



# Paradise (Liminal Space #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Marriage, for some, is the ultimate goal in life. But for Garrett Caractus, it's a battle against the odds. All he wants is to marry the love of his life, Jonah Helms, and have a peaceful wedding on the sunny planet of Paradise. But when Jonah's ex-husband shows up, determined to take their son Cody away, Garrett must find new ways to fight for his family.

The rain may have stopped, but the storm is far from over for Garrett and his loved ones.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter one

### Cody

O n Pandora, it rained almost every day. Some of the time it was a light drizzle, and on those days the city council left the environmental shields open, and the rain poured down on Pandora City, or “the Box,” as most of the people living here called it. It was always cool and moist, and after a year on Pandora, Cody could barely remember what life had been like back on Olympus, where the air was warm and bright and smelled like blossoming flowers.

Occasionally, when it was Garrett’s turn to tell Cody a bedtime story, he would talk about some of the planets he had lived on. Paradise was Cody’s favorite because it was so strange there—nothing but rock, sand, and sun. Garrett would load pictures of Paradise into the screens embedded in the walls, and they’d lie together on Cody’s bed and watch the strange, barren landscape fill the room. Garrett would tell Cody the names of different mountains and canyons and show him the tiny, fierce creatures who dwelled in the desert there.

Sometimes Daddy would join them, just for a while right at the end. He’d pet both of their heads, his fingers staying just a little on Garrett’s, like he was worried about something and didn’t want to say it. Cody knew enough about his dad to know that he worried a lot about Garrett but did his best not to show it. It had been ... not bad , when Garrett had gone away, but quiet. Sad.

It was a lot better now that Garrett was back. He and Daddy talked a lot, and they laughed and touched, and they kissed , gross, right in front of him. Someone was

always home when Cody got out of school, and Garrett would play games with him after Cody finished his homework, and Daddy usually cooked dinner and made fun of Garrett for burning water, which was weird because Daddy had to know that you couldn't really do that. It must be some kind of weird grown-up humor.

Anyways, they were all happy most of the time. Daddy might worry, but Cody never did.

Well, almost never. Today at school, the alarm went off half an hour before classes ended. It was the first time it had ever gone off for real, and Mister Hugelin-Padin explained to them all that it wasn't a drill this time. The alarm meant that the shields were being brought up for an emergency, so they were going to get out of school a little early and had to go straight home. One of the aides offered to walk Cody back, but his house was really close, and he didn't want to be a baby about it even though it was kind of scary outside, with the sky going dark as the shields slowly closed off the sky.

He walked until he was out of sight of the school, then broke into a run the rest of the way. He was out of breath by the time he made it home, but it had to be a record. Cody was the fastest runner in his class.

When he got home after school and found the living room empty, Cody was kind of confused. It was Garrett's turn to be home with him, and he always met him at the door. Yeah, Cody was early, but only by half an hour.

"Garrett?" Cody dumped his backpack at the door, quietly ignoring the fact that he'd be scolded for leaving it there as soon as one of his dads saw it. He kicked off his shoes, remembered to hang his dripping coat on the little hook that was his, then jumped from the tile to the carpet in one big leap so he wouldn't leave wet footprints on the stone. His socks were kind of damp, but no one would be able to tell on the carpet.

“Garrett?” Cody looked to make sure Garrett wasn’t taking a nap on the couch, then walked down the hall. The bathroom was empty, and so was his room.

Cody frowned, puzzled. Garrett had been back from Paradise for almost six months, and he’d never not been here when it was his turn. Cody took the stairs two at a time, making his legs stretch way far since that was how Daddy usually went up them. Someday he’d be tall like Daddy, and then this would be easy. Everything fun was easy when you were an adult.

Cody checked the upstairs bathroom, then he checked Garrett’s room too although he didn’t really think Garrett would be in there. It was just a place for Garrett to store the stuff he didn’t want to keep on his ship but that there wasn’t really room to put in the rest of the house. A lot of it was clothes. Some of them were really weird, made from light, shiny fabrics with all sorts of hooks and buttons and zippers. Garrett called those his clubbing clothes. Cody asked if he could have some clubbing clothes too, but Daddy had very firmly said no while Garrett laughed and laughed.

