



I Dated a Holiday Hero (Blind Date Corporation #19)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Hever wants one thing from life. Her wings. Once she has them back, she will consider life, love, and protecting her own. Krix is her patron, but he's been missing the mark until he throws himself into protecting the most precious woman in Aksalla.

Hever remembers every detail of her life. From the moment she woke in the lab to the moment they removed her wings and left her for dead. Being found and adopted changed her life and set a lot of things in motion.

Working for Z-Corp as a practical equipment developer is fine, but Hever's an omega, and twice a year she needs a tune-up of her own. She becomes an escort for the BDC and gets one regular patron. He's not very good, but he's not bad, and that is good enough.

A week before the holidays, Hever's world explodes. Well, it is actually her foyer, but she is inside it, so she takes it personally. A brief kidnapping, an embarrassingly populated rescue, and she is back home in the arms of her patron and her extended family destroying the facility and staff linked to her kidnapping.

Her patron quickly morphs into a boyfriend, and her mother authorizes his attentions. From there, it is a whirlwind of marked improvement in his bedroom skills and a desire to answer his questions about forever with a resounding yes. She always loved being with someone around the holidays.

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He ever watched Desmond and his growing family from the porch. The meal and games night had been great, and once again, the small, practical research and development arm had a successful holiday meal.

Hever called her mother while she was cleaning up. “So, my passive activation bit me in the butt again this year.”

Her mother chuckled on the large kitchen projection. “ Well, it looks like you had fun. ”

“I did. Desmond’s family is great.”

Her mom said, “ You didn’t... uh... have a date?”

Hever glanced at her parent. “No. Not for the holidays. All is quiet.”

“ Ah, well. I can hope. How is work? ”

“Classified.”

Her mother laughed. “ Good to know .”

They chatted about the big family party in a week and who all would be attending.

“ What are you bringing for the littles? ”

“Oh, just some stuff I made on my breaks. Little scooters that they sit on and stuff.”

“ Nice. Did you want to have them dropped by before the weekend? ”

“Sure. I know you like to colour-code your decorations. I will send them by tomorrow.”

“ Why don’t you bring them by for dinner, and I can start the holiday hugging. ” Her mom grinned.

“Of course, Mom. It’s the best part of the holidays.”

She got a request for a date the next night and denied it.

She said farewell to her mother and promised to be at her place for dinner the following night.

When the dishes were taken care of, she got a call from Zera. “Hey, boss.”

“ Hever, why did you deny the date with your patron? ”

“Because my mom wants me over for dinner, and I won’t be away from her place before nine.”

Zera huffed. “ He hates it when you deny him. ”

“He can find another minimally powered escort.”

Zera grumbled. “ None of them are omegas. ”

“Ooh. That’s the issue? Seriously. You need to teach more of those girls to take a knot, and this wouldn’t be a problem.”

“ That isn’t his only issue. He’s attached to you. ”

“Can I make another knot-knot joke?” She smiled.

Zera sighed. “ No. No, you can’t. ”

“Spoilsport.”

“ What is the decoration in the background? ”

“Oh, Desmond’s kids were playing pin the tail on the robot. We had to arrange our own holiday party... again.”

Zera paled. “ You are kidding.”

“Nope.”

“ But practical R Hever’s mother could get help to her daughter’s current location.

She made the call.

“Madame Ambassador, I have to report that your daughter, Hever, was abducted tonight. About four minutes ago.”

“ Zera? You are Hever’s boss.”

“Correct. I was on a call with her when there was someone at the door. They blew it open and hauled your child into the night.”

Ambassador Veradil nodded. “ Do you know where she is? I know you have all your escorts wired with trackers .”

Zera blinked. “Oh. She told you.”

“ No, she didn’t. I had the tracker signal identified when she first got the implant. Now, where is she? ”

Zera stared and shook herself. “It appears to be a base in the foothills of Elwor.”

“ Understood. Can you send anyone for her? ”

“I hate to say this, but the defenders are all on missions, and the ones local are off-com.”

“ Fine. I will force some of them on com. She’s a full Aksallan citizen and the niece of the prefect. Family will get her if no one else will .”

Zera paused. “She does have a patron.”

“ Only one?”

“Only one that she accepted. I can ask him if he can come.”

The ambassador glared at her. “ Do that. I am contacting the prefect. ”

The call went black. Zera called the matter manipulator, and he asked why Aksalla Fifty-Five had rejected the date. Zera cleared her throat. “She had family matters to attend, but now she has been taken by someone in Elwor.”

He paused. “ You are joking .”

“No. Why?”

“ I am on assignment there. Where is she? ”

“At a base at the bottom of the hills. Near the Horin River.”

“ I am twenty minutes away .”

“Bear in mind, she might be bait for you.”

“ Understood. Is she injured? ”

“There was blood and a strange gurgling noise, so yes.”

“ Shit. Do you know why they wanted her? ”

“She is a Z-Corp tech.”

“ Ah. She has knowledge of mechanical systems? ”

“She does.”

“ Right. I will go looking for her. They are working on a tank and haven’t gotten it up and running yet .”

“Oh, that is right up her alley.”

“ I will go to the base. ”

Zera got the notice of a dozen Aksallan actives heading for Elwor “You will have Aksallan support in under an hour. Some heavy-hitters, two Ikan, one Ikir.”

“ So, not just a tech. ”

“No, not just a tech.” Zera sighed. “She has a lot of family. Dangerous family.”

“Fair enough. I will take care.”

“Good. They are only going to be careful with her. I will send you her identity. Do not disclose it anywhere.”

* * * *

He was propped up in a lab, making splints for her fingers and coughing up blood from her lung. They weren't offering her any medical assistance or food or water. The ten-wheeled tank in front of her was a monster, and she flicked through the specs that they had given her.

She wheezed. “What do you want it to do?”

“Destroy actives.”

“What kind?”

“All.”

“This thing can't fly and isn't submersible. You need them to wander in front of you, like sheep.”

She coughed and wiped blood off the tablet. Her ribs were braced with half her shirt being tied tight around her torso. She was as supported as well as she could be.

The researcher growled. “It worked in Uradda.”

“And they have lost all their actives. How sad is that?” She grinned.

She wasn't allowed to touch the vehicle, so she only had the designs to go on. "So, I asked before, what do you want this to do?"

"Stun blasts."

She looked and said, "Wrong power supply. You need a higher range of power output to short out nervous systems. This will just give them headaches."

There was a thud in the distance, and she kept asking questions while the researcher asked, "Who is coming for you?"

"I dunno? Maybe my family."

"You... don't have family."

She didn't look up from the designs. "I was adopted into a very large family."

More distant thuds and shouting.

"A very large, angry family."

There was a soft huffing, and claws tore the researcher's neck out. When the man took form, she had been prepared to greet her cousin, but she blinked and squeaked. "Patron?"

"Fifty-Five? Or is Hever appropriate?"

He was standing with white hair, wearing a dark green suit with a blood-red trim.

He reached out to touch the blood on her cheek, but a sharp voice rapped out, "Hever! What did you get yourself into?"

“I am sorry, Doc.”

Torenne arrived at her side. “Zera said she heard your breath slurping around.”

“Yeah, well, I broke a rib, and it went for a walk.”

Torenne said, “Sit up, this is going to hurt.”

“Bring it, bitch.”

Torenne grinned and pressed her hand to Hever’s side. The entire area was on fire, but then it settled. The hand was next.

When Torenne ran her hands through Hever’s hair, they were close. Torenne chuckled. “Chocolate and honey?”

“Yeah, feel free to make fun of me. They took my scent nullifiers. I will put my cuffs on as soon as I am home again.”

Torenne worked on her head wound. “Is that what those are? I just thought you wore jewellery.”

“Nope. Nullifiers.”

“It smells really nice.”

“Good to know. Sorry to have roused everyone for this. Was it Mom or Zera?”

“Zera called your mom.”

“Oh, geez. I am never going to hear the end of this. She’s gonna make me move

home.”

“Why?”

“Mom only agreed to let me leave my round-the-clock monitors and guards if I said I would be on alert and keep out of trouble. Oh, I hope the presents are okay.”

“Your friend headed to your home to check on things and get the door repaired.”

“Gotta love efficient women.”

“So, what is Krix doing here?”

“Um, he was my patron. Zera asked him to come.” She blinked to clear the blurry tears.

“A patron? Seriously? How old are you?”

“Um, twenty-eight.”

Torenne smiled. “Well, that is a bit of a shock. I think of you as eight years old, learning to speak Aksallan.”

“I know. That is obvious. Okay, I am good to travel.”

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Krix stepped forward. “I will fly you home.”

“Um, I am not really dressed for it. I am sorry, but thermal shock isn’t my idea of fun.”

He chuckled, touched a chair, and held a thick cloak out to her. “Would this help?”

Torenne looked at him. “Are you able to keep up with fliers?”

“I am.”

“Good. We are heading to the ambassador’s home.”

Krix blinked. “Ambassador?”

Hever got to her feet, and Krix wrapped her in the cloak, easing the hood over her bloody hair. “My mother. I grew up at different embassies around the world.”

He nodded. “That would explain the ease with which you speak Sethir.”

“It would explain it.”

He bent and picked her up, holding her carefully.

Torenne led the way through the rescuers, and she nodded to her cousins, Ekron and Salat and Khytten.

Other cousins came forward with smiles as they looked between Krix and her. She was too tired to explain the situation.

The blood that covered her face and hands was enough to keep them from openly mocking her.

Krix walked outside, where bodies littered the ground. “Your family does not pull punches.”

“Most of those were guns or claws. Salat and Khytten arrived first.”

He began levitation and pulled her hood up more securely. “Let’s get you home. Exhale.”

She started a slow exhale as the air boomed behind them. The world blurred beneath them, and they were soon over Aksalla. She pointed. “Toward the lane where the prefect’s house is. It’s the building with the blue and black roof.”

He got into flight lanes and settled in the yard with several guards pointing weapons at him. Hever fought her way out of the hood, and her mother bolted from the house. “Hever!”

Hever said, “Put me down, please.”

He nodded and set her on her feet. She walked to her mother and was wrapped in a hug. “Oh, baby, you are never leaving my sight again.”

Hever sighed. “I am. I have to get a new com anyway. This one cracked when I blew up. Oh, Mom, this is Krix. He’s Sarathoan, was my patron, and helped get me out. The others were clearing the base, and then they would head home.”

She turned to Krix. “Krix, this is my mother, Ambassador Veradil. Getting people around the world to kiss Aksalla’s butt for the last two and a half decades.”

He looked at her dark-haired mother in astonishment. He bowed low. “Ambassador, I remember you as taller. You had that little active at your side.”

Veradil chuckled. “She got taller.”

Hever nodded. “Yup. She fed me every day.”

Krix blinked. “But the little active was covered with black and rainbow scales.”

Hever shrugged. “I found that looking human helps people get along with me. I do have some silver scales for fun on occasions, though.”

He stared at her. “I thought you were some sort of pet.”

She snorted. “Right. You are having some big feelings now. Thanks for participating in the rescue.”

He smiled. “Don’t think this is the last communication between us, Fifty-Five. I just need to check a few things.”

She nodded and looked at her mother. An arm was wrapped around her, and they made their way into the home.

Her mother murmured, “Let’s get you bathed and checked out at the hospital, and then we are going to discuss the fact that Krix is about as Sarathoan as I am. He’s Sethir-Nin through and through.”

“Yes, Mom. I know. But I have to keep the illusion of belief, just like he didn’t know

I have scales and used to have wings.” Hever snorted. “Like you always said, I have to leave some mystery for the wedding night, even if it never happens.”

She showered and got the blood off then let her mother come in to assess the damage that hadn’t been worth emergency treatment.

When she was dressed for the weather and wearing a coat, her mother got her into the car, and their driver took them to the hospital for a full workup. Veradil held her hand the whole way, and Hever’s recently damaged fingers felt the pinch.

Her mother pressed her forehead to Hever’s shoulder. “I swear, I am going to wipe out anyone who had a hand in this.”

“Mom. You are not. Besides, I am pretty sure all the cousins did the job for you. Khytten got some exercise, too.”

Veradil smiled. “That’s a good thing.”

“Yes, but it’s going to be super embarrassing at the family gathering.”

“Khytten was kidnapped early in her relationship with Salat as well.”

“This is not for romance. Krix has his own agenda and preferences, and he was rather single-minded about them. I was about to ask Zera to remove him from my roster.”

“He came to rescue you.”

“So did all my cousins. That doesn’t mean I am going to sleep with them.”

Her mother snorted. “Not funny, Hev.”

“Yes, I know, but my interactions with him have been based on a lie. This isn’t my face. We had it changed to match it. Did you know that my full sibling works for Z-Corp?”

Her mother was stunned. “What?”

“They threw me away, and you found me. They kept her until she broke out and ran with other projects.” She chuckled. “She’s not in my department, but I recognize my old face.”

“It’s a good thing no one else does. Is she happy?”

“She has an alpha and an omega of her own. She’s also very pregnant, so I sent her a present for the baby.”

“Does she know it’s you?”

“She might remember my scent. I left it in the basket.”

“Ah. You miss her.”

“I kept her alive for her first four years. After that, they cut my wings off and tossed me away. Then you found me.”

“We are still looking for those wings.”

She squeezed her mother’s hand. “I know. I am trying to be whole with what I have.”

“You are still my little girl, wings or no wings.” Her mother squeezed her hand in return.

“I do wonder where they ended up.”

“Are you sure they still exist?”

“Oh, yeah. They are as hard to kill as I am when I am wearing scales.”

“You didn’t shift at all during this?”

“Nope. I haven’t shifted in three years.”

Veradil laughed. “That stupid video of Ekron’s.”

“That would be it.”

“I still can’t believe you did that.”

“It was fun, and I was in silhouette. No one knew it was me.”

“Ekron knew.”

“And he was sworn to secrecy, as was Evali. They haven’t told anyone as far as I know.”

Veradil snorted. “Only because Iron made sure that his wife and son knew how serious he was about it.”

“It is odd you call your brother by his call sign.”

Veradil laughed. “And my sister, but she has been the prefect long enough for me to remember Salmes.”

They approached the hospital, and Torenne was there and waiting. Hever mumbled, “You called ahead?”

“Yes, of course. Torenne treats all our family.” Veradil snorted. “Please tell me you outgrew your crush.”

“Nope. Not at all.” She sighed, and when the driver opened the door, she slid herself out and stood, only wobbling slightly. Mom insisted on dressing properly, which meant heels.

She staggered toward the doors, and Torenne was there, holding her arm.

“Hever, I thought you were good.”

“Yeah, well, it was good enough to get me home without barfing up a lung, so thanks for that.”

Her heart was pounding, and she gritted her teeth.

“Geez, Hever, you seem tense.”

“Yeah, you are swift as always, Torenne.” She leaned on the good doctor, and her mother came to the other side.

“Hello, Doctor. Perhaps a chair for her?”

Dr. Torenne nodded to one of the attendants, and Hever was put into her custody.

“I am still stuck to X-ray only, Doc. No magnetics.”

“Got it.”

“Don’t drive like a maniac, Torenne,” her mother muttered.

“No, Auntie. I will treat her like glass.”

Hever covered her face with one hand. Her mother didn’t approve of Torenne, and it had more to do with her hanging out with thugs and criminals than her activation.

As they headed to radiology, she knew that it was a one-sided thing. Torenne had a specific type, and Hever wasn’t anywhere near it. Torenne had just been endlessly accepting of the new family member. She had made Hever feel safe.

She got to X-ray and settled in for a full-body scan. It was the continuation of a very long day.

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He ever was hooked up to an IV when she woke up. Her mother was sitting next to her. “Why didn’t you tell me you had broken bones?”

“Torenne got most of them healed at the site. They blew my entryway up with me standing in it, Mom.”

“Shit. What did they want?”

“Just some repairs to a vehicle they were building to attack actives. It was very clumsy, and an active would have to stand in the middle of the road for that unit to be effective.”

“So, a decoy?”

“Yeah, but they didn’t expect the visitors who arrived at the party. And they were willing and able to let me die. The punctured lung was not getting better any time soon.”

“Punctured...” Her mother looked upset.

“Doc Torenne took care of it and the head wound.” She sighed. “I recognized one of the researchers from the lab, and he said he recognized me.”

“Oh, shit.” Her mother clutched her hand.

“Can we just tell everybody how you found me? Uradda has fallen, and my wings are out there somewhere.” She smiled. “They can’t take me away from you, Mom.”

Her mother smiled and brushed her hair from her forehead. “Okay. We will tell them if they ask, but only if they ask.”

“Okay. Time for secrets is over.” Hever sighed. “I find them exhausting.”

Dr. Torenne came in with a dark scowl. “Auntie, I need to talk to Hever about some things that came up during the scans.”

“I want to hear them.”

Hever looked at her. “Mom. I am closer to thirty than twenty. I can manage a physician consult. If she tells me anything surprising, I will ask her to let you in. Okay? Go get a coffee. Call Auntie Salmet. Anything.”

Her mother got up, kissed her forehead, and left the room with a glare at Torenne.

The good doctor took her seat and said, “She is always slightly hostile.”

“Only when I am in the room. I had the biggest crush on you when I was a teen. You were so pretty, and I didn’t feel like myself, so seeing you gain comfort with your body was super helpful.”

Torenne smiled and blushed a little. “I had no idea.”

“I know. No one did. Well, Mom figured it out.” She shrugged. “So, what did you find?”

“You had plastic surgery.”

“Yes. It was to make my face match Mom’s, so I would blend in a bit better with the family. It was important that no one guessed where I had come from.”

