison’s sweet voice dripped venom. “And here I thought you were an honorable man, a brave soul — but no, you’re happy enough to sell us out for gems and for a chance to be, what, a court poet to the new Alpha? I suppose I can see that, but it’s a disappointment.”

“I have risked everything for you.”

“You didn’t have the guts to talk to me about this first. You knew I’d say no, so you didn’t ask. Don’t hide behind that feeble excuse.”

Molly cleared her throat and interjected. “This is all important, but it isn’t urgent. Right now, our biggest issue is that Vindar will be here sooner or later and we need to prepare. So what can you tell us, Harmon?”

The big human glared around at us, but he knew we’d caught him. He looked down, collapsing in on himself as he admitted defeat. “Fine. They have at least a dozen warriors, not counting Vindar himself. All well-armed. And they’ll be here with the storm. Look, let me go and I’ll speak on our behalf. They want a working vid broadcasting system, that’s all, they’d rather not hurt any of you — of us.”

“How did you fool me about the storms?” Allison demanded.

“Oh, that. Darling, you made it too easy for me to find your passwords, and I cobbled together a program that would alter the data you get from the other colony pods. Rather clever, I thought.”

Allison took one step forward and slapped him. The hard crack of her skin on his filled the studio and Harmon’s head rocked back, a red palm print rising on his cheek.

“We could have died,” she hissed, too angry to shout. “Two of us almost did. All so your alien friends would have a storm to attack under?”

“I...” Harmon swallowed and tried again. “I wanted to keep things off balance, and I had no way of knowing how strong the storm would be. Look, look, we can work something out here, I know the Alpha...”

His sniveling desperation made my fists itch. Worse was the fact that he’d committed this treason without caring about the people who’d be hurt. He could have killed Molly and didn’t care. Harmon was still talking, but I didn’t hear him over the sound of my pulse thumping in my ears.

“Enough,” I growled. My fist caught Harmon under the chin, lifting him off his feet. He was unconscious before he hit the ground. “His worthless words won’t help us. We must prepare to fight.”

### MOLLY

We wouldn't have long. Allison, ignoring the tampered data and working with what she saw for herself, estimated that the storm would hit in just a couple of hours, and Karnac thought the attack would come on the leading edge of that.

"They will watch the broadcast, so we can bring them in early," he said. "As soon as there's any change to the programming, any warning to the Joint Colony, they will attack at once. But if we change nothing, they'll wait till the storm hits and try to take us out before we can raise the alarm.

"Why do they even care about us?" Zeng Ru asked. Handsome, rugged, muscular, he looked like the action hero to save us all. Unlike some of his fans, he knew the difference between an actor and the real thing well enough that the coming fight terrified him. "I mean they don't need the station, they can just hit the colony, right?"

Alf chuckled and shook his head. "There is a reason that revolutions target the radio and tv stations. Think of all the Prytheen down there, some of whom might support a change in leadership. If they can broadcast from here, their numbers grow — and with them, their chances of winning."

Zeng nodded unhappily, and we went to work. Dragging heavy equipment to every door and window, we left only a few useable. That meant that we only needed to defend those, but it also trapped us. Well, running away into the storm would kill us, anyway.

Not that going up against a pack of Prytheen warriors was much safer.

Allison had more grim news: since its last maintenance cycle, someone had disassembled our sole laser rifle. Someone — and it had better be Harmon, because if there was a second traitor we were fucked — had pulled it all apart and removed several vital components. Nothing that we couldn't replace with a bit of effort, but we didn't have time. Even unconscious and locked up, Harmon fucked with us.

“Karnac,” I said, trying to think of anything to better our odds, “Is your blaster in working order?”

Confused by the question, he frowned adorably. Just watching him brought me hope, or something more. We were together, which meant that we'd get through this, something inside me said.

“It is,” he said, “but you know that it can't hold a charge on this damned planet, do you not?”

“Yes, I know, but I have an idea about that.” I grinned and his frown just deepened. “What's its power draw when firing?”

“I do not know in human units,” he said, then grinned. “High. Do you think you can get it to work?”

“Sort of, maybe, if I hurry.” I held out my hand for the blaster, only for him to bring my hand to his lips and kiss it instead.

“Then let us go,” he said. “We're more likely to get it done if we work together.”

An hour later we stood behind a barricade, watching the storm approach. Heavy snowflakes battered against the window before us, and the icy wind whistled around

the station. They'd be here soon, if they weren't already creeping up by stealth...