Finally, Cody checked his dad’s bedroom. He was only allowed in when the door was open unless he knocked, and the door was closed right now. He took a deep breath, then knocked, but there was no answer, so Cody gingerly opened the door and looked inside.

No Garrett. The bed was a mess, which totally wasn’t fair because they made Cody fix his covers every morning, and there were a couple of small bottles and something long and bumpy and shiny out on the bedside table. Cody kind of wanted to go look, but Daddy had been really clear about him coming in and poking around without permission, so Cody sighed and shut the door again.

So, no Garrett anywhere. Maybe he would be home soon. Cody went back downstairs and made himself a protein-spread sandwich as a snack, mixing the banana, chocolate, and chalaberry-flavored ones on the bread so it was like eating dessert. He

munched away and watched the clock tick over to when he'd normally have gotten home, and still Garrett wasn't there. It was really dark outside, the environmental shields muting all the light, and after a few more minutes of waiting, Cody decided that he'd better call his dad.

He fished his com unit out of his jacket pocket and tapped it. "Call Daddy." A second later the light went green, which meant the link was open. "Daddy?"

"Cody?" Daddy sounded kind of distracted. "What's goin' on, bucko?"

"Garrett's not home yet."

There was a pause. "Are you okay?"

Cody rolled his eyes. His dad always asked that question, like Cody was still six instead of just turned seven now. "I'm fine."

"Did Garrett leave you a note?"

"Um ..." Cody checked the countertop, then the fridge. He turned on the holoscreen just to make sure Garrett hadn't left a message there, then shook his head.

"You gotta speak up, bucko, I can't see you on this thing."

"No, he didn't leave a note."

"Okay." Daddy was speaking kind of slow, like he was working something out in his head. "I'll be home real soon, okay? We'll figure it out."

A sudden, awful thought struck Cody. "He didn't leave, right, Daddy?" Garrett had promised he wasn't going to leave again; he had promised .

“No,” Daddy said immediately. “He didn’t leave. Probably something came up with work. I’ll figure it out. Stay inside, bucko. I’ll be home in a few minutes.”

“Okay.” Cody ended the call and felt his stomach do a little flip-flop. All of a sudden, he wasn’t hungry for the rest of his sandwich even though it had the best flavors in it. He left it on the counter and went over and sat on the couch. “Space Rangers vs the Haunted Mansion” was playing, which was kind of a dumb episode, but it was better than nothing, and so he watched it until he heard the door chime. His dad came in still talking on his com, and he sounded kind of angry. It made Cody nervous until he realized his dad wasn’t talking to Garrett.

“It’s important because I’ve got a kid at home who needs supervision, and if one of his parents can’t be here, then the other one needs to be informed ... No, I didn’t get Garrett’s message, I’ve been ferrying supplies up to the Indigo all day, but you should have forwarded it to—no, it is a part of your goddamn job description.” Cody listened with wide eyes as his daddy said a curse word. That meant he was really mad. “You work for Resident Services, it’s your job to facilitate communication between families. The regular ground coms still haven’t been expanded to cover low orbit, which is where I’ve been for my entire shift ... yeah, well, next time, think about it.” He disconnected the call and took a deep breath, then turned toward Cody. “Hey, bucko.”

“Hi, Daddy.” He waited for his dad to take off his jacket and shoes before asking, “Where’s Garrett?”

“Apparently, he had to go fix some things Outside this morning. He wasn’t supposed to be gone long, and he did leave me a message, but I didn’t get it until just a few minutes ago.” Daddy got that worried line right between his eyebrows. “He was supposed to be back an hour before school ended, though. I talked to the lab, and they haven’t heard from him since his shuttle landed.”

“So he’s still Outside?” “Outside” meant outside the city—outside the environmental shields, which were closed now. “But how’s he going to get back in?” Ships couldn’t fly through the shields when they were up. Cody felt his stomach roll over. “The alarm went off at school, and we all had to come right home; that means something’s wrong, right?”