Torenne blinked. “So, what do you look like normally?”

She shrugged. “I can guess, but my face changed when I was a child. I don’t know what the adult version of me should have been.”

“Oh, right. Did you know you have multiple vocal cords?”

“Yup.”

“And that you are an omega?”

“Knew that, too.”

She sat back. “Huh. Here I thought I was going to surprise you.”

Hever shrugged. “Not much surprises me.”

“You are pregnant.”

Hever looked at Torenne, horrified. “That’s impossible.”

“Good. No. Just kidding.” Torenne laughed. “Can you imagine?”

Hever’s heart was thudding in her chest. “I haven’t taken a patron during a heat, so that did give me a shock.”

“Patron... you are with the BDC?” Torenne’s eyes were wide.

“Yeah, it seemed the best way to socialize without Mom catching on.”

“Did you?”

“Socialize? Yeah. There are always alphas searching for an omega in heat.”

Torenne blinked. “And have you?”

“No, not in heat. Not a risk I want to take. Getting a knot now and then was as much as I engaged in.”

The good doctor was sweating a little.

“Sorry. Too much? Overshare?”

“It is hard to overlap you with the kid who used to dance in front of the microwave as she waited for popcorn.”

“I still do that.” She smiled. “Your face says there is something else on that tablet.”

“Have you noticed your bones aching and your body being easy to break?”

“A little. Why?”

“You have lost a ton of calcium, but it isn’t a natural reduction. It’s like your body has been washed in acid from the inside out.”

“Oh. We had an accident in R when I am a monster, I can fight like a monster.” She looked at the good doctor. “This should have fixed it. I felt things exploding. Do you want to do another blood draw?”

Torenne nodded and scrambled to get a kit.

Hever downgraded herself to human and climbed back in bed. Her mom held her hand, and the doctor took the blood to run a test. “I will also have to do a new bone

scan.”

“Yeah. I figured.”

Her mom touched her cheek. “I never thought you were a monster.”

“No, but it was hurled at me when we travelled, so I thought looking weak was safer.”

“Looking like me.”

“Well, the closer I could make myself look to you, the more I was accepted. Even by your family.”

She smiled sadly and kissed Hever’s forehead again. “You are always my little girl. From the moment I found you in that little boat, I knew you were destined for me. All the seers we ran into said the same. You are my little girl from the moment we met until the moment I die.”

Hever clutched her hands. “I have hoped you would say that but didn’t dare ask.”

Veradil smiled. “My life for yours, any day of the week.”

“Not if I have something to say about it.” Hever smiled.

Hours later, Torenne came in and said, “That is a very powerful transformation. Dark energy isn’t common, but you definitely have it. Heraina also has dark energy. She uses it frequently and can give you pointers if you need them.”

She nodded. “I have regular meetings with Hera now that she’s off mat leave and back to hawking our wares.” She looked at the doctor. “Can I go home now?”

Torenne nodded. “You can, but someone is hunting you, so remain under guard if possible. Maybe your patron?”

She snorted. “That’s doubtful. He lied about his origins because it is well known that omegas don’t want to hook up with Sethir. Not if they want to keep their lives and families.”

Torenne smiled. “Zera is very forthright that they are not allowed to take off with her omegas. The contract has to be worked out to the agreement of both parties.”

“Oh. Great. Good to know.”

Torenne asked, “Who is your patron again?”

“Krix. But it’s a very direct transaction.”

Torenne winced. “What does that entail?”

“More details than I want to spill between my mother and my doctor.”

Her mother huffed. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“I had an itch that needed scratching, and this is how I afforded the savings bonds for the nieces and nephews.”

“You are not Khytten, and you don’t need to meet men that way. I could introduce you to plenty of Sethir or other alphas.”

She groaned. “I don’t want my mother introducing me to a sexual partner.”

Veradil paused. “Oh, yes. I suppose that is right.”

Torenne blinked. “I am going to be outside, finishing the paperwork.”

“Thank you, Doc.”

The medical professional left the room, and Veradil got Hever’s clothing. She got dressed in the dress, leggings, and boots, and got to her feet. Veradil carried her coat.

They got the paperwork from Torenne, Hever got a careful hug, and Veradil shook Torenne’s hand.

They returned to the car, and Veradil asked, “Do you need anything else?”

“A new com. Mine got smashed in the explosion.”

“Hm. Fine. To the shopping district,” she ordered the driver.

“Yes, Ambassador.”

They drove further into the city and went to the com centre. Veradil was authorized to authorize a new com for any of her staff, so it was an easy thing for Hever to select a very boring unit and get it installed.

Veradil sighed. “Hever, you can afford much better.”

“Yes, but I don’t need it. This will do the job quite well.”

“You don’t have my flair for fashion.”

“Nope. I am a girl who likes getting dirty.” She babbled to ignore the pain of getting a new com installed.

The broken unit was removed and recorded, and the new unit was put in place.
“Mom, that wasn’t the one I picked out.”

“Sue me. You are pretty, and I want you to wrap yourself in beauty.” Her mother smiled. “Consider it your gift to me.”

“I already got you a gift if it wasn’t blown up. I need to go to my house and get my holiday stuff, at least until I can get contractors in to fix the door and everything else.”

“You also have to be interviewed by the defenders for the whole series of events.”

“Right. What time is it?”

“It’s closing in on six.”

“Okay, so if they aren’t waiting when we get home, we can do it tonight.”

“Do you have any preference?”

“If we want a psychic reinforcement, Remark is pretty good. I don’t want Torun anywhere near me. If Titan has time off, I can definitely talk to them.”

“You mean him.”

“Them. It’s more polite.”

She flexed her hand, verified her com was working, and checked her backlog of calls. Zera had called her... a lot.

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They were back in the car and on the way home when she made the call. “Hey, Zera.”

Zera looked at her. “ Are you all right? ”

“Sure. Just really depressed. Was it really Desmond?”

“ Yes, he took bribes to weaken you and mark you for the team. ”

“Was it for his family?”

“ Which one? A forensic accountant found three. ”

“Holy heck. That’s shocking.”

“ Yes, well, the defenders are holding him, and charges will be laid in the morning. ”

“Okay. Is that it?”

“ No. What the hell did you do to Krix? ”

“Nothing. He made me a fur cloak and flew me home. I didn’t know he was a speedster.”

“ Speedster, heavy-hitter, alpha, Serathoan. ”

“He’s Sethir.”

“ His father is Sethir; his mother is Serathoan. ”

“Oh, so he didn’t lie, all the way.”

“ No. Not completely. Are you alone? ”

“Nope. In the car with my mom and the driver, Mirol.”

“ Right. Call me when you have privacy. The next bit is delicate. ”

“Sure. I might have to be debriefed by the defenders and agents, given the nature of the events.”

“ Of course. Call me after that. ”

“Fine. Have a good evening, Zera.”

“ Call me. ”

“Yes, boss.”

She ended the call and thought about it then contacted a friend and asked them to take a look at her house and bring the wrapped stuff over to the ambassador’s home. Keera agreed and promised to take a video.

She sat back and smiled. “Mom, I also have to tell you that I know where my sister is, and I know who she is.”

“The little golden one?”

“Yup. It’s Leska from the accounting department. She’s about to have a baby, so

she's off on mat leave."

"Aw, that's sweet. Does she know?"

"About me? I left some clues. She will know me if we meet again."

Her mom nodded. "So, if you are, um, dating, is there a chance of me becoming a grandmother?"

"Not with the current organization for my social life. I am using a ton of birth control, just in case the dates are interested in more than recreation."

Veradil sighed. "I should have helped you more with social dynamics."

"I was raised in a lab, Mom. You grow up naked, and you figure things out. I am just at the phase where I will let others touch me. That is huge and strictly due to your constant hugs and light contacts, stopping when I stiffened up."

Her mother squeezed her hand, and Hever squeezed back. "I am really sorry I didn't suggest you keep your scales."

"They were looking for them. I knew I needed to hide them, and by the time we finished in Hyreno and made our way to the Sethir Stronghold, I figured it out. That was where the other children were mocking me, calling me a snake and a black hole."

"Honey, I had no idea."

"I know. It's okay. Kids are mean little buggers, and then I found my human shape, and that is the one you managed to adopt."

"I love you scaley, and I love you pink."

Hever grinned. “Thanks. Now, do you want to know how old I actually am?”

“You weren’t eight?”

“Six.”

“Fuck.”

Hever laughed and leaned to hug her mother as they pulled into the drive, and the gates swung open. There was a crowd of actives and the prefect waiting for them.

Hever sighed. “There goes the quiet dinner.”

“I will order takeout, so the chef doesn’t have an aneurism.” Her mom smiled. “Take them into the solarium. It should fit them all.”

She nodded, and when the driver opened the door, she smiled and nodded, and he gave her a slight wink. She walked toward the group of people, and Salmet rushed toward her and hugged her. “Auntie? This is a little weird for you.”

“What?”

“You give me A-frame hugs or pat me on the head.”

“Someone tried to blow you up and kill you today. Consider it a special occasion.” Salmet smiled. “You are so soft.”

“Yeah. It’s a whole thing. Mom said we can use the solarium. Anyone who is coming, please come with me.”

She turned and walked into the house, through the entryway, past the formal living

room, the family dining room, the formal dining room, and into the solarium.

Abbi brought in beverages, lots of lemonade and water, with Hever's special cartoon cup.

Hever filled her cup with cartoon supervillains on it and sipped at it while others watched with raised brows. Salat and Khytten were grinning. Salat said, "You still have that thing?"

"Sure. After the cousins took the hero cups, the villains were the only ones left."

Salat winced. "I could have made replacements."

"When your kids have their favourite things broken by a sibling or cousin, try and replace them. I dare you." She smirked.

Everyone settled, and it was a lot of bodysuits.

Salmet said, "Fine, from the start of the day, tell us what happened."

Hever went over it, filling in details. Everyone scowled when she mentioned spending the day with Desmond's family. She nodded. "I know. I know."

She continued and then said, "That tank was so basic. I mean, it was first-year design school basic. I mean, Kritz could have designed it."

There was a "Hey!" from a com link on someone's shoulder.

"Seriously. They wanted it altered to do everything, but this thing could barely turn. They also had no equipment for me to do any work, so I just splinted my broken hands and flipped through the tank designs."

Zera spoke quietly from another open com.

“ Hever has won nineteen defense contracts and seventeen design awards. Salat, she designed all of your vehicles, including all the extras. She also does the suit designs when Kritz forwards the specs. The prototypes are all hers, and then she uploads the print to the computers. ”

Hever smiled. “Mom has impressed the importance of fashion on me. And I am a huge fan of function.”

Salat looked down at his body suit. “This?”

“The original. You have taken the copy and tweaked it. Same with Khytten’s suit. I did the basic, and you added all the entry points. All the entry points.” She sipped at her lemonade.

He frowned. “I thought that was done in Kritz’s office.”

“Arcady, if you are listening, I also added placement of all your extras, including the skin designs,” Hever smirked.

The other cousins and defenders looked at her with surprise. Salat said, “How did Krix come to find you?”

“Zera sent him. As my patron, he had the right to know why I wasn’t available.”

Salat grinned. “You are an escort?”

“Niche market. And I am picky.”

Zera sighed. “ She really is. She had a line out the door. ”

Hever snorted.

“ Krix is just the one who made the cut, and he isn’t the best match for her, so I am still trying to get her to take on a different alpha. ”

Four of her cousins jolted. She gave them bland looks.

Khytten blinked. “Oh. You are an omega.”

“Yup.”

“Wow. Salat said I wasn’t to hug you to death.”

“Family rule.”

Salmet winced. “Yes, well, now that we know you need it, all the hugs you can handle.”

“It’s fine. They make me queasy now. I can handle Mom’s contact and not a lot else. Well, and the kids. The kids are fine.” She smiled. “Good thing the family started breeding. I get the contact I need a few times a year.”

Salmet covered her mouth. “So, you went to the BDC...”

“To have someone who didn’t resent contact. I didn’t have to beg for it. Anyway. I got back to the hospital once Mom made sure I washed all the blood off and got the information about the poisoning, and I got rid of it.”

Salmet asked, “How?”

“I took on my actual shape minus my missing wings. That was the last thing they did

to me when I was a child. Cut off my wings and locked me into a small stasis pod attached to one of the explosive buoys in the harbour.”

She sat and went silver, and then she went black. Then she went back to pearly pink.

Salmet blinked. “That’s... you...”

“Mom thought you would accept me more easily if I looked more like her. It didn’t really work, but it was better than nothing.”

Salmet covered her mouth.

Zera said, “ You look like one of the Z-Corp staff .”

“Yeah. I know. We were created from the same source. I was first, and then she came a few years later. When she was trained to feed and clean herself, they cut off my wings, used them for research, and threw them away. She didn’t grow wings. She had energy manifestations.”

Salat was staring at her. “Leska?”

Khytten was staring at her features. “You don’t look like her.”

“Plastic surgery so that I wouldn’t look like the creature they threw away. No one looks for you if you don’t look like what they are looking for.” She smiled.

Hever was hungry. “Is there anything else?”

Zera asked, “ Are you coming back to work? ”

“Sure. I just need someone to do a bug sweep.”

“ No. I mean to work. ”

“Oh, wow. I thought he took off.”

“ He did but is still on your books. I want you to consider a few of the others. ”

Salat growled. “How many are there?”

“That matches with her physically in this form? Twenty-four. If we can get her in for a scan in her scaled forms, we should be able to knock that down a bit.”

The cousins were looking at each other with uncertainty. She sighed. “You aren’t alphas; you don’t have the requisite drive to be anywhere near my file.”

Zera snickered. “ You really don’t. Her need for contact is extreme. Well, I look forward to you doing a recalibration. I can’t wait to see what happens once we narrow down the field a bit. ”

Khytten looked at Hever with understanding and pity.

“Yeah, but Mom gets irritated if I am more than forty minutes away from her. The vast majority of the alphas are Sethir. They don’t particularly like to commute. They like their omegas locked down and where they can find them.”

Zera murmured, “ Not only that, but you are a tech of international renown. You can get a job anywhere, but our designs are proprietary .”

“Oh, honey bunny, I have designs for vehicles you would never let me build. And line after line of interactive children’s toys that don’t match Z-Corp’s brand.”

Zera’s voice was amazed. “ Seriously? ”

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“Seriously. I have made the spirit of the holidays presents for the last decade. I donated so many toys to the Uraddan kids so they could learn to play with them.” She sighed.

“I am also done with not being remembered. I don’t like it, and the need for it has been blown out of the water.

So, from now on, people will remember me. ”

That caused a flurry of questions, but her mom held up some chopsticks, and Hever went to the family dining room to have dinner with her mom.

Auntie Salmet joined them, and slowly, the table filled with the family that had come to her rescue.

Uncle Iron was piling food on his plate. “You know, you are going to have to explain that last comment.”

“Oh, it’s related to the omega thing. I can make memories of me fade, and when Mom and I were going from embassy to embassy, it seemed sensible to blur the edges of what I was and where I had come from.

Then, one of my cousins told me that I was picked up like a stray puppy and not a real cousin at all, and that was when I started doing it with family.

Everyone remembered that Mom had a daughter, but the details were always blurry when I wasn’t there. ”

She beat Remark to an egg roll and smirked as she reeled it in. “Remember defeat, defender-boy.”

The table burst into laughter, and she kept eating as a battle to get the food commenced without a bit being wasted.

When someone beat Hever to a dumpling, she let herself tear up and sniffle. She snagged the dumpling from the chopsticks and had it in her mouth. “Sucker. This is why I don’t use my powers for evil. There just isn’t a challenge.”

Khytten laughed and said, “You are a lot livelier today.”

“I got to be my scaled self twice today. It returns me to health.”

“Right, so what are these wings you mentioned?”

“I had soft bat-like wings on my back, and they cut them loose, pinned them in a box, and watched them try to flap free.” She sighed. “I could hear them calling to me, and it is still there. I really want them back.”

Zera said, “ They were moving in the box? ”

“I have seen the scans. I am descended from Nelith and Tirra’s dad. I have luck and god knows what else with a lot of regeneration available, when I use it. I wasn’t going to do it in front of my kidnappers.”

“And the poisoning?”

“I didn’t notice it. Except for my pinkie toe.”

Another wave of delivery was placed on the table, and she had to explain the constant

break in her foot, which made the defenders in the family describe small issues they had ignored that had nearly cost them a mission.

Hever looked at her mom's hand on her own and squeezed it. This is what Veradil had always wanted for both of them: to be accepted as family. It just took getting kidnapped to accomplish that end.

When Keera was let through security, she drove up with her truck and the presents. Hever went outside and hugged her friend. "Wow. Was there any trouble?"

"No. I got the door back on and some plywood from your garage, sealing it. I also have a list of contractors if you want them. They work on weekends."

"How bad was it?"

"You need to reframe some of the needlepoints in the entryway, but it looks like you caught most of the blast. I got some of the blood out of the entryway and scorched the rest in case they came back for samples."

Hever blinked. "Thanks. How did you know to do that?"

Keera looked at her with a knowing expression. "This isn't my first time hiding traces of you."

Hever stared and grinned. "You look better without a tail."

"Aw, I thought it had a certain aquatic charm."

They hugged.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

“I wasn’t positive until I caught your scent and smelled your blood. Until then, you were just a coworker. Now, you are my cell-buddy.”

They hugged and laughed.

Her mother arrived. “Is this your friend, Hever?”

“Yes, Mom. You met her once. She was pushing me in a boat.”