That kind of thinking does no one any favors, I told myself sternly, gripping my weapon and keeping my eyes on the approach. The blaster was heavy, too heavy for me, but if it worked, I'd forgive its weight. Cabling ran from it to the ceiling, limiting my movement but drawing power from the station.

Everyone else gave us a wide berth, looks of horror and fear on their faces when they stared at the frankengun. Their caution was justified — Karnac and I had only had time for the shortest of tests, and who knew what firing it at power would do?

"There," Michiko called, pointing with her left hand, her right holding a sledgehammer. I wasn't convinced it was a great choice, but it had the advantage that if she connected, her opponent would know it.

The shadows in the snow that she pointed to meant nothing to me, but as we watched, they became clearer. A pack of Prytheen walked out of the storm, a dozen of them lead by an older warrior. Not that I was about to discount him as a threat because of his age: he carried himself with the grim, determined stride of someone who knew exactly how dangerous he was.

"I'm up," Karnac said behind me. "With luck, I may settle this on my own."

I turned to embrace him, my heart aching already. If he went out that door, I might never hold him again, might never feel his skin on mine.

If he stayed, though, he wouldn't be the man I loved. "Be as safe as you can, and come back to me, khara."

The last word slipped out without me thinking about it, but now that I'd spoken it, there was no going back. It felt right, a perfect description of our feelings for each



other.

It had a hell of an effect on Karnac, too. He swept me up into his arms, swung me around, kissed me firmly on the lips. His golden eyes gleamed, and neither of us was breathing normally when he put me down.

“You mean that, khara?” he asked, half-exultant, half-suspicious. Well, I couldn’t blame him, not after how long it had taken for me to come around and accept the truth. I nodded, kissed him again, and stepped back.

“I do. And once you come back safe and sound, we’ll talk about our future.”

I’d swear I felt the rush of joy that went through him when I said that.

“Then I shall return swiftly,” he told me, striding to the door and out into the cold. I turned back to the window and watched Karnac walk down to meet his fellow Prytheen.

“Good to give a man something to come back for,” Allison said. “Nicely done.”

I gave her the finger, blushing. Somehow it hadn’t registered that every one of my colleagues was watching our exchange. “Shut up or I’ll test the blaster on you.”

“Ooh, I see the grumpy Prytheen is rubbing off on you,” Allison replied, unmoved by my threat. I met her gaze, and she winked, subtly inclining her head to the rest of the crew. All of them watched me with amusement. The tension in the air lightened just a touch, and I turned my attention back to the outside.

So I’m a tool to raise morale, I thought. Fair enough, if it worked. We might need it.

Our conversation was cut short by a bark from Amy’s companion Labrador. She’d

been in charge of monitoring the radio — Karnac had gone out with a microphone, so we could hear what was going on.

“Vindar,” Karnac’s voice came through loud and clear. “I hope you are well, and your pack has fed. This is Silver Band territory and you are welcome as long as you come in peace.”

Vindar’s voice was old, tired. “We are well, and there is good hunting. I hope you and yours have too? If not, we have food enough to offer. Come join us.”

They spoke Galtrade, thank goodness. Presumably making sure we could all understand what was going on.

“We have plenty of food, Vindar, though you seem to be hunting in our territory,” Karnac replied. “Come join us, and we can hunt this land together.”

Definitely a ritual exchange. Were they offering each other the chance to surrender without losing face? With thirteen Prytheen they not only outnumbered us, but only Karnac was up to fighting one of them on an even footing.

Vindar sighed heavily. Looking at him, he seemed old though not weak, a grizzled veteran of a thousand battles who might have slowed down but was no easy target for the younger warriors. A little shorter than Karnac, a little broader, he wore knives everywhere and silvery bands around his right arm.

“You know I cannot accept,” Vindar said. “And you know that your pack is too small to fight mine. Join us, feast with us, and no one here need die.”

Karnac snorted at that. “You underestimate us, I think. Even if we cannot stop you, we will weaken you. Without the element of surprise, Auric will tear you apart.”

“Karnac, I do not know you. I do not know your humans. But I can count. Perhaps it’s true that you can hurt our chances; none of you will live to see your triumph. Do not throw your life, and the life of your khara, away on a hopeless cause.”

“All you need to do is stop the attack, walk away if you will not join.” Karnac refused to back down or show weakness, and I hoped he knew what he was doing.

“I cannot. Auric defied the Council of Alphas, stood against his brothers and sisters of the Silver Band to protect the humans. He is a traitor, he cannot lead us, and I will remove him.”

“Attacking the humans was wrong. Auric stood up for our honor when he defended them.” Karnac’s blunt words made Vindar wince. “I can do no less, especially when my khara is amongst them.”

“Then there is nothing more to say.” Vindar sounded disappointed by that.

“There is one more thing. If we have to settle our differences by combat, let it be between the two of us. No need for others to die.”

“Agreed,” Vindar said, and leaped.

I’d expected something more formal, maybe with seconds or at dawn or something. Prytheen dueling wasn’t like that, or at least it wasn’t between these two. Vindar’s knives sliced through empty space as Karnac jumped out of the way, rolling to his feet, and drawing his sword.

Just in time to parry one of the daggers Vindar threw at him. The other sliced into Karnac’s left arm before spinning off into the snow. Vindar already had another pair of blades in his hands, closing on Karnac before he recovered.

I covered my mouth and wished I could look away. The two were well matched, swift and smooth and brutal, and my heart stopped each time they closed for a flurry of cuts. The ringing of blade on blade came through the transmitter loud and clear, each exchange making me wince as I tried to match sound to action.

“As you can see, Karnac has the edge in speed, but Vindar’s experience is telling,” Allison’s voice caught my attention with the name of my khara, and I turned to see her standing next to the barricade, a camera drone focused on her, Tulla riding on its back. A second drone watched through the window, recording the fight itself.

“Ooh, that swing from Karnac nearly turned the tide. I think... YES, Vindar’s bleeding, that cut will slow him down a bit.”

I guess we all have our own ways of coping, I thought as I turned back to watch and tuned her out. Vindar was bleeding, but so was Karnac, blood staining the snow around them. My heart pounding, I resisted the urge to open fire on Vindar. My mate wouldn’t forgive me if I stole his kill, and the rest of the Prytheen would rightly see it as a reason to attack.

But I’d never forgive myself if I let Karnac die. I shifted my grip on the blaster as I watched Vindar dart forward, blades flashing. Karnac stepped back with the beautiful precision of a dancer — but just too slow to avoid a cut to the face. I yelped in terror, watching Vindar press his advantage. He couldn’t quite land a killing blow, but each cut slowed my mate down, made the next easier.

Fuck, come on Karnac, I thought, trying to think of something to do, some way to help. Karnac staggered back, sword swings too slow now, and Vindar pushed that advantage, getting in close. Blood sprayed, I opened my mouth to scream.

Karnac’s headbutt came as a surprise to us all. One moment he was on the back foot, the next he launched himself forward, head slamming into Vindar’s. Dropping his

sword, Karnac grabbed both of his opponent's arms as he hammered his head into Vindar's again. Vindar tried to twist free, but no luck.

Allison's voice shifted behind me, getting more and more excited. "Yes, I think Karnac has it, Vindar's down. He's down! What a comeback. And now Karnac's opening his mouth, baring his fangs... oh my."

I didn't need to ask what had upset her. Karnac bit down on his enemy's neck, his sharp teeth digging in as he shook his head violently. Vindar's blades dropped from his grip and he choked out a word in Prytheen.

Instantly, Karnac released him and stood, roaring something into the darkness. Vindar remained on the frozen ground, pressing a hand to his bloody neck and as I watched he stopped moving.

"Yes, yes, it looks like it's all over," Allison's commentary continued. She looked as calm as a statue carved from ice, but her voice came out fast, high-pitched, the voice of someone on the edge of panic.

I'm sure she'll clean that up in post, I thought. That was a trivial distraction from the important job of congratulating Karnac on his victory.

No kisses until he washes out his mouth, though. I shuddered at the memory of that bite.

"Wait, what's this?" Allison spoke on autopilot, careening over the edge into full-blown panic. "They, the rest of the Prytheen, they don't look like they're surrendering."

Stopping short of the door, I whirled back to the window. The rest of Vindar's pack charged in, a dozen of them against my one beloved. He snatched up his sword,

bracing to receive the attack, though it was obviously futile.

Karnac would die while I watched.

“Like hell he will,” I snarled, snatching the untested blaster up and pointing through the window. Too big for my hands, it wasn’t easy to aim, but I had nothing to lose.

The heavy trigger clicked as I pulled it back, and around us the lights flickered out. In my grip the blaster whined, heated up, and then fired.

A rush of super-bright orange and white slammed through the window, shattering the hardened glass and throwing it out. My shot missed, but where it struck the ground, the snow exploded in a shock wave of steam that flung two of the attacking Prytheen off their feet.