Keera waved. “Hello, ma’am. I had a mermaid tail.”

“I thought you were Hyreno.”

“They don’t have tails, ma’am.” Keera grinned.

“You were raised in Aksalla?”

“Yes, ma’am. They fostered to adopt, and then I got a new brother, so they were even happier I was there.” She smiled. “I even got Aksallan citizenship due to scholastic excellence.”

The prefect came out and looked at Keera. “Keera Oranson?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are working for Z-Corp?”

“Yes, ma’am. In analytics.”

“What do you do?”

“Find out how much it will cost to make Hever’s designs as prototypes and as mass production.” Keera smiled. “We work out both and then head to marketing.”

Hever laughed. “And then Hera tells us that they are unsuitable for the company path but very cute. She likes the cars, the weapons, and the body armour, but for that, we have to get Litha in textiles to cooperate, and she’s working from home a lot.”

“But I get the numbers, and then we head back to marketing again.” Keera grinned. “It’s fun.” She waved her hand. “I also do work for biomechanics and other departments that want to make something commercial.”

Veradil looked at her in surprise. “Well, it looks like you two work well together. Are you listed with the BDC as well?”

Keera coughed. “Not that I am telling in mixed company.”

“So, that is a huge yes.”

“I have very different requirements from Hever.” Keera shrugged. “She needs what she needs, and I need what I need. Don’t worry. My parents are well aware of the situation.”

Hever said, “You don’t need to tell her that.”

“She’s learning new things about you today. I do need to tell her. She needs to understand more than she has paid attention to before. That includes being an escort.” Keera grinned. “Mom’s a therapist. No shame in our game.”

Hever hugged her again and got a soft and caring hug in return. This woman was an excellent hugger.

“We just had dinner. Did you want to come in? I can make you something.”

Keera laughed. “No. I will head home for dinner. Mom is keeping some pot roast for me. Can we unload all the stuff?”

The men stepped into action, and the truck was unloaded in under a minute.

Keera got a shopping bag from inside the truck.

“This was all the smaller stuff. Some breakable and some not. I wanted to make sure it was in your hands. I will send you the images and videos when I get home, but you may want to go shopping in the meantime. A lot of your clothing is trashed.”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, the door opened, and raccoons moved in. They are fast little fuckers.” She grinned and got behind the wheel, buckling in. “I am off to dinner.”

Hever watched her slowly drive around and then back out through the gates. “Right. So, what was salvaged?”

Her mother put an arm around her. “Let’s go have a look.”

They headed into the house, and Hever smiled. Crap day or not, she was home.

* * * *

K rix contacted Zera . “Where is she?”

“ Her account has been suspended until we confirm her situation. We have to run some more scans to make sure she’s stable. ”

He scowled. “She was stable with me. It was a very pleasant interaction.”

“ Yeah, she mentioned that as well. It was fine, but I am trying to get the ladies more than fine, so they want to do it again. With her identity being exposed, her family may not want her to resume her position as an escort. ”

Krix froze. “What? Why not?”

“ How would you feel if your sibling were an escort? ”

He paused. “I see.”

Zera sighed. “ There will eventually be another omega who will take you as a patron. Don’t worry about it. You just need patience.”

Krix frowned. “If I send her something, can you get it to her?”

Zera sighed. “ That I can do .”

“I will send it to her drop box later today.” Krix knew the rules. Despite the fact that he knew who she was, he didn’t have the right to go to her home and demand affection.

He looked at the ornament with the tiny woman in silver with black hair and black wings sprouting from her back.

He smiled and set it into a protective case and wrapped it with a ribbon.

He knew he wasn’t the best lover, but he learned every time they were together.

She refused to let her needs rise to the surface of her mind, so he couldn’t guess what

she wanted.

He tried and eventually brought her pleasure, but he knew that it wasn't with any kind of grace or speed.

She always got frustrated first, and then the clues began.

Krix walked out of the defender headquarters. "I have to run an errand. I have my com on in case of emergency."

Sgoth nodded. "Got it."

He left the headquarters and flew over to Z-Corp. He took the addressed package and left it at the security office. It would be run through scan after scan until it ended up in Hever's possession.

As he flew back, he tried to overlap the woman he knew with the scaled little girl with wide blue eyes.

She had been introduced as the ambassador's daughter, and some of the other girls had been mean to her because of the scales.

He couldn't stop the girls from being mean, but he asked his older sister to talk to their sisters to prevent them from being cruel.

It worked, but the ambassador moved on six months later and took her little girl with her.

He was ten and wasn't an alpha yet, but her shuttered eyes made him sad.

He had heard her mention wings, so he decided to find them. He knew just who to

contact.

Wonder was a local alpha who kept to himself, but his mind was a net that could wrap around the world. He could probably find them if they still existed. It looked like Krix had a job for after his shift.

When he got back to the headquarters, Sgoth smiled. “Complete your assignment?”

“I was just bringing a present to an escort I have been seeing.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Things have gotten complicated.”

“Aw, are you thinking about making her a wife? I did it, and I regret nothing.”

“We are a long way away from that. I am still trying to get another date. I have been leaning on my activation with her, and she is close-minded.”

Sgoth frowned, and then his eyes opened. “Oh, shit. You are waiting for feedback, and she cools off by the time you make your next move.”

“Yes. So, I get what I need, but it isn’t really a desirable repeat for her.”

Sgoth nodded. “Come with me. You are going to watch some biology videos.”

“I am your elder.”

“Right, but I knew who I wanted when I was a teenager and just had to wait until I got authorization from family to jump her. I studied... for her. I wanted her to think of me with a silly smile on her face. And she does as long as I don’t kiss with the tentacles.

Then she punches me and gags a little.” He grinned.

Krix frowned. “I didn’t get the alpha classes. I was a slow developer.”

“This works for alpha or not.”

They went into a boardroom. Sgoth got a video and handed him earpieces. “You really don’t want the rest of the team listening in.”

Krix nodded and started watching the video.

He blinked in surprise at a few mentions, and he continued through to the end of the tutorial.

He exhaled and was still frowning when he put the learning unit away and closed and dismissed the file, so it wasn’t the first thing to pop up when someone opened the unit.

He groaned. He had fucked up royally. He had been looking for psychic feedback when he should just have been watching for biological signals. She had been giving him all the direction he needed; he had just been looking for what she wanted.

Sgoth looked at his face and clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t overthink it. Just think of it as a fun fight. When she moves, you move.”

“If she accepts a date with me again. I have to wait for her to be reclassified. She got blown up last night.”

“Wait. Hever was your escort?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Everybody knows about her. Half the off-duty defenders went out to get her back.

She's related to the prefect, for pity's sake."

"Yeah, well, she's an omega and has requirements."

"Needs, Krix. We all have them."

He sighed. "I know what she needs, but getting it for her will be difficult. It's something not included in a video."

"Well, you are off shift. I wish you luck. Are you still on call?"

"No. I have a few days off."

"Right, well, give yourself time to absorb what you learned, maybe read a few romance novels but not the kind with creepy stalkers. These ladies have had enough of that. They can get stalked just by walking into the wrong office at Z-Corp."

"Right." Krix checked himself out of duty and left the building. He headed to the nearest coffee shop and sent a message to Wonder. Now he had to wait.

An hour later, he was on his third latte when he got a response. He nodded and left the building, taking off and heading for Wonder's workshop. It seemed that the mysterious active was willing to help.

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Krix landed at the spot in the yard, clearly marked for fliers. It was the crosshairs of two guns. A scan ran over him, and then a gate swung open. He walked up the drive, and a man stepped out of the shop at the side of the house.

“Wonder?”

“Worro Der. It was an easy work name. Krix?”

“Yeah. I don’t bother with a work name.”

They shook hands, and Worro paused. “Oh. It’s for a girl.”

“Yes. She has a need, and I can’t fulfill it without help. I don’t have long-range tracking for something I have never seen.”

Worro nodded. “But I do. How do you know that?”

“I know what people wish for, and I wished for help.”

“I see. You have affection for her.”

“I remember her eyes as a child, and they were hollow. I recently learned she had a pair of wings that were cut from her and that remained mobile after the amputation. She hopes for them. Misses them. Needs them.”

Worro nodded. “Understandable. She’s an active?”

“And an omega.”

That shocked Worro. “A powered omega?”

“Yes, you must have been here for a while. There are many of them. She is an escort for the Blind Date Corporation and also works for Z-Corp. I also met her when I was nearly a teen and she was younger. She looked different then.”

Worro cocked his head. “Do you wish to tell me anymore?”

“No. I believe that is sufficient.”

“They have omegas as escorts?”

“Yes. And some who can take a knot without the omega scents.”

Worro’s eyes lit up. “How does one hire one of these ladies?”

“You need to fill out an application, have a full medical, and if you are going to date an omega over her heat, you will have to be temporarily sterilized.”

“Ah, but you can ride an omega through a heat?”

“If she lets you. She would actually have to like you for that to happen.” Krix chuckled. “They have the final say. If they don’t like you, they don’t have to go for a repeat.”

“And she repeats for you?”

“A few times, but I need her to have this. It’s important.”

Worro nodded. “I see. Well, describe these wings to me. I will make some tea. Come into the workshop.”

Krix followed the man with blood-dark hair and charcoal clothing.

“I don’t know much about the wings, but she said that even cut off, they flapped and tried to fly.”

Worro blinked. “That is pretty specific. What colour are they?”

“She used to be black with a rainbow sheen. I am guessing that they would be soft black.”

“What colour is she now?”

“Her skin is pale now. She’s Ambassador Veradil’s daughter. Adopted.” Krix said, “When I flew her home, she mentioned her wings. If she didn’t say it, I still heard it.”

“Can you give me that image?” Worro asked as he brought over mugs of tea.

“Sure.” Krix touched Worro’s temple and gave him the discussion and all that he had picked up during the flight.

“She’s charming.”

“Yes. She is. Extremely intelligent and very sweet.”

“I see.” Worro blinked. “I have them.”

“What?”

“I have the wings. They are in Uradda, under rubble. They are very much alive.”
Worro blinked.

Krix projected maps of the Uraddan capital on the table. “Where?”

Worro reached out and moved the map. “Here. This facility. This is where the wings are.”

“Thank you. What do you want for the information?”

Worro smiled. “Show me how to apply to the BDC, and what is your escort’s number?”

Krix blinked. “Why?”

“Because, having seen her through your eyes, she is precisely my type.”

“You are going to steal her?”

“No, she’s an escort. She is not exclusive to you, nor you to her.”

Krix blinked. “I suppose that’s right.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t steal. I only accept that which is freely given.”

Krix sipped at his tea. “You will hate the BDC then. The cost for one night is astronomical.”

“How do you afford it?”

“I am a maker. I do side jobs for the government.”

Worro nodded. "I will come with you to the facility. Uraddan's are treacherous, and you need a heavy-hitter to move that rubble."

"I am a heavy-hitter."

"You are? You look fit but not bulky."

He sighed. "I am aware that I am a stunted alpha."

They finished their tea, and Krix contacted dispatch, registering a visit to a defunct Uraddan facility.

He looked at Worro. "Can you fly?"

"No."

Krix walked outside and looked at Worro. "Are you used to a lift?"

"Yes. How fast are you?"

Krix grinned. "Pretty fucking fast." He picked Worro up and said, "Exhale."

He blasted forward, and they were over the destroyed facility in Uradda a moment later.

Worro staggered when set down. "You weren't kidding."

Worro walked toward the building, and together, they followed his tracking and finding to a lab three levels deep, where images of children at different stages of development were stuck to walls and charts.

Krix grabbed a stack of files and put them in an expanding pack on his work suit.

Worro found a lab with different preserved child-sized limbs, and there was a case with the wings flapping away.

Krix walked up to them and touched the case.

“Little ones, we are taking you back to her. She’s bigger now, so you are going to have to catch up. ”

He gripped the case and pulled the whole unit from the wall.

Worro asked, “Why not take them out?”

“Because they can’t fly, but they can still move. So, do you want to chase them around? I think it would be best to get them to a medic who can do grafts.”

Worro blinked. “Sensible.”

“I will contact the doctor her family uses when we arrive. Can you hold the case?”

“Uh.” He looked at the wings.

“Never mind. I can carry you and them.” He fixed his bag, put the case with the wings facing him, and they walked up and out of the facility. Krix grabbed Worro around the waist and said, “Exhale.”

They shot forward and were in front of Ambassador Veradil’s home in under a minute. They were standing outside the gate, and Krix said to the guard, “I have something for Miss Hever.”

The guard looked at him. “You are a polite one.”

“My parents were strict. Manners matter.”

He called it in, and the door opened.

Krix walked in with Worro at his side.

They were welcomed into the house, and Hever walked toward them with a smile and a curious expression.

* * * *

She looked up when she was told there were visitors. She got up and brushed her winter gown down, moving down the steps slowly and feeling something important near the door.

Krix and a strange alpha with blood-red hair and black clothing were standing there. Krix had a box under one arm and a pack full of files under his other arm.

She looked at the box and then at Krix’s face. She smiled. “Hello, Krix. I didn’t think to see you for a while.”

“You are looking well.”

“Yeah. Turns out I also had complications from sabotage. I am doing better now. What have you been up to?”

Krix swallowed. “I remembered about your wings, and I asked Worro to find them. He did, and we have them here.”

Hever inhaled and said, “In that case?”

“Yes, we had to keep them inside because they were flapping a lot.”

She chuckled. “That’s how I lost them to begin with. They were annoyed by the flapping. May I have them?”

Krix blinked. “Oh. Of course.” He awkwardly turned the case toward her.

There they were. Her wings. She stroked the glass, and they flapped rapidly. Her hand turned glossy black, and she cut through the glass with her claws.

The glass shattered, and the wings sprang loose, flapping over to her back.

She laughed. “So impatient.” She reached back and clawed her dress and the skin beneath it open.

The wings attached, and she felt them burrowing back into place.

When they started to draw to grow, she staggered, and Krix and his companion reached to support her.

The wings firmed up and became part of her again, and then they started growing.

Hever heard the moment her mother saw her. “Hever!”

Hever laughed. “They found them for me. My wings are back.”

Her mother approached and caught her. She was sobbing. “My wings are back.”

“They are beautiful, baby, but I think we need to call your cousin Khytten. They are

bleeding more than they should.”

Hever grinned. “I can fix that.” She let go of her mother and ran to the courtyard, launching skyward. Her wings pulled her up, and she lit her body with dark energy. Silver, purple, and black crackled around her, and she grinned. “Woohoo!”

Her wings firmed up, and the crackling of dead nanites ceased.

She laughed and began flying figure eights around, letting the dark energy dissipate.

She landed in front of her mother and smiled.

Resuming her pale appearance, folding her wings, and locking them tight around her neck, like a cloak. It was a hug, and she could wear it.

Her mother beamed. “You are beautiful, Hever.”

“Thanks, Mom. I feel... whole.” She laughed.

“The wings aren’t wiggling.”

“They are where they need to be. They don’t have to fight anymore. We are one.”

“We?”

“Uh, they weren’t part of me originally. They were an addition in the dish. Uradda backpedalled hard after they made me.”

Krix held up the pouch. “We have the files.”

Hever smiled. “Bring them to the prefect. I can come with you, if you like.”

He smiled. "I would like that."

Veradil said, "I will call ahead. You are flying in?"

"Oh, yes."

Hever had a thought, walked up to Krix, and said, "Thank you. Thank you so much."
She grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him down for a kiss.

He remained stiff for a moment before he wrapped his arms around her, and the kiss took off.

She tasted him, tongues duelled, and she held tight until there was a soft clearing of a throat.

"Salmet is wondering where you are," Veradil said softly.

Hever blushed and backed away. Krix reluctantly let her go.

The other alpha stood smiling. "I believe I am owed a thank you as well."

"I don't know you."

He walked toward her and bowed. "I am a finder of things that fit in my life. It was easy to find your wings, as they were part of you, and you are going to fit into my life."

"You are very sure of yourself."

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He took one of her hands and kissed the back of her fingers. “Yes. But as the prefect will tell you, it is fucking annoying.”

She smiled. “I hope you like Krix.”

“Why?”

“Because I fly alone.” She stepped back and launched skyward.

She looked back, and the guys blurred and disappeared. Looked like Krix did a standing start. She flew over to her aunt’s place and slowly descended. Salat, Khytten, and the kids were all there, and they all watched her land.

Salmet was there and was grinning. “So, that’s what you were supposed to look like.”

“Take it in, Auntie. I know you always were fond of basic black.”

Salat grinned, and Khytten’s eyes were watery. She let the dark energy run over her before it dissipated, and Salat’s jaw hung open. Hever beamed and settled her wings, hugging the staggering toddlers. She had Cira on her hip when she looked at her auntie. “So, what do you think?”

“You can shift between them?”

“Sure. I can go silver as well, but then the wings don’t lift. I have a lot more dark energy, though.”

Krix and Worro were standing at a distance.

“Would you be willing to try for one of the teams?”

“Nope. I make suits. I made those monstrous cars for Salat and Khytten and then designed the features to put child seats in a battle tank. That is what I do. I am not a hero; I am a maker.”

Salmet smiled. “It’s good that you know it. Right, now, what are these two doing here?”

“Krix and Worro found my wings, and they found the files that had been left behind in the labs.”

“They used paper records?”

Hever nodded. “Yeah, they were super concerned that someone would hack them and rescue us. Luckily for them, that never happened.”

Salmet looked at Worro and grimaced. “It figures that you would be here. Being a seer and finder and heavy-hitter is a stupid mix.”

Worro shrugged. “I am sorry, but it is the mix I had. Your niece is a bit of a blend herself.”

Salmet looked between Hever and Worro. “Oh, you have to be kidding me.”

Hever held her hands up. “I just met him, am under contract to the BDC, and am on suspension. Plus, I have a day job. And it would be Krix rather than him anyway.”

Krix grinned. Worro scowled. Salmet cackled. “Well, Krix, hand over the files. I am

eager to see how Hever was made.”

Hever cleared her throat. “Read them when you are on duty, possibly with a genetic specialist and a therapist. What they did to children smaller than Cira here is not pleasant. There was a ten percent survival rate, from what I recall. There was one scientist who understood how to manage it, and when they discovered she was an active, they killed her. That was the end of their success, such as it was.”

Samlet stared at her. “That’s right. You were ten or twelve.”

“Six or eight. We aged me up because of my height. The records have my actual birthdate; Leska’s, too. Can I see my file?”

Salmet looked at the bundle. “Why don’t we wait until work on Monday? You can spend the rest of the weekend with your mom.”

“She’s had quite the time of it. I think we need to go for a mani-pedi.”

Salmet sighed and looked at her own nails. “Let me know if you need company.”

“I think we will go for a mother-daughter day. As long as she isn’t busy, and as long as my changed appearance doesn’t make a difference if we are out in public.”

Salmet smiled. “She won’t have a problem.”

She walked to Krix. “Are you good to put him back where you found him?”

“Yup. Are you good to find your way home?”

“Yes. Thank you again. I feel like myself for the first time in decades.”

He smiled. “It is wonderful to see you this way. Happy and energized.” Krix leaned in and kissed her softly. She breathed softly against him until Cira shrieked and kicked.

Khytten came by and retrieved her daughter. “We wondered if you would forget to hand her back. Continue.”

Hever blinked, but Krix didn’t hesitate.

He kissed her again, and she leaned against him.

There was a cleared male throat, but Hever flipped them off.

Worro snorted, grabbed her, and pulled her into his arms. The kiss was deep, fast, and left her aching.

When he leaned back, he smiled softly. “Have a good rest day, Hever.”

She frowned. “I hope he makes you walk.”

Worro laughed, and she launched skyward and back home again. Her mother was waiting, and she asked about the mani-pedis. Veradil immediately made the appointment. Mother-daughter day was on the books.

Salmet sat at her desk in the middle of the night, and she opened the file with the image of a baby Hever on it.

The black skin and scales were unmistakable.

The first thing was that she was made of more than just two donors.

They had carved her up and rewritten her several times over in the first year because she would continue healing.

The wings weren't born to her, but when they were installed, her skin blackened, and the researchers were punished for wrecking a perfectly innocent-looking potential assassin.

The wings had been on the split twin who had not survived their attentions. So, they cut them off and implanted them on baby Hever. Salmét refused to think of her as a subject.

She read further and further into the file and the shocking raising of the subject that would become Leska. She had taken over her care when Hever was eighteen months old and Leska was a newborn. Leska had golden scales after a few months with Hever, which caused the researchers to act out.

Hever's life got worse. They removed the wings and were stunned when they kept moving, and Hever remained black.

Hever was six when they stress tested her to near death but wanted to keep the body to use, so they put her in a stasis pod and chained it to an explosive buoy in the harbour. They had a drone checking on her every week until the pod was suddenly gone.

Salmét turned to Veradil's recollection.

She had been on the yacht heading to Hyreno when a young being pushed the open pod toward her.

The little girl inside had stared at her with wide eyes, and Veradil had taken her into her arms and gotten her clothing.

Hyreno did the first medical exam and got her a wardrobe suitable for an ambassador's daughter.

All adults adored Hever because of her intelligence, which was above her age, and the children of Hyreno were content to play with her.

When Veradil was assigned to Sethir, the adults were impressed, but the children were hostile due to her appearance.

She managed to get through things, but since she was tall, the older children were most hostile.

Her education began in Serothoa and continued as she travelled with her legal mother. Veradil was childless and took good care of Hever.

Salmet blinked at her own reaction when Veradil brought the little girl home for a visit. She had thought that her sister was simply grabbing onto any available child, but over the years, Hever had demonstrated that she was kind, she was intelligent, and she was special.

There were more notes about a pyroactive burning all remaining samples and two of the researchers. But Salmet would deal with that tomorrow.

She got up, locked her office, and went to bed. She crawled into her husband's arms, and he wrapped them around her. "Rough read?"

"Yeah. She gets the first dessert next weekend."

"Ouch. That bad?"

"Worse. So much worse. Veradil chose the right daughter. Oh, and she's twenty-six."

“Oh, baby girl is going to be upset.”

“Why? Because she was mean to someone younger? We are all going to have to deal with how we treated her and what we thought she was.”

“What did we think she was?” He rubbed her back.

“We thought Veradil just adopted a child so she wouldn’t be the only childless one in the family. She adopted a child because that child needed her.”

“So, she was good-hearted.”

“Both of them were. One needed a parent, and one needed a child. They met in the middle.”

He chuckled. “If you and the girls happen to meet them for mani-pedis tomorrow, it would be a family-bonding thing. The guys and I can watch the kids.”

“That might be infringing on their day.”

“So? Come in late and see if you can get a table at Klauz’s?”

Salmet chuckled. “You are devious.”

“Thank you.”

“I wonder what kind of grandmother she’s going to be? If I am not mistaken, Krix and Worro have that look in their eyes.”

He laughed. “Yes. Alphas are easy to read. Strong, protective, good family men, and easy to spot from a mile away. Both of them are tracking her.”

Salmet looked up at him. “You think?”

He chuckled and caressed her hip. “So, our family is now all set and settled. Now we can expand a bit.”

“More grandkids?”

“Sure, but I remember how all of our kids entered the world, and I am up to practice.”
He kissed her softly.

“That ship has sailed.”

“I don’t care. We used to like having sex on the shoreline.”

She laughed and caressed him in all of her favourite places. Soft touches changed to laughing sighs, and then they tangled in the way that had started all six of their children.

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He ever sat and got her nails done with a silver base that had red garlands on it. She always loved the holidays.

Veradil got gold and garlands. “Where did you want to go after this?”

“Hot chocolate, a walk in the square, and if we can find that flavoured marshmallow vendor, I want to hit that.” She paid for both of them and tipped the ladies.

Veradil laughed. “Done. Great. While we walk, I can ask about those two young men.”

“I haven’t researched Worro yet.”

Veradil chuckled. “I have. He’s known for being difficult, but you take no shit, so not a bad match.”

“What about Krix?”

“Ah, he is sweet. Shy. Tremendously strong, can manipulate matter, and he can fly at incredible speeds. His mother is Serathoan, and his father is Sethir, and they live at the Stronghold and have a home in town.”

Her mother had that look in her eyes. “They are here in town, aren’t they?”

“His grandfather is unwell.”

“Ah. Oh. I didn’t know. We don’t actually... talk.”

“I see.”

“It is an escort classification, not therapy, and not girlfriend status. He knots and goes.”

“Do you think it’s a lack of experience?”

“Well, most alphas get instruction. Worro is working from the textbook.”

“Maybe Krix wasn’t given that textbook. He’s a bit small for an alpha.”

“He’s the right height, he’s just a little more streamlined. Less broad.”

They walked to one of the hot chocolate kiosks and got hot chocolate, walking arm in arm.

“You sure?”

“I’ve seen him naked, so yeah. Oops. I think I have just busted about all of my super secret protocols.”

Veradil laughed. “Honesty is my skill.”

“I know.” She wrinkled her nose as she sipped her hot chocolate. “It was the bane of my teen years.”

Zera called, and Hever sighed. “I have to get this.”

Her mother chuckled. “Yup. Go ahead, but I am going with you.”

“Oh, that will be fun. Zera, Veradil is coming with me.”

“ I have never had a mother attend an assessment before. ”

Veradil snorted and leaned toward Hever. “It isn’t anything I haven’t heard during her teen years. Erradian walls are thin.”

Zera blinked. “ Oh. Wow. I heard that. Okay, you are half a block away, and security is waiting. Bring the ambassador and come on in. ”

Veradil laughed, and they headed to Z-Corp, the home of multiple branches and several smaller businesses, as well as the BDC.

They checked in at security, got passes, and Zera came up to greet them. Zera looked at her and said, “Not black?”

“Only when I want to wear it. Not in the lobby. I have some dignity. Besides, this is the face on my company identification.”

“Oh, right. Come on.”

They headed downstairs, and Zera was grinning. “Seriously. This is the first time someone has ever brought their mother down.”

Veradil chuckled. “I am special.”

They giggled, and then Zera said, “You know the drill. First, strip and get a full scan done. Do you dismiss the wings as well?”

“Nope. They stay, but they are nice and soft and stay flat against me.”

“Okay, then we need flat, and up and out.”

“Noted. Mom, can you hold my hot chocolate?”

“It is going to die, Hever.”

Hever laughed. “I know.”

She headed to the platform and stripped. She had altered her dress that morning and used the strip method to get around her wings.

She folded the wings in and got the dress over her head. Then the boots, underwear, and stockings went next. The bra was impossible right now.

She got onto the platform and heard Zera directing her, saying, “Suzara is going to have fun with this.” She laughed. “You prefer a lower latch to your dress?”

“Yeah. I have to dress myself. The wings are getting more flexible, but I can’t hold the strips with them yet.”

“Fair enough. Show your range of wing motion.”

Hever flexed and reached forward and then backward. She went out and up then circled around. She stood with arms up, arms down, and then a few hero shots in different stretches.

When that was done, she folded her wings along her back, stretched, and twisted.

“Okay, now reaction testing. Get in the tube.”

Hever laughed. “Right. The wings are sensitive, so keep that in mind.”

Hever stood in the tube with her hands on the grips and her feet in the marked slots.

She was held in place as light tubes extended and started touching her. She squirmed and twisted, breathing heavily. Then, she heard, “Scales on.”

The scales went on, and the touching continued.

The irony was that she was more sensitive with the scales than without them, and they were not consistent over her skin.

The scales swirled and twisted, covering her sexual characteristics with tiny plates that made every touch reverberate through her.

She squirmed and moaned as the tendrils touched her, her wings tried to foul them, but they went around and were insistent until Hever gasped and shivered from the light contact.

Zera laughed. “Wow. Your patron is going to have to up his game, but from what I hear, he has already begun working on it before you transformed.”

She was a little dopey. “What?”

“A little octopus told me that your patron missed alpha classes because he was a slow grower.”

Zera snorted. “Sgoth. He is chatty and wants everyone to be coupled up. He wants all of my escorts locked to specific patrons. Greedy bastard. That isn’t the business model.”

Veradil asked, “How many patrons has my daughter had?”

“Fifty-Five has had four. You know her repeater.”

“What are your criteria for adding one?”

“He has to go through the application, interview, and medical check.”

“Am I good? There’s a draft,” Hever asked.

Zera laughed. “You are good.”

Veradil spoke, “Could I try that?”

Zera paused. “Um, you would have to do that calibration first.”

“Sure. If it doesn’t bother my daughter, it shouldn’t bother me.”

Hever got dressed and scrambled to the control room. “Seriously, Mom? This is the coolest thing you have ever done.”

“Remember this when I have grandkids.” Her mother chuckled and removed all her clothing.

She stood on the scanner, and Zera looked at her and shrugged, starting a simple scan of the body that only the rarest forty-year-old could claim.

Zera ran her through the poses and the necessary scans and then directed her to the test chamber.

Hever told her how to set her feet and the grip she needed to use on the handles. “And now I am turning my head because this is not an image I want to keep for the grandkids.”

Zera grinned and chuckled. “Okay, contact testing is starting now.”

Hever listened to the giggles, the gasps, and then she turned to peek between her fingers. Zera had a surprising expression on her face.

Hever put her foot down. “Oh, no, Zera. You are not turning Aksalla’s precious retired ambassador into an escort.”

Zera muted the mic as Veradil started to moan. “That isn’t it. I have a patron looking for this exact profile. Age is not a barrier. This is a surprise, is all.”

“Wait. There is an active out there looking for my mom?”

“Yes. He is trustworthy. He’s been through all the normal vetting, but his range of inquiry was very narrow. He’s also not local.”

“Oh. Damn. Where is he from?”

“He’s an island active.”

Hever’s eyes widened. “Oh, good grief. I know who that is.”

Zera blinked. “You do?”

“Sure. Nautilus. He’s a water breather whose skin hardens up, and he has tentacles.”

Zera started laughing. “So, you have met.”

“Sure. We had to stop at his island for emergency repairs. I chatted with the kids and learned to swim, and she and Nautilus were seen chatting and smiling at each other for hours.”

“He has retired as well, now. He never forgot her.”

“Well, could she chat with him, as not an escort, without wrecking privacy regulations?”

Zera smiled. “You ask her first.”

“Good plan. Springing an active on people doesn’t really go over well.”

Veradil yelped as the tentacles were going for a second round.

Zera laughed and stopped the test. “Sorry. Hever distracted me. You have lovely reflexes.”

Veradil chuckled. “Thank you. I am going to get dressed, but I have a far more informed idea of why my daughter sought this out.”

Hever leaned toward the mic as her mother walked back to her clothing. “This is not what I had in mind for mother-daughter day.”

Her mother was laughing as they met outside the control booth, and Zera was shaking her head in amusement. “Well, Hever, now I know where you get it from.”

Veradil grinned and hugged Hever again. They headed up to the main floor and handed their visitor’s badges to the security guard.

Zera smiled. “Madame Ambassador, come back if you ever want an evening job.”

Veradil nodded. “How much to rent the sensor test?”

Hever hauled her laughing mother out of the building and then sighed. “Where are those marshmallows?”

They linked arms and laughed as they went in search of the treat. It was a very good day.

Two hours later, carrying a stack of boxes of marshmallows in a variety of flavours, they stood with the others, watching the lights blaze to life on the main street.

“You used to love watching this when you were little.” Veradil smiled.

Keera walked by with a young boy, blonde hair and a brilliant smile. “Hey, Hever. Wasn’t the light-up fantastic?”

“Absolutely. This is your brother?”

The boy stuck his hand out. “I am Wellin. You are Hever?”

“I am.”

“You work with my sister.”

“I do.”

“Does she do a good job?”

“She does. She’s an excellent analyst.”

“Yeah, she helps with my homework all the time.” Wellin smiled. “I am going to be an active one day.”

“I am sure you will. You have a certain look about you.” Hever winked as she shook his hand. There was a roaring in her ears, and she heard a woman crying and others telling her they would take care of him. She came out of it and looked at Wellin.

He looked at her. “They took care of me.”

She whispered, “Yes. They did.”

“You are like me.”

She swallowed. “Yes, I am.”

Keera was looking between them. “What am I missing?”

“Just taking a walk down memory lane with Wellin.”

Keera nodded. “He must like you.”

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“We share parts of an origin story.”

“Oh, no way. Mom and Dad will be impressed.”

Wellin said softly, “We can’t tell them yet. We have to wait until I activate.”

“Sure thing, short stuff.” Keera ruffled his hair. “I can do secrets.”

“It’s not a secret, Kiki, it just isn’t time.”

Veradil paused. “Kiki?”

“Yeah, it’s a nickname.”

“How old are you?” Hever’s mother looked at the woman.

“How old do I look?”

“You look nineteen.”

“I am nearly thirty. Yes, my parents know I was older than declared. They didn’t care.”

“You were attacked a few years ago.”

Kiki paused. “Yes, but recent discoveries have allowed me to heal and stop using a projection field. I have a normal face again.”

Hever frowned. “What?”

“Oh, I was attacked by the same guy who got Hera, but I didn’t have the ability to burn them out myself. When they managed to kill him, Kritz made a treatment, and he helped me heal my features again.”

Wellin took her hand. “You were still pretty but unhappy.”

“That is true.”

Hever blinked. “I never knew.”

“I was the user of one of Kritz’s concealment fields, in combination with a compression suit that you developed.”

Veradil said, “Should you be discussing this out in the open?”

Kiki smiled. “Probably not.”

“Did you lose anybody?”

Kiki shrugged. “The first guy I ever loved. This was before the BDC was in Aksalla. The authorities made me disappear, and he didn’t look for me.”

“Maybe it was too much for him?”

“Maybe. Anyway, five years is a long time. We are going to hunt down those marshmallows, and I will see you at work on Monday.”

They hugged, and Hever watched them go. “You know, I never asked about her past.”

Veradil shrugged. “That is unlike you. Maybe they put a sliding block on her? They do that with witnesses. If someone thinks about them specifically, their thoughts slide away.”

“I don’t know much about minder stuff.”

“I know. No one does. Torenne’s father is notorious for sussing things out with a light handshake.”

Hever paused. “Oh, no.”

“Your crush? Probably well known to him.”

“Damn.”

“He hasn’t mentioned it so far. You are safe.”

“I already told Torenne.”

Veradil laughed. “What did she say?”

“Not much. She just stared and swallowed. I know I haven’t come up on her BDC roster, so I guess we just aren’t a match.”

“She doesn’t have a knot, hun, and I think that was something you asked for.”

“Oh. Damn.”

“Yeah.” Veradil wrapped an arm around her, and they walked to where their car was waiting. “Time to go home and gorge on the marshmallows.”

The driver took them home, and Hever sighed when she saw that Krix and Worro were waiting for her.

She looked at her mother.

“What? I didn’t call them. I wouldn’t want to wreck these nails.” Her mother laughed. “I will just take the candy inside. Don’t be too long.”