Karnac took advantage of the confusion, hacking another’s neck open while the enemy were distracted. That got the rest charging again, two switching targets to rush me. Why do Prytheen have to be so fast, I wondered. The blaster burned in my hands, and the system hadn’t reset yet. Karnac was bogged down with fighters, he wouldn’t be able to reach me in time. I’d die alone.

But I wasn’t alone. Alf shouldered his way in beside me, improvised spear he’d made from a boom mike’s pole jabbing toward the window. Michiko joined me on the other side, holding her sledgehammer high, ready bring it down on the head of whoever stepped through the window frame.

Behind me, Amy and Rod gathered, pointing their spears over my head. Improvised weaponry, yes, and the people holding them didn’t have a clue how to use them. But they were performers enough to look frightening with weapons in hand, and the window wasn’t that big. Rushing through would be sure to get the Prytheen stabbed, even if they didn’t get killed.

They pulled up short, taking a moment to reassess their strategy. A moment too long — the lights snapped back on over my head, the blaster thrummed to life in my hands, and my finger squeezed the trigger. The blast cut one of the Prytheen in half before he could react, and I turned the beam toward his companion.

He was faster, diving behind a snowbank for cover. Not a great choice: the blaster's beam struck the snow and exploded it, then carved through the chest of the exposed Prytheen.

And then it died in my hands. Dead as the station itself: the weapon had eaten all our stored power, and I couldn't hear any of the thousand little noises the station usually made. It didn't matter. The remaining Prytheen turned tail and fled, Karnac leaping on the last of them and driving his sword deep into the man's chest.

Two more cooling corpses lay beside Vindar. My mate hadn't been idle.

"Did—did we win?" Amy stammered. Rod laughed, clapped her on the shoulder, and pointed at Allison, who was still addressing the camera. Talking about our victory, she made it sound like we were a sports team. I half-expected her to do a deep dive into our stats and season records.

"Of course we won," Rod said, slipping an arm around Amy's shoulders. "You can hear all about it on the news."

I stepped out of the shattered window, trying not to look at the remains of my kills as I found a path that avoided the blood. It didn't do me much good — Karnac swept me up in a powerful hug as soon as I reached him, spinning me round and round.

"You are magnificent, Molly my khara," he called out to the heavens. "Magnificent and deadly and smart."

I winced, his hug making my ribs creak. “And you, Karnac, are covered in blood. Put me down.”

He laughed but complied, setting me down in the snow. I looked down. Yep, this jacket was done for, smeared with blood.

“Don’t worry, none of it’s mine,” he said, as though that should be a huge relief to me. I smacked his arm, aiming for the wound Vindar had left there.

“So what’s this then? Or this?”

He winced, mock-glowered, then gave up and laughed. “Yes, very well, khara. It’s mostly not my blood. Satisfied?”

“Not even slightly,” I grinned. “But we’d better get out of these bloody clothes, hey?”

Just the thought of it made me tingle, my body on fire with a need for Karnac. I saw his breath catch too, his eyes widen, the unconscious flexing of his hands as he thought about catching me, stripping me... great, now that’s all I can think of.

It wasn’t an unpleasant thought, just the opposite in fact.

“Help me get Vindar inside, and then we’ll go clean up,” he growled, stooping to lift his fallen foe. I blinked, but grabbed Vindar’s legs, and together we carried him into the break room. Questions followed as the other colonists clustered around him.

“Isn’t he dead?”

“Should we finish him off?”

“How did you do that?”



Karnac ignored them all, laying out Vindar on a pair of tables and looking at the neck wounds. Nodded.

“He will need at least a full day in the healing trance before he can wake,” he said. “Do not disturb him in the meantime.” With that, he shooed the crowd out. All except for Allison, who stood staring fixedly at the older Prytheen.

“Will he be all right?” she asked in a tone I’d never heard from her. Vulnerable, worried.

“Vindar will make a full recovery, do not worry. As long as he’s not woken from the healing trance too soon.”

“I’ll make sure of that,” Allison said, nodding decisively. “Go on, you two need to clean up and get some power running before we all freeze.”

Karnac nodded and hustled me out into the hallway, leading me towards the washroom. Halfway there, he started to shake with suppressed laughter.

“Are you sure Vindar will be safe with her?” I asked, frowning at this very un-Karnac-like behavior. “Allison can be vindictive...”

“He’s safe, beloved,” Karnac answered. “I’ve seen the look on her face before.”