Hever got out of the vehicle and put her hands on her hips. “What? Zera hasn’t sent me anything, and you two don’t look like you hang out together.”

Krix frowned. “There was a notification. Your friend Keera was abducted during the lights tonight. Her brother called the defenders, and he is with their parents right now.”

“Why are you here? Why aren’t you looking for her?”

Worro said, “Because I can’t see her, and I don’t know why.”

“What does that usually mean?”

“Something is psychically shielded.”

“This is a weird coincidence. Worro, did you have a girlfriend?”

He frowned, and a hand went to his head. “No, of course not.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. We will do it the old-fashioned way. You are looking for a woman wearing a long blue dress, black leggings, a scarf, black boots, and she has my scent on her. Find that scent.”

Worro’s eyes went distant. “Got her. Krix, can you carry us both?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Great.” He projected a map and showed him where to go. “There.”

Krix nodded, picked Worro up, and rose in the air before they blasted away.

* * * *

Keera was plodding along toward home. Her body was scratched up and covered with blood, but most of the blood wasn’t hers.

She heard a roar in the sky and looked up. She froze. It was Krix and Worro.

She swallowed and kept walking.

The defender and the retired guy stopped near her. “Miss Keera?”

She nodded. “That’s me.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home. I should be there in eight days.”

Krix stood in front of her. “I can get you there tonight. That way, your family wouldn’t worry.”

“Attend to your friend. He has a headache.”

She glanced, and Worro was hunched over, and he was rocking from side to side, clutching his head.

In the old days, when they were dating, she would have run to his side to help him, but she had gone through her recovery without him and had been bound from speaking to him. He had simply forgotten she existed.

Krix looked between them, his jaw flexed, and he picked up Worro and then grabbed Keera. With a burst of speed, he got them back to Z-Corp for medical treatment, with the defenders needing her side of things.

Keera let herself be examined. Her clothing was removed, and she was showered with filters to catch every trace of it.

Her family was notified that she was safe, but she was being interviewed at the time.

The defender Sgoth asked her what had happened, and she told him. “We were watching the lights; I felt a hit from behind, and then I started to droop. Hands grabbed me, and I was pulled to a portal base.”

“And what happened then?”

“I verified that there were no friendlies, shifted form, and clawed them all to death before starting to walk back to Aksalla.”

“Clawed them?”

“I am a polymorph like you. My possible career was curtailed when I was attacked by a serial killer and left shredded. Kritz and Zera made me an appearance generator, but

I lost everything until Hera's situation presented a solution, and I was repaired."

"You were a defender?"

"No. I was still in training. I was Wildling."

Sgoth leaned back. "I heard about you. Your partner went insane when you were injured, so he was retired."

"I didn't have a partner," she muttered.

"You didn't? The records said... oh, that kind of partner."

"Right, well, he is after Hever, and I don't blame him. She's lovely and charming and happy."

"And you are?"

"Done with the interview. They grabbed me to use me to get Hever to do something, and I killed them all. They grabbed me in front of my little brother, and that filled me with rage. There was no stopping after that."

"No. I suppose not. Wait here."

Worro was brought in a moment later with a minder at his side. She sat and waited.

Worro was in genuine pain, and then it suddenly stopped.

The minder was sweating. "Whoever put the lock on his awareness of you was very good."

Worro gagged, and the minder handed him a sick bag.

Keera asked, “Should I go?”

The minder said, “No, his mind is full of you in horrible condition. He needs to see you whole.”

She shrugged and looked at him. Waiting.

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K eera watched Worro's head slowly coming up. His gaze locked on her, sitting in her scrubs, and he said, "Kiki?"

"Yes."

"Where have you been?"

"Here. They hid me. You took my loss badly."

He swallowed. "You were covered in blood."

"When? Then or now?"

"Now."

"Yes, I was. A lot of people are dead."

"Did they touch you?"

"Not in a sexual way. They died anyway."

"You used the wolf?"

"It always wins for shock value, plus I can bite them." She smiled slightly.

"You never told me you were alive."

“I tried twice. You couldn’t see me. Then you started sleeping around, and I didn’t want to be close enough to see that.”

Worro froze. “You know about that?”

“Sure. I was at three of the parties where you picked up a girl to bang out some tension. Congratulations.” She smiled. “I hear you are applying to the BDC to be a patron. Congratulations again. Hever’s a solid choice.”

He looked ill. “I am not going to finish my application.”

“Why? She triggers your alpha reflexes and your protective nature.”

Sgoth came in and said, “Keera, your family is here to take you home. They were very worried.”

“So was I.” Keera smiled, and she got to her feet. “Glad you are back to yourself, Worro. Glad Krix was able to get you out on a mission. Have a nice life.”

* * * *

Worro watched her leave. Shy Kiki looked up at him. “Are you actually serious?”

“I am the most serious I have ever been. I am yours to the end of time, Kiki.” He smiled and brushed her hair off her shoulder.

“It’s okay if you don’t mean it. I know the defenders get around. All those fans and all.” She gave him an out.

He kissed her seriously. “It is only you from now until we both cock up our toes.”

She had smiled shyly and kissed him back. “That sounds really nice.”

Then the last memory he had of her. Triumphant from a successful mission, he sought her and found her in an alleyway.

She was carved up and covered with blood.

He got her to the hospital, and they struggled to stop the bleeding.

He moaned and struck the walls as no one could tell him who or what had done this.

His team found him rampaging in the hospital and brought him down. The next thing he knew, there were hands on his head, and his mind was cold. When he woke, she was gone, and he couldn't remember or find her.

Worro touched her with his mind, and he exhaled. She was safe and heading home.

Sgoth sat with him. “She’s a little messed up. Did you know that she kills without remorse?”

Worro frowned. “Kiki? No. She’s the most sensitive of souls. She’s delicate and sweet.”

Hever barged in and looked at her with his new eyes. The fascination he had felt now filled him with shame.

“Where is she? Is she okay?”

Sgoth nodded. “She’s headed home with her family.”

Hever slumped. “Oh, good.”

“She was taken to blackmail you into something.”

“What?”

“She didn’t ask for many details. She just got slashing and biting.”

“Oh, the werewolf form. Got it. Yeah, that one isn’t chatty.”

Worro asked her, “Did you know?”

“What?”

“That she and I were lovers?”

Hever shook her head. “She’s not an omega.”

“Maybe not, but she could take the knot after very little practice.”

“Oh, so you can be one of her patrons. She is signing up for the BDC now that she’s free to get her own place again.”

“What?”

“While she had to use the image generator, her parents wanted to keep her close.”

He paused. “She’s not stationary. She’s heading for the coast. Fast.”

Hever looked at him. “You still care for her.”

“Of course. She is my one.” He swallowed. “But, when we were separated, she saw me with others, and I think it hurt her.”

“Wait, so she thought you two were exclusive, and she caught you catting around, but you couldn’t recognize it? Yeah, you are doomed.”

Worro wanted to wail in despair, but instead, he asked Sgoth, “Am I cleared to travel?”

Sgoth nodded. “I don’t see why not.”

Worro got up and was escorted out of the building. He caught a cab to his home, got his cycle, and drove it to her family’s cottage by the sea. She loved it. He was going to talk to her. He was hoping that she would listen.

* * * *

K eera was curled up on the swing with a cup of coffee and wrapped in her mother’s shawl. She looked out at the churning surf and debated how easy it would be to just dive beneath the waves, transform, and stay there.

She heard the cycle approaching and sighed.

He would still be scrabbling for balance.

She had lashed out at him with her hurt, and it wasn’t fair.

They had informed her that he had gone mad at her loss and that a minder had to step in, but it wasn’t until they had passed each other on the street that she realized that it meant their eighteen months together were gone.

She had been wearing the marks of the attack, and he had been able to have a new life without her.

It had hurt. Almost more than the wounds that she kept under control by constantly shifting her body to keep them from overwhelming her.

The stress on her mind and body had only left absolutes to comfort her.

Analytics and her family and, eventually, friends.

That was everything. No room for love or loss.

Now, she was healed, and love and loss were approaching at speed.

She remained curled up on her bench swing and sipped at her coffee as he stomped up the stairs.

“Kiki.”

She gestured to the other side of the swing, and it dipped as he sat down.

“You were hurt.”

“Oh, yes. Left in an alley until you found me after your mission. You carried me to a hospital, and they went to work. You started punching things, and your team had to tackle you.”

“I remember. What happened to you?”

“Ah, stitched, pinned, and taped together. I was given a projector, and it hid me from view. I lived that way until six months ago when the same man attacked Heraina, and Kritz and his team were able to make a cure for the nanites that kept tearing me apart.”

“How are you... as you were?”

“I am a shifter, you moron. My skin healed in, and the scars faded.”

He blushed. “Oh, right.”

She nodded. “So, it is all coming back to you?”

“Yes, and I am so sorry that my actions hurt you.”

“You literally didn’t know who I was, and the pain just blurred together.” She smiled and didn’t say what she wanted to. She had known he would leave her when she was out of sight but didn’t know why. Now it was obvious. His body took over.

He swallowed, his blood-red hair sliding over his shoulder. “I am so sorry that I hurt you.”

“You didn’t know what you were doing, or rather, you did, but this was what would have happened if I didn’t exist in your life. You are a tramp, Worro.”

He smiled sadly. “I was before we met, but when we shook hands, all other women ceased to matter to me. Apparently, I reverted rather quickly. I was trying to fill the hole in my life left by your absence.”

She nodded and sipped her coffee. “If you want something to drink, it’s in the house.”

He paused and then went to get a cup of black coffee.

When he came back, he settled. “So, what now?”

“There is no now. There is you living your life and me living mine. I can’t join the

BDC. Not stable enough, and I try to conform to the men I am with.”

He jolted. “What men have you been with?”

“Fuck off. None of your business. You broke our pledge, and now that my physical pain is gone, I have needs. Zera’s done me a favour and has been making queries at a few embassies for me to find a mate so that I can take the edge off. I can’t be an escort, but I can take a knot, so there is that.”

He was scowling. “No.”

“You don’t have a vote. We haven’t been anything to each other for half a decade.” She set her cup down. “Why did you come?”

“I miss you. I want you.”

“You had me. I was gone. I disappeared. I died. And they brought me back over and over while you raged outside.”

“What kind of male are you looking for?”

“Breathing and present are the two criteria I am looking for. I don’t even need to keep him. I am just getting the urge to have a child, and I need one of them to accomplish it.”

“Them?”

“An alpha. I am an omega but a sleeper one because I have been able to hide my nature for my entire life. Now, I am done hiding. My mom would be so proud. She was kicked out of her home for getting pregnant, and we made our home in the deep ocean.” She set her cup down on a nearby table.

“What? Why didn’t I know that?”

“You never asked. You expected resistance, so I gave you resistance. I should have just taken all of you. You would have gotten bored and moved on.”

He stared at her. “How did I not know?”

“I think part of you did. That is why you hovered around me and were so sweet. An alpha taking care of their omega. All the cuddling and fussing were nice.”

He swallowed. “Let me do it again.”

Keera reached out and took his hand. “No. I learned exactly how vulnerable I was that last time. You left, and the monster dragged me into the shadows.”

He asked the question she was braced for. “You didn’t fight?”

“He stung me with a paralytic that nearly killed me. I was trying to heal, but everything moved so slowly.” She squeezed his hand. “Even the screaming turned into a single exhale.”

“I am so sorry to have asked. It was a reflex.”

“I know. Zera’s been asking around the reapers if they want to take care of a badly damaged omega but let her live and work in Aksalla. This isn’t what she normally does, so things are going slowly. Mistress and breeder contracts are more involved than escort contracts.”

Worro closed his fingers on her hand. “I would take care of you.”

“Would you? I tried that once before, and it didn’t work out so well.”

“We could have a little boy or girl. I would treasure all of you.”

She froze. “They didn’t tell you.”

“What?”

“I was pregnant.”

The slight, coaxing smile on his lips straightened. “What?”

“About six weeks. It stopped before it really started, but they told me during recovery. I had no idea. I thought they told you.”

Tears welled in his eyes, and she set his coffee aside and held him. His alpha nature had failed her at every important turn. He whispered, “I understand now. I failed you.”

“I loved you, Worro, but the trust is gone.”

He nodded and swallowed. “What is your scent?”

She chuckled. “Fresh coffee and ocean air. Not a very pretty scent.”

His eyes widened. “You couldn’t shift to get away because you were pregnant.”

“That’s the hypothesis.”

“I will find you a mate. Why are you looking at reapers?”

“I need someone who can be there in a moment if I need it.”

His arms wrapped around her, and she cried. They were both in love but horribly mismatched. She took from him what she could. She took comfort.

* * * *

Zera spoke to the minder , “Well, he came out of it pretty well.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“How long did it take you to get her out of her memory loss?”

The minder frowned. “What? She was never under my control.”

“Oh, so not only did she have to remember pain, but she had to remember that her partner never helped her recover, never helped her move through the pain, and didn’t give her any comfort when their child was lost?”

“She wasn’t a defender. I am only licensed to work on defenders. She was left to the public system. That wasn’t my business.”

Zera swallowed. “Get out.”

“What?”

“As a minder, you have the ability to require balance. You didn’t even request it. She lost everything, and her lover walked away from her. You don’t think she needed to know more than why?”

“We told her what was done.”

“And left her with the pain of being forgotten. Your Z-Corp contracts will not be

renewed. We need someone who considers all parts of a trauma, not the ones that pay the best.”

Zera waved him off before she put him through the wall. Worro had been forcibly retired due to an escalating temper. She had been considering him for patronage at the BDC, but he was wild, and his temper was extreme. She wasn't going to put any of the escorts up against that.

Zera rubbed her head. This was a fucking disaster. All they had to do was downgrade the lovers to friends and let them seek comfort from each other.

Now, there was one broken heart and one shattered one. Zera didn't want to be down an analyst, but it was inevitable. She had already lost a mechanic.

If Worro went anywhere near Hever, things would hit the fan, and her entire R&D department would be out of practical application. That was missing what had been a strong financial arm.

Zera made a call, and she knew it was going to cost her.

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Keera woke in Worro's arms, where they were sleeping on the couch, and she jolted as the knock on the door repeated.

Worro unwrapped himself from her and walked to the door, scowling. "What?"

"Oh, good. You are together. This will be easier, then." The woman, made of silvery shadows, walked in and took a seat at the kitchen table.

Keera felt so much familiarity with the woman. "Do I know you?"

"I am four years younger than you and have been trying to push you into places you need to be since we were little, Keeks." The shadows flared and flickered. "I was the second important person to leave your life. Our mother left first when I arrived."

"Cloud?"

"Yes, darling. Now, Zera called me to help you two. Mistakes were made all the way along this disaster, but if you and Worro would like, I can smooth the edges of the hurt. Basically, it will share your emotions on either side, and you will each see through the other's eyes."

Worro blinked. "Keera? I will if you will."

Keera rubbed her face. "What? Sure."

"Great, this is best done with a sleeping mind and an empty stomach. Sit down." Cloud turned her smoky tendrils around and said, "Yeah. Either side of me, hold

hands. I don't need you to touch me. I do all the work."

Keera asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because Zera called me and paid me a shit ton of money. And there is no better minder than me." Cloud chuckled. "I am very good at what I do. I am very angry that they didn't call me when you were attacked, but that was then, and this is now."

The tendrils turned from Keera to Worro. "Are you both sure that you want the other, but only the circumstances are in the way?"

Keera looked to Worro, and he reached his hands to her. "Yeah, we are."

"Cool. Invite me to the wedding. I like cake." Cloud chuckled and then sobered.

"I am going to walk you through the situation and the treatment. This is not what I would normally engage in, but it is what it is. We are going to go through your lives, and at any and every stress point, you are allowed to comfort and support each other. Every. Stress point."

Keera blinked. "Oh." She watched as Cloud's tendrils rose in the air, shifting and moving, pointing at them in a deadly display.

Worro nodded. "I want to be there, even if I couldn't be."

Keera looked at him and nodded. "Me, too."

"Well, then, let's get you two under before my ex shows up." Cloud chuckled. The tendrils became mist.

Keera felt wrapped in supportive warmth, and Worro's gaze was on hers. They were

wrapped in mist, and then they were falling. She held Worro's hands as they fell into the past. He was with her this time, and they started at the beginning.

* * * *

Cloud got up and made herself some coffee. They were going all the way back to the underwater cavern where Keera had been born and her mother had been contained.

They went through all of it, including the Hyreno male who fathered Cloud, coming in one day and never again.

Cloud still had to beat the hell out of him.

He was on her list, but first, Keera had to get stable.

She was dangerous now, and Worro was depressed.

Zera was right to have called her in, but she still owed Cloud one in addition to the half a million that she was charging the head of Z-Corp.

Cloud remained with them for the hours that it took for them to work through their traumas together. They had been there for every stressful moment in their partner's life, knowing they couldn't fix it, but they could be there.

She had a fresh pot of coffee, water, lemonade, and some hot chocolate for them. They were going to need fluids, and she wanted to be ready.

Keera slowly sat up and blinked, tears flowed, and Worro did the same. They walked around the table and came together.

Cloud smiled and kept her mist around her. "Right. You need to hydrate."

Worro nodded and kept rubbing Keera's back. "We will. In a minute."

Keera chuckled and held on.

Cloud knew what Worro had done. Instead of railing or shouting when the attack came, he knelt next to her, counting the minutes until he would be at her side. He saw his actions through her eyes and understood that in that moment, she needed him, not his rage.

Cloud nodded. They were good together. Keera now understood that Worro had been going through rut, and since she wasn't there to help him, he had been forced to seek partners for a single encounter. One per year.

The fact that he identified those moments as points of stress indicated that they were not completely voluntary.

He was a good match for Keera, but they had been complicated by circumstance.

Now they were both on the same page and super supportive of each other.

It was sweet. The little tidbit that he had had a vasectomy after his breakdown had helped.

"I am not leaving your side again."

"Dude, I pee alone. Respect the privacy." She mumbled it against his chest.

He chuckled and leaned back to have a chance to kiss her. She smiled, and their lips met.

Cloud remained with her coffee and slowly pulled the dreaming away from them. It

was easy. They found reality far more enticing than memory. It was nice to see.

Cloud said softly, “You can make out all you like when I am gone. It is still Sunday, and you have the whole day to play with each other. Wait. That sounded wrong.”

They chuckled and smiled at her, in perfect sync for that moment.

Keera said softly, “Are you going to disappear again?”

“Not for a while. I just have to dodge my ex, and all is going to be well.”

Keera stared at her. “You have an ex?”

“Yeah. I am twenty-six, Keeks. I am capable of making my own bad decisions.” She kept her concealing mist around her.

Keera smiled and said, “What is with the beverage buffet?”

“I have to make sure that I didn’t knock out your swallowing reflex.

Both of you. Pick something and drink.” She waited, and they obediently grabbed a beverage and drank.

When they had swallowed and looked at each other in relief, Cloud cackled.

“You guys were in there for four hours. You were dehydrated. Yeesh. You are gullible. Have a good day.”

Cloud turned toward the door and was surprised by Keera’s hug. Keera was surprised as well. She let go like Cloud was on fire.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, well, he’s an ex for a reason. I have unblocked my name from your com. Call when you like.” Cloud patted Keera’s cheek but kept her shadows around her.

She sighed happily and left, knowing all was right for that moment. She got onto her own cycle and revved the engine, put on her helmet, and kept her cloud around her body as she drove back to the city.

* * * *

Keera blinked at what she had felt. Cloud was hiding it, so she didn’t want to tell Worro what she had hugged.

“Are you all right?”

Keera smiled and walked back into his arms. “I am fine. She... I haven’t seen her since after the accident. She was on one of my therapy teams. I hadn’t seen her for twelve years before that.”

“She’s powerful.”

“Yes. Our mother was powerful as well, but she died alone with a baby in her arms and four-year old me at her side.”

“What did you do?”

“I turned into a mermaid from one of my mom’s books, and I swam to a nearby island and got formula and bottles. Mom had told me what was needed, and I took care of her.”

He blinked. “Right. I saw that. You helped her walk, swim, and she’s full Hyreno?”

“Yes. Well, she looks like our mother.”

“Who do you look like?”

“Our father. Yes, same guy twice.”

“Damn. Hyreno?”

“Yes. His body was purple with blue striping.”

“And your mother tried to get away from him.”

She shivered. “Yes. She ordered me to hide.”

“Cloud knows who he is?”

“Yes, she and Mom had a mind link. Everything Mom knew, Cloud knew.”

“A heavy weight for a child.”

“Yes.” She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. “So, do you want to grab something to drink and go sit on the swing?”

Worro nodded. “That sounds like just the thing. How wide is the swing again?”

“I am not ready for much more, Worro.”

“I know, but feeling you sleeping next to me was enough to satisfy my need for contact. So, can I entice you to come live at my place? You can sit on a workbench

and analyze the cost expenditures for my materials.”

She smiled. “You shape things with your fingers.”

“Yes, I do. I also remember where the important things are.”

Keera laughed. “I am sure my family will be delighted to hear it.”

“I will have to make your brother something special for the holiday. How old is he now?”

“Ten and a bit.”

“Fun age.”

“Hever’s going to make him a voice-activated robot.”

He laughed. “So, the bar is pretty high.”

“You could help sculpt it into something more aesthetic.”

“So can Krix.”

“Good point. We will have to brainstorm some ideas.”

She smiled. “I am good for that.”

“Maybe dinner, tomorrow after work?”

“Yup, but for now, a nap with hot cocoa as we watch the waves.”

He nodded. “You bring the hot cocoa; I am going to make some alterations out there.”

She chuckled and followed him, watching as he took the chairs, changed their shape, and created a low mattress out of the cushions. He pulled one edge up so they could sit on the couch and see the ocean.

He smiled. “Good enough?”

“It’s lovely.”

He took the cocoa, lifted her, and set her down so he had enough room to curl around her.

She laughed as one of his dark-red locks slid over her shoulder, but their heartbeats synced again.

It felt so right that she sniffled a little, and he grabbed the hot cocoa, finding the one with the most marshmallows and giving it to her.

She grinned. “You remembered.”

“You like things sweet enough to hurt my teeth.”

She sipped at the sweet sludge at the top of the drink before she put it down and turned in his arms. “So, do you think this hurts your teeth?”

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She slid her arms around his neck and kissed him. He smiled, and they continued the kiss while the sun blazed on the cool day. It wasn't back the way it was, but they had the chance to build something on the rubble of their past.

Cloud had given them the new foundation.

* * * *

From her office in the Z-Corp building, she called her employer. "Hey, Zera. We are good. They wanted to be together, wanted to comfort each other, and now they are spending the day cuddling together."

She rubbed the side of her belly where her son was kicking up a storm.

"So, they are both in the present? "

"In the present and planning a future together. It is so sweet."

"Why aren't you more involved in her life? "

"She needed to go her way, and I had to go mine. I still love her, if that is what you are asking."

Zera murmured, "I wondered, considering the cost. "

"Ah, it is particularly taxing to do what I did today. I had to pull both of them in together and hold them in the same moments. That isn't easy." She didn't mention

that she was saving for an education fund.

“ Have you been watching the international requests? ”

“No, I was busy today.”

“ Well, just as you left, the prefect got an admittance request for a dream master. They don’t generally leave their library. ”

“How peculiar. I didn’t know they knew how to read a map.”

Zera huffed. “ Cloud, do you know why a dream master would be in Aksalla? ”

“Nope. Ask them. The last one I knew should be married and tied down by now. I mean, if he’s into that sort of thing.”

Zera frowned. “ Do they get married? ”

“Oh, sure. Ancient bloodlines and all that crap. No deviation from the plan is tolerated.” She continued making session notes from her visit with her sister and Worro.

“ Sounds unpleasant. Have you been to the library? ”

“Yes. I went when I was a teen.”

“ When did you leave? ”

“Six years ago.”

“ Have you visited recently? ” Zera was driving right toward the very obvious secret.

“Yes, about seven months ago. It was a friend’s wedding, so I was there to celebrate.”

“ How hard did you celebrate? ”

“Just ask the fucking question, Zera?”

“ Are you pregnant? ”

“Yes.”

“ How long? ”

“Six months.”

“ Shit. I had hoped he was wrong. Stay where you are. We are coming down. ”

“He’s here?”

“ Yes. Sorry. ”

“Don’t be sorry. This is my home, and he’s getting married to someone else. I have no regrets.” She calmly completed the notes regarding her morning, and by the time she was done, Zera was in the doorway with her ex and Sgoth. He seemed to have been selected as an escort or guard or something.

“Romar, what takes you out of the library?” She glanced up and kept working.

“Cloud. Why did you leave?”

“Your mother struck me in the face, called me a whore, and told me that you were marrying the woman of their choosing, and then that woman stepped forward and

called me a whore. It was a banner day for me.”

Romar swallowed. “My mother wishes to apologize.”

“Good for her. It is always a sign of growth that she can admit her wrong. I am sorry if I missed the blessed event. I can still send a gift, I suppose.”

“I am not marrying Hilian.”

“Oh, she seems like a lovely girl with a delightful turn of phrase. Give her another chance.”

“Would you stop working and look at me?”

“Nope. That costs extra. Would you care to pay for a session?” She flicked a glance at his dark and roiling countenance.

Zera inhaled, and Sgoth hissed.

“What are your rates?”

“For normal consults and talk therapy, four hundred per hour. For what you have in mind, two hundred thousand.”

He blinked. “That’s a little steep.”

“I am a single woman collecting an education fund. I know what I am worth.” She shrugged. “Take it or leave it, monster.”

Romar smiled. “I will take it.”

Zera told him where to send the funds.

When the payment came through, she looked away from her terminal and said to Romar, “Please have a seat in my consulting room. Everybody else has to stay out.”

She waited until he was past her, and then she stood up and followed him. Her body showed her occupant as she walked, and Zera gasped, “How did I never see that?”

The mist wrapped around her and camouflaged her body.

Sgoth paused. “That would do it.”

Cloud walked into her consulting room and took a seat in the chair while Romar sat on the couch. She looked at him. “So, why have you come this way?”

“You left.”

“I left quite a while ago. Why are you here now?”

“I didn’t know what had transpired at the wedding until my sister mentioned it. She was very smug about Mother successfully driving you off.”

“Your sister doesn’t like me. Your mother doesn’t like me, and that other lady hates me.”

“You could have told me when I returned. You could have waited.”

“And how long would I have to deal with the hostility. I stayed a week, and you didn’t return, so off I went. I know when I am not wanted.”

“Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That you were pregnant.” His shadows moved around him slowly.

“Nope. I was just highly agitated and tired of letting people shout whore at me. We were both adults and entered into that situation, and then you left me to deal with your family, and they hated my guts. So, I left, and they probably had a celebration. Your fiancée definitely did. You could have mentioned her at any point.”

He looked at her and sighed. “She was important. She was my family’s decision. You were mine.”

“Well, Dream Master Romar, my child and I are fine here.” She sighed and pressed her bump.

“Will you touch your mind to share your experiences?”

She nodded. “That’s why we are here, after all. Your nannies are nervous.”

He snorted, and his shadows moved toward her, so she reached back. He was precise as he analyzed her experiences, and she felt his hand resting on her belly. When he receded, he nodded. “You are telling the truth.”

“Have you known me to do anything else?”

He stroked her cheek. “Just the once.”

She blushed. “Well, I wasn’t sure that I was in need.”

“Your body was on fire. How could it be anything else?” He trailed his fingers over her jaw and neck. “It is a boy?”

“Yes. He joins me in the dreaming now.”

He froze. “He does what?”

“You heard me. When I am in the dreaming, he is with me.”

“Oh, that is unusual. Will you come back to the library?”

“No. It isn’t safe for me there. My birth sister is here. I just have to run one errand in Hyreno, and I will settle back here.”

“What is the errand?”

“I have to break my father’s nose, arms, and legs. Being unwieldy myself, I can only imagine the terror my mother must have gone through. I have a request filed to visit the city and speak with the king, his queen, and their adviser. It should be done by the end of the week.”

Romar’s hand hesitated near her belly. She could feel the heat.

“May I?”

She nodded.

His hand touched her belly cautiously, and there was a solid thud to his palm. His icy gaze flicked to hers. “He’s strong.”

She winced. “Very. He also knows you are big on proof.”

“I want you to come home with me.”

“No. It isn’t safe. I am safe here. You can visit as you like, but I am not going to be anywhere your family is.

I am less and less able to defend myself.

I am not putting myself into a position where I am unwieldy and they will attack.

They had started with tripping me and salting my food, but they have had time to think on it. ”

“Yes, I saw it. Will you be all right here if I go for a few days?”

She laughed. “Of course. Why?”

“I need to speak to the prefect.”

“Right. Well, have a nice day. I will let you know when I deliver.”

He chuckled. “He will also let me know when he is here.”

Romar leaned in to kiss her, but she backed up. He wasn’t going to weaken her resolve. “No. You lost that right when you didn’t tell me you had a fiancée. I don’t tread where others will walk, and you made me into a mistress instead of a lover. I don’t know if I will ever forgive you for that.”

He frowned, and his shadows flickered. “I understand. Please excuse me.”

He left, and she walked out after him with a practiced, calm expression.

He nodded, and Sgoth led him out of the building.

Cloud walked to her desk and wrote the session notes.

Zera sat near her. “So, the dream master is the baby’s father?”

“Yes. He neglected to tell me that he was engaged at the time, so I came to Aksalla, and now I make it my home.” She chuckled. “My sister works in the building, after all.”

“Sister? Who?”

Cloud looked away from her notes. “Keera. You knew that, didn’t you?”

“Uh, no. Or maybe I did. Things get blurry around you. So, he lied to you?”

“He thinks of it as a simple omission. I consider it a betrayal.”

“Ouch. So, what’s your schedule like?”

“I have next week off. I am going to see some family for the first time.”

“Does the dream master know?”

“Nope. None of his business.” She glanced at Zera. “I have done a long-range analysis of Hever and Krix. They are both stable for a date, and you can allow them to do it without the masks.”

“Why? There will be an emotional tie.”

“Those two are so knitted to each other, it isn’t funny. He was just starting with eagerness and no education. Things weren’t as good as he could get them. Sgoth helped him do research, and I believe things will be better now.”

“How did you do that?”

“Oh, I went through Keera and got to Hever. She’s easy to check, and she is very attached to Krix. Outside of a heat, I don’t think she would even consider another alpha. And once they have actually bonded, they are going to lock in and be steady. I think they will make really cute kids.”

Zera snorted. “That isn’t a huge concern.”

“It is very much on my mind right now. Keera and Worro are cuddling their brains out today, and I can see all kinds of plans in your mind for Veradil. She has a suitor?”

“Yes. I had no idea that you could read surface thoughts.”

“I was reading thoughts before I left the womb. I just am not interested in other beings. Just me and mine. I am very insular.”

“Cloud, do you think Keera will want to be involved in your child’s life?”

“Oh, yes, I just have a few things to do first.” She scrolled through her correspondence and grinned. “Excellent. I am going to Hyreno.” She smiled. “Well, I have to go pack. I travel in the morning. I will be back on Wednesday.”

“Are you going alone?”

“No, my assistant is coming with me. She has family there. She’ll get me out if I do something stupid.”

Zera blinked. “I didn’t authorize that.”

“We rent from you; we don’t work for you unless contracted. If you want to break

our lease, you are welcome to try.” Cloud smirked. “Yahtana works for me.”

“She has a no-Hyreno dating policy.”

“Yeah, she stands out among her own people, and some of them don’t care for it.” Cloud smiled. “But she will keep me and mine safe. She’s also a delightful person to have around.”

Zera blinked. “I see. And I see she has suspended her account for a few days.”

“Aw. She moonlights? Nice.” Cloud laughed.

“You didn’t know?”

“Of course I knew. She ran it past me first. I hear about all her dates in the vaguest of terms. No confidentiality is ever broken.”

“She shouldn’t have told you.”

“She had to. We share a residence. She’s my roomie.” Cloud laughed.

“That isn’t in her file.”

“I believe you will find it is. I am her next of kin and emergency contact.”

Zera stared at her display. “How did I miss that?”

“You weren’t looking for it.”

“Does Keera know?”

“Nope. I am going to tell her next week.”

“Why?”

“Because the problem will be solved or it won’t. Either way, I need a few days.”

Zera sighed. “It was so much easier when we were in the capitol. Now, the escorts aren’t as desperate for sex, and they are more interested in finding a partner.”

“So? Expand again and make a matchmaking service. Three dates, no sex, and there you go. They can at least meet other actives they would have difficulty killing.”

“So, what’s between you in the dream master?”

“Nothing. My body called, he answered, and then I found out he had a fiancée.” She drummed her fingers on her belly. “So, that was that.”

Zera blinked. “Right. That was it?”

“Oh, his family fucking hates me, so I can’t set foot in the great library without risking me or the baby. And I will not risk my baby.”

“Right. Well, let me know if I can do anything.”

“Don’t give Yahtana trouble for her absence from your little project for a few days.”

“Fine, but I don’t like my escorts to risk themselves, especially if they are as popular as Yahtana.”

“Fair enough. She is one of a kind.”

The woman in question came in the door. “Come on, preggo. We need to get you home and get you packed. The car is waiting.”

Zera blinked. “You are going to Hyreno? I thought you hated them.”

“I do and I don’t. My grandma keeps trying to hook me up with city-based Hyreno, and I don’t want to live there. I like living where I can get a tan, and when I want to go for a snack, I can just go. No wading through kelp. Bleah.”

“Wait. You are a Hyreno, and you don’t like kelp?”

“Yes. Also, not crazy about fish. Do you understand now?”

Zera blinked. “Yeah, I think I do. Well, have a nice trip.”

Cloud looked at Yahtana, and they closed up the office while laughing softly. It was going to be the trip of a lifetime.

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Hever looked at the request for a date and paused. It was Krix, and he was requesting a mask-free date at the holiday market. After getting confirmation from management, Hever agreed.

That night, she was going to see the holiday lights with Krix. She had two hours to get dressed for a night of walking from kiosk to kiosk and drinking hot cocoa as they had an actual date with the option to extend it to a hotel stay.

Hever had to admit, she was excited. This was different from the other dates he had invited her on.

Her mother saw her expression at the table and said, “Going on a date?”

“Yeah. Have you made up your mind about going for coffee with that fella?”

Veradil blushed. “He’s a strong active, and I only influence truth. I don’t really see what he could want with me.”

“Aw, Nautilus is a really fun guy. If he’s in town, give him a chance. You never know unless you try, and I already know you don’t mind tentacles.”

Her mother turned crimson, and Hever laughed. “Sorry, that was a little blunt, but my mind is in the gutter. I am going on an actual date, and I am probably going to jump him at the end of it.”

“Wow. You know that already?”

“My heat is a few days away, so yeah. I can either use another nullifier or my bracelets at work, but for tonight, I just want to feel.”