“Oh?” I frowned, unsure what he meant. “I certainly haven’t.”

Karnac didn’t answer right away. He had to force the unpowered washroom door open, reminding me that there was no power. I shivered, hoping that the water tanks were full and heated. Karnac either didn’t think of that or didn’t care. Stripping, he strode into the shower and I couldn’t help staring at his ass as he went.

Okay, yeah, getting in there with him was worth the risk of a cold shower. I ditched my clothes as quick as I could.

“You wouldn’t have seen it,” my khara said as I joined him in the shower. “It’s the same look you have on your face when you look at me.”

I froze in place, trying to process that. All that came to mind was at least she won’t be banging another of the staff for once.

Warm water engulfed us, Karnac’s hands drew me to him, and I stopped thinking about anything else.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am*

The Day of Vindar's Oath, some were already calling it. Mostly Prytheen, for now, but once Allison found out, it was only a matter of time before everyone was doing it. She'd be here somewhere, filming the celebrations and using the phrase as much as possible.

The Colony needed some good news and bringing Vindar into the fold qualified. Not just as an excuse for a holiday — though we all treated it as one — but a sign we might not always have to watch out for Prytheen raiders. That maybe, one day, there'd be peace.

Karnac and I had been 'invited' to take part in the ceremony. I appreciated the attempt at politeness, and the message was very fancy, but when Captain Joyce and Auric invite you to something, saying no doesn't feel like an option.

"Ready, my love?" Karnac grinned down at me, looking splendidly piratical with his fresh scars. They were all that remained of his injuries after his healing trance, and they only added to his sex appeal.

"Nope," I replied, trying to smile. "I doubt I'll ever be ready to be a celebrity."

He laughed, not unkindly, and held me close. "You should enjoy it as much as you can, Molly. It won't last long."

"God, I hope not." I sighed and leaned into him, his warm, solid presence comforting me. Also doing other things to me. I bit my lip, looked up at my soulmate, and wriggled against him. "Do you think we have time to go back to bed?"

“Temptress,” Karnac said fondly. “No, we do not, and you know it. We’re already running late, and you know you’ll regret it if we don’t attend.”

Taking me by the arm, he pushed open our apartment door and led me outside. My worst fears weren’t realized — no adoring crowd waited to pounce on us. People streamed past in the direction of the Wandering Star, eager to see history made, and we joined them. The mangled superstructure of the crashed colony ship loomed over us, and where the rest of the crowd stopped, we had to push forward.

Karnac was gracious enough not to point out he’d told me so.

Pushing into the crowd drew enough attention that we were, finally, recognized. And cheered. My face burned at the sound of people chanting my name, and I shot a glare at a camera drone flitting overhead, a pink tarantula sat on top of it.

Our fame was all Allison’s fault. Her recording of the battle had played over and over, complete with her breathless commentary in which she praised us both over and over. To hear her tell it, we’d defeated an invasion force which would have enslaved every human on the planet.

I think she was trying to do us a favor. Not just for saving her, but for bringing in Vindar alive. Allison literally broadcast from the highest mountain that the two of them were khara-bonded now. Making us famous was a reward because Allison couldn’t comprehend anyone who didn’t want adoring crowds.

Nothing to do about it now, anyway. Until the publicity faded, I was stuck with it. I tried to enjoy the moment, accept the cheers in the spirit they were intended. To my surprise, I managed. It was down to Karnac: with him present, I felt safe from any danger.

“I’m going to kill Allison for this,” I told Karnac, keeping my voice low. “If I wanted to be the center of attention, I wouldn’t have taken a job on the top of a fucking

mountain, would I?"

He laughed and squeezed me close. "If you do, I'll have to fight Vindar all over again, so behave."

"Not likely," I told him, grinning mischievously, and he laughed. "But fine, I won't kill her, just rough her up a bit. She deserves that, right?"

"Khara," he said in a tone that made me tingle, blush, and bite my lip.

"Okay, you big bully," I said. "No violence, just as long as we get out of here as soon as possible."

"Back to our mountain lair?" Karnac laughed, leaned in, and whispered in my ear. "I have already bribed a pilot. As soon as the ceremony is over, we can get airborne, away from the crowd. Just the two of us, all alone at the station..."

His voice trailed off, letting me fill in the rest. I trembled and squeezed his hand, forgetting all about the crowd surrounding us. Karnac and I might as well have been alone in the universe.

And that suits me just fine.

The End

Thank you for reading Glitch! Please take a moment to leave an opinion about the book, I appreciate every review.