Her mother blinked. “You can just admit that?”

“Yes. There is no reason to pretend. Pretending just gets you frustrated and irritated. It accomplishes nothing. You are currently either retired or between assignments, and you aren’t dead yet. Find some happiness. I remember him. He would probably feel nice and secure to cuddle up to.”

“I... hate to ask this, but you seem comfortable around actives. Could you call him for me?”

Hever grinned. “I’ve got time. Do you want me to do it privately or so you can eavesdrop?”

“I will be here and quiet.”

“Fine.” She went through the secure archive and called Nautilus’s code.

It took under a minute, and then the cheerful man, with bronze skin and black hair, was looking at her with his bright aqua eyes.

“ Good afternoon. ”

“Hello, sir. I am Hever. Veradil’s daughter.”

He immediately smiled softly. “ Calling to check me out?”

“Yup. What are your intentions toward my rather shy mom?”

He paused. “ I would like to offer her companionship with the possibility of partnership on a permanent basis. ”

“Uh-huh. And how many times a week would you try and render her legless? Inquiring minds want to know?”

His eyes narrowed, and he grinned. “ That would be between the good lady and myself, but I remember the feel of her hand against mine and am eager to determine whether the rest of her matches the creamy silk.”

Hever didn't look at her mom, but she could feel the jaw open. “Is her lack of practice a hindrance?”

“ No, I have waited nearly twenty years for her. I can wait longer. I know where all the cold currents are .”

“Is her lack of gills a problem?”

“ No. I can breathe for her if needed .”

“So, if I offer you the ability to date my mom, can I go to your island on vacation?”

He grinned. “ Yes. If she is here, you are always welcome. ”

“What if she has to continue her ambassadorial work for Aksalla?”

“ I can accompany her as her security. ”

She grinned. “Fine. I give you permission to date my mom, and she's still young enough that children aren't out of the question if you are feeling particularly limber. It takes two to catch a toddler.”

Veradil gasped, “Hever!”

He grinned. “ She’s right there .”

“She is.” She rattled off her mother’s direct com and said, “You two can talk directly. I have to head into town for a date.”

“Thank you for interceding. ” Nautilus was calm but sincere.

“Good. Talk amongst yourselves. Bye, Dad!” She ended the call on his laugh. He was only twelve years older than she was, but he wore it well. He was also twice as broad as Krix, but the maker was definitely more her speed.

Veradil was staring at her and said, “I can’t believe you said that.”

“What? I didn’t mention tentacles, going deep, or any of the other nautical puns that were in my head. You might want to answer that.”

Veradil’s com was alerting.

She blushed but answered, and Nautilus—who probably had a normal name—introduced himself, and Hever left the room after giving her mother a thumbs-up that made Veradil giggle.

Hever had her mother’s driver take her to Z-Corp, and from there, she gave herself a makeover.

It took over an hour, but she was soon dressed in a pretty wrapped dress that flowed and fluttered as she moved.

She wore boots with three-inch heels, and the dress had been fitted for her wings.

She felt pretty, but she put the cloak he had made for her over her shoulders.

She checked her mailbox, and to her astonishment, there was a gift box in it.

Hever opened the box with shaking hands, and she gasped when she pulled out the small ornament of her with wings.

The date recorded on the tag had read before the wings had even been possible.

He had gotten Worro to find them, and for that alone, she owed him more than she could say.

She held the ornament up, and there she was, reaching for the stars, her wings curved wide. She smiled and put the ornament back in her locker. She would get it on her way home.

Her warning chime told her it was time to meet him, but he was meeting her down the road at the market, so she took an automated car to the market, having learned from Hera's attack. Krix came to the car, and she exited, placing her hand in his.

He smiled. "You are wearing the cloak."

"I like it."

He smiled and offered his arm. "So, do we want to start with chocolate or the fancy marshmallows?"

She grinned. "Cocoa. I have plans for the marshmallows later."

"Do you?"

“I absolutely do.” She chuckled.

“Have you been having fun this weekend?”

“Yeah, time with family is always worth doing. As are mani-pedis.”

He smiled as they walked to the lights and bustle of the holiday market.

“So, what does your family do for the holidays?”

“My mother decorates. My father reaches the high parts of the house for her.”

“Oh, right. Both parents.”

“They will enjoy meeting you.”

“Will they? I hadn’t actually thought that far.”

“We will have dinner by the end of the week.” He chuckled. “My mother is in a flap about picking the right day. She’s hooked on selecting the best day.”

“Wait. She knows about me?”

“Yes. You made the news when they took you. My carrying you back was noticed.”

“Ah. Right. Ambassador’s daughter.”

“Prefect’s niece was the tagline.”

“Ah. Right.” She curled her hand around his arm and pressed her breast against his elbow.

He smiled. “Are you doing that on purpose?”

“Tall shoes. Wings are all warm and snuggly.”

He grinned. “Suddenly, I feel taller.”

“I haven’t ever seen you in casual clothing before. It looks good on you.”

He was wearing a pair of black slacks, shiny black shoes, a belted tunic that had gold trim, and it fit snugly over his chest. Sethir formal.

“So, you default to Sethir fancy dress?” She smiled.

“Yes. It’s what I grew up wearing for serious occasions.”

“This is serious?”

Krix nodded. “It is.”

“Okay. Serious mode activated.”

“Good. We are going to have some serious hot chocolate, listen to some serious music, maybe some serious dancing, get some serious marshmallows, and then spend some serious time at the hotel. Reservations are in place.”

Hever sighed. “I love a plan. Is there room for more snacks? I am a fan of all things deep fried.”

He laughed. “Then, you shall have it. Do you have any shopping left to do?”

“Oh, damn. Now I’m hot.” She exhaled slowly.

“Down girl.” He laughed. He looked happy. His eyes were twinkling.

“Well, not here, but if you find a quiet alley...”

He laughed, and they went straight for the hot chocolate. It was the beginning of a spectacular date.

She gasped and clutched at the chain that the cuffs he had fashioned were attached to.

His mouth moved on her ceaselessly, and she moaned and rolled her hips against his mouth.

He gripped her thighs and held her as the slow licks and curls around her clit sent her into whining and panting before a final sob and shudder heralded her orgasm.

It was her third since they got into the room, and he didn't seem to be stopping.

She was gasping as her warm body felt full of warm syrup. Her wings were nestled against the sheets, and she had to ask, “Okay, who are you, and what did you do to Krix?”

He lifted his head and kissed her belly before nibbling and sucking at her breasts on the way to her mouth. The kiss was something she was able to meet, and she wrapped her legs around him.

He smiled against her mouth, and when he whispered, “I was encouraged to catch up on missed classes, so I did some research. I am sorry our first dates were so hurried, but I couldn't believe you said yes.”

She shivered at the feel of him against her. “The cuffs?” She wiggled her fingers in the wide, comfortable restraint.

“When you touch me, I lose it. I black out, and getting inside you is the most important thing in the world. My body aches, my knot hurts, and it is over quickly after that.”

She arched against him. “My sympathies.”

“You, love, are the cause and the cure.”

She blinked rapidly. Love . Only Veradil had ever told her she was loved. She was liked, respected, but love was a step too far.

She leaned up to catch his mouth in a kiss, and he obliged for a seething few minutes until she was sweaty and twisting under him.

He leaned back, and his eyes glowed. “So, Hever, are you coming into a heat?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“Best present ever. How long does it last?”

“That depends on you.” She stroked her foot up the back of his leg, up to his thigh.

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He groaned and murmured something she didn't hear, but he angled his erection to enter her, and she closed her eyes and focused on the thick slide of him inside her. He went to the edge of his knot and then retreated. He eased forward again, and she stopped thinking.

He fucked her slowly, and when she was clawing at him, he groaned and sank into her, his knot widened her, and then he locked in place as it swelled even more.

Krix moved his hand between them, and he rubbed his thumb against her clit until she felt a hot rush inside her again, and she twitched after the orgasm.

She came to herself and stared up at him.

He smiled down at her. "Not this time, but do you want kids?"

She was pinned to him, but he seemed chatty, so she answered. "Yes. I am content to be an aunt if needed but do want a family eventually. Work is going to be nuts, now that Desmond is gone."

He smiled. "I am an only child, so my parents are watching me closely."

"My mom has siblings, and they all have kids, and all want kids and more kids." She smiled.

"My mom was underpowered compared to the other members of her family, but she was strong and good at her job. She's always wanted more direct family than me, and I would love to see the look in her eyes as a grandma for the first time.

She would finally be able to stand with her siblings with her head high.

There's a lot of subtle classism there. They love her, but she's the one who only knows truth. She can't punch through a wall."

"She's never been married?"

"Um, no, but we are working on it."

He grinned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, a few years ago, when I was still a minor, Mom and I had to put in for repairs at an island. The local defender was smitten with her, and they spent time together. Nothing went beyond flirtation, but he's still interested, and so is she, so.

.. they are going on a date." It was weird to have this conversation while impaired and locked, but Krix was asking.

"Who is the defender?"

She started laughing, and then gasped as her movements tugged things. "Um, Nautilus."

Krix froze. "Nautilus?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Okay. He's a solid guy."

She snickered. "Yeah, he and I have chatted, and I gave him full authorization to date my mom. He called her immediately."

She smiled. “Mom looked equal parts happy and appalled at my attitude. But she really liked him back then, and I already planted the seed that she’s not too old to have kids if he’s spry.”

Krix stared at her. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, I did. And when I disconnected, I called him Dad. So, I think he knows I am in favour of the connection.”

“That was very obvious.”

“I was raised by someone who can force truth. It is just easier. It also makes me a dangerous hostage. I tell folks whatever they ask.”

“I see. So, you need watching.”

“Naw, I need a rescuer. I do a lot of stupid stuff.”

He chuckled. “I can help you there, as long as you call me when something happens.”

“Yup. Zera can even give you the frequency for my panic implant. That’s what notified her the first time.”

“That is why she had your location.”

“Yeah. Betcha can’t tell I had implants.”

He snorted and pressed his forehead to hers. “I can’t, and I was really looking.”

Krix began to rock slowly against her, and the gentle motion caused a wild swirling of sensation to move through her. He smiled. “You shift from appearance to

appearance when I am inside you.”

She gasped and clutched at him. “I am trying to figure out the best fit. It’s all the same.”

“I can feel the differences, but as long as it’s you, I don’t care which skin you wear.”

She wanted to say something witty, but she arched and clutched at him, holding tight as her throat made a small choking sound.

Every nerve in her body lit up, and heat raced through her.

It was a new orgasm that heated her skin from scalp to toes.

He continued that slow rock until, finally, she shuddered and whined.

He leaned in and licked sweat from her neck.

She could feel his smile against her skin. She croaked. “Be smug, you deserve it.”

He laughed softly. “Not smug, just happy.”

“When did you get rid of the cuffs?”

“At the moment I wanted you holding me, which is as soon as I am inside you.” He smiled. “The timing is vague.”

“I thought you were gonna bite.”

He shook his head. “Don’t need to. You bit me on our second date.”

Hever blinked. “I did?”

“Yeah. That is when I knew that we were a match.” He smiled and kissed her softly.

She held him and stroked his neck. He rolled them to his back, and she opened her wings, drying the sweat that had built up.

Krix grinned. “Did they get squished?”

“Nope, just sweaty.”

He laughed. He ran his hands up and down her waist and ribs. “I think I am going to remember this moment forever.”

She smiled. “The date?”

“You astride me, your wings up and out, and fireworks happening outside the window. Best. Holidays. Ever.” He smiled and stroked her breast. “If life is a series of moments, this is one I want to keep in my mind.”

She chuckled. “It is going to be a problem when you go up against psychics.”

He grinned. “It will certainly be distracting.”

She laughed and shook her head. “My naked, knotted body isn’t an offensive weapon.”

“Don’t forget your wings.” He chuckled. “Your wings are very hot.”

She chuckled and ran her hands idly over his chest and belly. “Thank you. I really appreciate having them back, and once we are a little less entangled, I will show you

how appreciative I can be.”

He grinned. “I look forward to it. Really. But, first, I think we can separate and have some room service.”

“Uh-huh. Are you still vasectomized?”

He nodded with a frown. “Yes. Why?”

“Good. They had to remove my birth control after the explosion. Well, my body ejected them during healing. Foreign bodies and all. So, I am depending on you to shoot blanks for a while.”

“I can do that.” He grinned.

His knot relaxed, and she sighed in relief and eased away. She folded her wings in and stood up, stretching. She walked to the window and watched the lights and celebrations happening down below.

“Hever?”

“Hm?”

He laughed. “Hever, turn around.”

She turned, and he was kneeling, naked, with his green hair ruffled and a ring box open in his palm.

“Hever, will you marry me?”

She cocked her head. “Um, I would, but I am under contract.”

He grinned. "I have a union waiver from Zera. If I book my wife's time, you have to drop what you are doing and go out on a date with me."

"If I accept it."

"I get priority override."

She smiled. "Are you serious?"

"When it comes to you, yes."

"What does your family think?"

"Mom is going nuts getting ready for you and your mom to come over for a chat as to how large the wedding will be."

"Oh. That is odd. I hadn't thought of that. Mom will go nuts. We know a lot of people."

"It doesn't matter. Might need to find a wedding planner and a venue. Doesn't matter how big."

"Yeah, that's what all the boys think." She smiled.

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a yes. Yes, Krix. I will marry you."

He grinned. "Good. This ring is from my father's family, so it has a bajillion trackers in it."

She laughed as he slid the ring on her finger. She smiled and leaned down to kiss him, her wings balancing her.

He chuckled. "I am going to make an entire set of figurines with you and me and your wings, and we will leave them up every year until the children start to ask why you are persistently naked."

"Children?"

"I would like three if that matches your ideas."

"I think my mom would like three. I will try, but I might have to purchase an incubator." She pointed at herself. "Lab grown. No idea what my body would do."

"Right. Well, we can try. I am willing to try over and over again."

She laughed. "I am glad you are enthusiastic about the prospect. First, we wait to see if my mom can hook up with Nautilus, and then we can get that little procedure reversed. Oh, where do you want to live?"

"Well, my family has a place at the edge of the city."

"And there is my mom's estate. Sgoth lives down the road, so you can work out barbeques or baby tips or something. Though you can't use tentacles."

He laughed. "No, but I can make toys out of household objects."

"Great. If you can change diapers, you will be my favourite hero ever."

He got to his feet, and he closed his hand around the ring box, opening it to show her a coin with the image of him proposing to her, with her holding his hand. Both of

them were naked. He grinned. “This one is for me. It goes into my uniform.”

She blushed. “The guys are going to nag you about it.”

“Don’t care. If they get on your nerves about it, let me know.”

She smiled and turned to her black scales. Her wings framed her, and the only bright spot on her body was his ring. “I may have to take it off when I work.”

He grinned. “I will get you a necklace to string it on.”

“Deal. Back on your hands.”

He leaned back, and she slid down his body, straddling his hips until his cock was nudging at her entrance again. He looked startled as she slowly sheathed him.

“Let me guess, this was not on the video?” She nipped his shoulder.

He let out a strangled, “No.”

“Then, we learn together.”

She moved herself on him, rising and falling slowly, and they both learned something. But Krix learned about carpet burn.

Hever arrived home with her gentleman caller, and the house was empty. She pulled Krix to her room before dawn, and they cuddled together until she had to get up for work and go.

She sighed and kissed him to ease the sting when she said, “I have to get to work.”

“No. Stay.”

She laughed. “No. My department is down by half, and I have to figure out what is needed versus what is wanted.”

Krix sat up and bent his knees. “I could help.”

“I need a shaper, not a maker.”

“Ah. I know one. She works in your building, too, but I think she’s a clerk.”

“But she’s a shaper?”

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“She’s a mechanic. She’s also a metabolic. It’s a necessary evolution for her.”

“Can you ask her if she will report to R&D this morning?”

“Sure. She’s a friend of my cousin, if it matters.”

She grinned. “Thank you. Shower?”

He laughed. “Yes. That would be nice, but then I need a hug so I can carry you with me all day. Chocolate and honey, mm.”

“Sure. I can see that confusing your opponents.”

He laughed. “I have to spar with Sgoth today. It might mess him up a bit.”

“You smelling like a female? Yeah, or he will give you congratulations and pointers on keeping me happy.” She smiled. “He and Jeneev are adorable.”

“She’s an excellent trainer.”

“I know.” She smiled. “I make suits for some of your team members. They talk.”

“Do you work with Sgoth?”

“Sometimes. He needs a lot of very specific fabrics when he needs a new suit.”

“Wait. Did you make my suit?”

“I did.”

“Why those colours?”

She ran her hand through his hair. “I like the holidays. They make me smile. My first year here, Veradil brought me to the square every night of the holiday festivals. I saw light, love, laughter, and joy. She formally adopted me on the solstice. It’s always a special night for me.

It’s the day I legally joined the family, but I had been hers since she first held me as I was hauled out of the sea. ”

He blinked. “You dressed me in the colours you like?”

She nodded. “Yes. I can change them. You would look nice in black and grey as well.”

He kissed her softly. “Dress me in any colour you want. If it is paisley, I will know I fucked up.”

Hever laughed. “Thanks for building in a clue.”

They got up and headed to the shower. Hever tried to think about what she wanted for breakfast, but she kept getting distracted.

Once they were dry and dressed, they walked downstairs with the ring on her finger feeling odd but not unwelcome.

Hever walked with him to the kitchen, and she froze and grinned as she came around the corner to see Nautilus leaning into Veradil, pinning her to the counter. Hever’s mother was wearing a robe and nothing else.

“Hey, Mom. Sorry. I got a late start. You know Krix. Morning, Nautilus.”

The huge islander grinned. “Ah, my daughter. You are looking well.”

Veradil hissed and smacked him.

He chuckled and lifted her in his arms. He moved to the table, and the chair creaked as he settled. “You need sturdier chairs, sweet.”

Veradil looked to Hever. “Can you pretend you didn’t see this?”

“Nope. Krix and I are trying to figure out where to live now that he’s trying to make an honest woman of me.” She shrugged. “Or whatever I am.”

Krix nodded and headed to make coffee. “You are a woman. I checked.”

Nautilus snorted.

Veradil paused. “You will live here.”

“Mom, I am guessing that your robe beat me here by about two minutes.”

Nautilus grinned.

Her mother huffed. “Fine. Live in the guesthouse.”

“Nice.” She looked at Krix. “Five bedrooms.”

“Plenty of space. Thank you, Ambassador.”

Veradil finally clocked her ring. “Wait. You are getting married?”

“Yup. Not one of those dibs’ situations that the more active actives have. I go to work, I work, I go home. We don’t play any games that can’t be negotiated later.” She grinned, “Plus, I am three women in one. What’s not to like?”

Krix laughed. “I proposed, and she said yes. Now we have to plan a wedding. My mother will be inviting you over for dinner so that the two families can meet.”

Veradil blinked. “Married? My little girl?”

Hever walked over and took her mom’s hand. “Married. Krix will be on the hook for keeping me alive, or at least responsible for retrieving me if someone grabs me again.”

Nautilus smiled. “I can help.”

Veradil snorted. “I might need backup at Xelia’s place.”

Krix blinked. “You know my mother?”

Veradil nodded. “We are on a few charity boards together.”

He nodded. “Right.”

Hever chuckled. “Just be glad that Salmet isn’t at the door wanting to know what your security plan for me is. I can give you hints. Help me to fly and help me get my license.”

Krix nodded. “I can do that. I might ask Jeneev for help. Her brother has wings in a similar structure to yours.”

“Nice. Well, I am using your connections to help me get into a training situation.”

“Fine, but the first thing you have to do is to use your wings to do a pushup.”

Hever shrugged and dropped onto her arms, lowered herself to the kitchen floor, glanced up, and smiled. Her wings unfolded and pushed on either side of her shoulders, walking her to an upright position.

“Okay, so you have that already. They look so soft.”

“I can’t carry more than my own weight and maybe forty pounds. They aren’t cargo haulers.”

Krix smiled. “Good. A guy has to be good for something.”

Hever looked at her mother. “So, how do you feel about having another adult daughter or two? I know that my sister has mates, but she could always use a mom.”

“Mates? Plural?”

“Yeah, she is mated to Sarel and Vinul. Omega and tiger alpha, respectively.” She smiled. “Vinul is an Etir.”

“Oh. Nice. Wait. When did you meet her?”

“When she was born. When I was chunked into the pod for corpse storage, she had to go through life in the lab. She organized an escape for her and the littles, but she ended up in a group home. She got through life pretending to be human.”

“Hm. Does she have a name?”

“Leska. We are both genetically part Nelith and part Tirra’s dad.”

She smiled. “Ask her. If she wants family, I am in a very expansive mood.”

Hever nodded. “Okay, I will introduce myself to her this week. Today, I have to get back to work and start advertising for assistants.”

Veradil smiled. “Have breakfast and get to work. I will contact a wedding planner and let Salmet know what is going on.”

Hever grinned. “I would come in for a hug, but I know where all hands are right now, and you two seem perfectly comfortable. I will grab breakfast at the commissary.”

She grabbed Krix and hauled him out.

He laughed as they walked outside. “What was that?”

“Uh, I managed to see under the table, and there was a lot more going on than you could guess at on the surface. Mom’s still mid-sleepover.”

He grinned. “Let’s get you to Z-Corp. You have your pass?”

“Yup.”

He lifted her into his arms. “Let’s go.” He launched skyward, and then there was a heartbeat, and they were next to the building and lowering to the sidewalk.

“Can I see where you work?”

“Not today. I have to get to work right away, making sure that the requisition for replacement staff is filed. Desmond was an okay mechanic, but I liked that he could lift heavy objects. I definitely need someone in the heavy-hitter capacity, with an engineering background.”

“That’s a tricky fit.”

“Yup. I can only hope that the next staff is just as good as Desmond. He was a disappointment.”

“He sold your location to Uraddan scientists.”

“Yup. A disappointment.”

She smiled and kissed him. He returned the kiss, there on the sidewalk. “Did you want to grab breakfast in the commissary? I can get you a visitor’s badge.”

He snorted. “I don’t need one.”

“Oh. Right. Well? They do a great eggs-in-hollandaise. I believe we have burned sufficient calories.” She looped her arm through his, and they walked toward the building.

Breakfast with Krix, wearing his date clothes, was definitely one for the books.

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After a meeting with Zera, Hever spent the morning working on Desmond's desk, clearing up what the investigators had left behind.

She headed to lunch and came back to a seriously tall woman smiling and standing near her desk. "Hello, Ms. Hever."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Dex, and I have engineering skills, am a heavy-hitter, and a good conversationalist. My name is at the end of the list because I have been in the float pool, so I thought I would come in and put my two cents in. My most recent occupation hasn't been in mechanics or engineering."

Hever cocked her head. "Can you replace the axle on that rover?"

"Sure. Do you have the replacement?"

"On that rack."

Dex walked over and lifted the rover, checking the angle of the axle. She checked the break and chuckled. "It's an easy fix, but I am guessing this is a hard-use unit."

"Yes. Good guess."

Dex lifted the vehicle to a working level, reinforced the supports, and shook them to make sure they would hold.

Hever watched as Dex got the replacement in position, grabbed some tools, and lay on her back to remove the offending part.

She hummed softly as she got the axle in place, pressed it, fastened it, and pulled at it to make sure it was steady.

The tire went back on, and Dex set the rover back on its wheels.

Hever grinned. “Do you want to take it for a test spin?”

“Wait. What?”

“We have an underground test track. Just for this purpose.” Hever grinned. “So, do you want to?” She dangled the keys and hit a switch on the wall that let the garage door lift to expose the test track.

Dex smiled. “That sounds like fun. Shall we? I love testing my work.”

“Yeah, you won’t say that when I use you to test bullet-proof fabric.”

Dex chuckled. “I am bullet resistant.”

They climbed into the vehicle, and Dex started it up.

Hever opened her com. “Zera, I found a new mechanic.”

“ Who? ”

“Her name is Dex.”

Zera paused. “ Dexandra? She isn’t even on my list. ”

Hever shrugged. "She can do the job."

"She's a wedding planner!" Zera shouted.

Hever laughed. "I need one of those, too."

"No, way. Krix proposed?"

"He did. I said yes, in case you were wondering."

Zera sighed. "I will put it through the payroll."

"Good. And next year, we are going to have our department holiday party with all the other departments. This is four years in a row that you have missed R it is hard enough to get clothing in my size."

She smiled and ate.

Zera looked at her. "I am not sure you are suitable for this position."

Hever nodded. "I am. She fits."

Zera looked at Dex. "You don't know her complications."

Hever looked to Dex. "You will tell me when we are back at the lab?"

"Sure. It isn't really a secret."

Zera sighed and turned serious. "Can I get a plus four for the wedding?"

Dex nodded and made a note on her tablet.

Hever grinned. “This is going to be huge. And fun. But mainly huge. Auntie Salmet called, and she wants the whole family, plus my mom and her new beau. Plus, Leska and her two, so I count over a hundred on my side, and that is before Krix’s side is there.

I think they are good for about another hundred. ”

Zera blinked. “This is going to be big.”

Dex nodded. “I am guessing at close to four hundred after all of the ambassador’s associates are invited.”

Zera smiled. “How many are actives?”

“About seventy percent.”

“You know that already?”

“Sure. Known associates are common online. I have a program to estimate large and intimate family crowds.”

Zera blinked. “You do?”

Dex smiled. “I am a professional. I am very good at this.”

“Fine, ladies, but keep R&D going. I am running a business here.”

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Dex said, “I can set all queries for data bursts during breaks and do calls on lunch. Evenings for tastings and fittings.”

Hever smiled. “We are professionals.”

Zera snorted. “Krauz is doing a private party for you before the new year in one of the private rooms. You can each bring a plus one.”

Dex chuckled. “I will leave Hever to it. I don’t have a plus one.”

Zera looked sly. “I could set you up with an escort.”

Dex looked at her wryly. “Dumb enough to not know who I am?”

“Ah, right. Well, what would you like instead?”

Hever looked at her nails. “Spa day. Our bodies get messy and dirty. Spa day would fit.”

Dex beamed. “That, I would be up for.”

Zera nodded. “I will save the private night for me and mine.”

Hever laughed.

Zera looked at them. “What are you coated in?”

“The latest active Kritz sent exudes a paralytic. Don’t worry. I didn’t let Hever touch him.”

Hever blinked. “He did?”

“Yup. It acts on my skin like dental freezing. I can feel through it, but it doesn’t really matter. He kept trying to get you to touch him, so I am guessing he was a shadow walker and shit himself when he saw me.”

Hever blinked.

Zera added. “She’s a Rhodian. Shadow killers. If he had flickered in front of her, he would have found out if it was true or not.”

Dex grinned. “But I do want to work in R&D. However, if I am there, nothing is getting to you.”

Hever laughed. “I knew I liked you.”

Dex inclined her head.

Zera sighed and walked off.

Hever finished her donut and mumbled, “You move like a bodyguard.”

“I move like a warrior. Generally, if I fixate on someone, they are dead or in bed with me, and you are not my type.” She grinned. “I don’t play with omegas.”

Hever laughed. “Fair enough.”

“Do you have an emergency button?”

“A what?”

“A panic flare to your com that brings defenders running.”

“No, but it’s a good idea.”

Dex grinned. “Put me on the list. I do love a good fight.”

Hever laughed and set the program up on her com. She was hoping she wouldn’t need it, but if Krix couldn’t make it, she was oddly sure that Dex would.

Hever got home and took a shower before Krix finished arriving with his stuff. The guesthouse was spacious, and she was ready to make it into a home.

Krix hugged her. “How was work?”

“I got a new assistant.” She hugged him. “Did you chat with Sgoth?”

“Yes, he had a wealth of information on Bennari weddings but not a lot on Aksallan ones.”

“My new assistant was a wedding planner and a mechanic and a heavy-hitter.”

“Wow. Looks like you have it settled. Your mother contacted me and asked us to the house for dinner.”

“All right. Well, I already showered and changed.”

“I showered at work and will just change into casual clothing, and we can go.”

She nodded and said, “I will supervise.”

Krix snorted and went to the bedroom to get changed.

Hever leaned in the doorway. “So, my assistant caught someone trying to sedate me today. She took the hit and didn’t flinch.

She’s earning her salary already. Also, she’s an amazing driver.

We got so filthy, and then we went for coffee.

Zera freaked, and now we are getting a shower in R&D.” Hever was laughing.

“Save the rest for a discussion over dinner in case we need to break up Nautilus and Veradil smiling at each other.”

They held hands as they walked across the pathway that led to the main house.

Krix paused when they followed voices to the living space. They came around the corner to see two older couples sitting there talking. “Mom?”

Krix’s mother smiled, her eyes relieved. “Oh, good. You are home. Your father came into town for this, so I called Veradil, and she invited us for dinner.”

Hever looked at Nautilus and whispered, “Blink if you need help.”

He snorted. “I am fine.”

Veradil sighed. “Hever, your sense of humour is not appreciated.”

Nautilus smiled. “I appreciate it. She has removed any nerves I had about courting you, Veradil.”

Hever mumbled, “If that were courting, I would hate to see foreplay.”

Veradil covered her eyes, and Nautilus grinned.

“Sorry, Mom. I am on good behaviour, I promise. From now on.”

Krix chuckled. He introduced her to his parents, and they all sat around talking about their day.

When it was Hever’s turn, she smiled. “I have a new assistant. It pays more than being my mechanic.”

Veradil chuckled. “What are they like?”

“Dex is really tall. She has a few inches on Krix, actually. Just a little shorter than Nautilus.”

Veradil smiled. “That’s interesting. Heavy-hitter, mechanic’s skills?”

“Of course.”

Krix snorted. “And apparently immune to toxins.”

Nautilus leaned forward. “And tall, does she carry a sword?”

“Not in her skirt and heels.”

Krix frowned. “There is something nagging at me, and I can’t remember why.”

The housekeeper called them for dinner, and the conversation changed to the wedding.

Krix lifted her left hand and kissed it. “Yes, a fun subject.”

Krix's mother, Xelia, smiled. "That is complicated, but do you want a long engagement or a short one?"

Krix muttered, "Short."

Veradil smiled. "Our family and friends can be gathered in about ten days."

Xelia looked to her mate, Kenovar. "How long does the Stronghold need?"

"For a party? Anything would be fine."

Hever paused. "You mean hold it at the Stronghold? No. I have a lot of friends and family who are not welcome there. I want to have the party here."

Veradil said, "Salmet has offered the Aksallan gardens for the ceremony and a reception at the prefect's residence."

Kenovar sighed. "Fine. How soon can it be managed?"

Hever said, "Can I ask Dex?"

Everyone nodded.

Hever smiled. "Can she come over?"

Veradil laughed. "I think it is wise at this point."

Hever sent Dex a message and got a laughing emoji followed by the notice that she was on her way.

The knock on the door happened a second later, and the housekeeper returned to them with wide eyes. "Miss, a Miss Dex to see you."

“Bring her in.”

Dex walked in, and Hever blinked. Kenovar scrambled to his feet and charged up his hands. Dex snorted. “Oh, please. I am here as Hever and Krix’s wedding planner. I am not starting anything.” She gave Kenovar a calm look. “Nor am I finishing them tonight.”

Kenovar looked to Hever. “You know this person?”

“She’s my new assistant. She’s great. I am guessing you know her?”

“I know her kind. They are dangerous.”

Dex smiled. “If I say my name is Dexandra Sion, will that calm your tits?”

Nautilus was grinning. “She’s a shunned Rhodian. If she meets any of her kind, they have to destroy her.”

“Well, they have to try. No one has managed yet.” She lifted her tablet. “Now, as to the wedding. Do we have an estimated guest count? I was spit-balling four hundred, but—”

Kenovar asked, “You are truly Sion?”

“Yup. Twelve years now.”

“Why?” He blurted.

Dex sighed and looked at him. “Since this won’t progress without the chat, I defended my father against my mother and gave him time to escape.

He had been coming to get me away, but she caught him.

She was going to kill him, so I got him away and let him return to the shadows, while I fought my mother. ”

“Your mother is?”

“Dorix. Chief of the Rhodians. I am her only daughter and greatest disappointment, and one of my brothers is a florist, so you can see how far I have fallen.” She grinned.

Hever had to know. “Why did Kenovar ask if you had a sword?”

“Oh, if you see a Rhodian’s blade, they are going to use it.”

Krix frowned. “Are you safe to be around Hever?”

“No one safer. I am not bound by blood nor honour. I have a service contract with Aksalla, but that’s it. No one has a claim to my blade.”

Hever nodded and looked around. “Right. Now, how many does each of you want to invite? Dex guessed at four hundred, but I know we are missing someone.”

Xelia put her hand on her husband’s and said, “If you are counting, we have fifty direct relatives, some children, with about sixty from my husband’s association.”

Dex nodded and got to the seriousness of friends and relatives who were not in Sethir.

Hever grinned at Krix, and he looked relaxed. “Looks like things are in good hands.”

He sighed. “Dex is impressive.”

“Keep eating, you are going to need your strength. Her face is telling me that we are going to be going through all of the bulk details tonight so she can get invitations ready.”

Dex nodded, “And we are going to schedule food tastings. If everyone here wants to participate, that is fine. In this timeline, things are going to be pricey, but it can be managed.”

Veradil smiled. “I’ve got this.”

“Mom. I have money.”

“I know, pumpkin, but half the places we visited before you turned eighteen gave me funds toward your dowry. I thought a ripping wedding might do well.”

Dex was making rapid notes as people spoke. “Do you want Nautilus on the invitation?”

Veradil blushed, but Nautilus was holding her hand on the table.

Dex said, “The Honourable Ambassador Veradil and her companion Nautilus invite you to the wedding of her daughter, Hever, to the Honourable defender Krix, son of the bonded mates, Xelia of Serathoa and Kenovar of the Sethir-Nin. Titles to be added later when they are provided.”

Veradil smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

Xelia nodded. “You knew I was from Serathoa?”

“Yup. You are one of the discarded ones. You don’t breathe water, so they gave you a nice trust and set you up on the land.”

Kenovar smiled. “She was staring at the ocean, and it was a glare of fury. She turned that gaze to me, and I melted.”

Xelia smiled. “And I looked toward him, and he blocked out the sun and the ocean.

Making him the centre of my world for a while didn't seem so bad."

Krix chuckled. "Then I came along, and the while turned into years."

Dex nodded. "You also need to decide which defenders and guards you are inviting. They can be on call. I can have a sober bar available."

Krix blinked. "You are thinking of everything."

"That is literally the job. Okay, food. I suggest a plated meal with a buffet backup and tons of dessert. I know how actives eat."

Hever chuckled. "I have a few places that we could use for desserts."

"I will get a list and contact them all."

The housekeeper brought out dessert and coffee, including Dex, and she made notes and notes and notes. This was going to be one helluva party.