“Tsunami alert,” Daddy said, coming over and sitting down next to him on the couch. Cody burrowed into his side immediately. “One of the big waves is coming in, kind of by surprise. It wasn’t supposed to be big enough to reach the city, but the scientists upgraded it and sounded the alarm. We’ll be fine in here.”

“But Garrett’s Outside!” Cody protested. Of course, they’d be fine in the Box; it was always safe in here, but Garrett wasn’t with them.

“Yeah.” His dad took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then tried a smile. It wasn’t a very good one. “But he’s in a good shuttle with a good pilot. I’m sure they’re holed up somewhere safe. They’ll wait the wave out, and then they’ll come back once the shields are down.”

“Why didn’t they come back before the shields went up?”

“I don’t know,” Daddy said quietly. “We’ll have to ask him when he gets back.” He ruffled Cody’s hair, then tried to stand up. Cody clung to him like a monkey, and his dad took the hint and picked him up. “I can’t cook dinner when I’m holdin’ onto you, bucko.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Not even for mac and cheese?”

Oh ... that was Cody’s favorite, all gooey and cheesy and crispy on top. Daddy

usually only made it for special occasions, or if Cody was feeling sick. He was feeling kind of sick right now, so it made sense that Daddy would want him to be better. “Okay,” he agreed finally, and his dad let him sit on the counter and help grate the cheese.

By the time they ate, Cody was really hungry, and he finished two servings, but his dad hadn’t eaten very much of his own. “I’ll save it for later,” he said when Cody asked about it.

The com unit suddenly activated all on its own. “Advisory alert: wave impact in five minutes. All residents are required to remain indoors for the duration of the wave. Again, five minutes to wave impact. Remain indoors until you hear the relief bell sound.”

“You wanna watch it?” Daddy asked Cody after the com turned off. They had a big picture window at the top of the stairs that gave them a good view of the shields.

“Sure.” They put the dishes into the autoclave, and then Daddy picked Cody up again, without him even having to ask, and they went upstairs. Usually, Cody liked to watch the waves when they came close to the shields, but this time, as the faint light was replaced by no light at all and the thunderous crash of so much water filled his ears, all he felt was sick again. Garrett should be home, with them, and instead he was Outside, where anything could happen. He could get washed away. He could fall into the ocean and never come back. He could die .

“Hey, now, don’t cry,” his dad murmured, kissing his cheek. “Garrett’ll be fine. He’ll be back real soon, and he’ll tell us all about it.”

Cody wasn’t stupid. He knew when his daddy said things just to make him feel better, but it did help a little. He sniffed and wiped his face on his dad’s shirt, and they stood quiet for a while longer until the thunder died down, and the water washed away



again.

“They’ll open the shields soon, and they’ll send another shuttle out to look for him if he doesn’t call,” Daddy said soothingly.

“Could you go look for him?” His dad was a real good pilot, the best. He’d find Garrett superfast.

“Nah, bucko, I’m stayin’ here with you.”

“Oh.”

“It’s gonna be fine.” Daddy walked them back downstairs and sat on the couch. Cody spread out but kept his head in his dad’s lap. “You look tired. You want to go to bed?”

Cody shook his head vehemently. “I want to stay up with you.”

Daddy didn’t even argue. “Okay. But go wash your teeth and get into your sleep clothes just in case. Maybe take a quick shower too.” He sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose. “You kinda smell a lot like a little boy right now.”

“I am a boy!”

“I know, and phew.” His dad waved the air in front of his nose theatrically.

Maybe it was the glue. Cody had kind of gotten some of it on his shirt during art. And then he fell in the mud at recess, but the aide had helped him wash most of it out of his hair. But okay, maybe he did smell just a little. “Fine,” he said with a huge sigh. He pushed up off the couch and headed for his room just as the relief bell sounded.

As he picked out the sleep clothes he wanted to wear, Cody could hear his dad on the com with someone, but he was talking too quietly for Cody to hear. Well, if it was important, his dad would tell him about it later. Cody finally decided on his blue sleep set, because it had teddy bears sailing ships on it, then went into the bathroom and got into the shower. He conscientiously put his clothes in the cleaner before he got in, then remembered that he'd left his backpack by the front door. And Daddy hadn't even noticed it! That meant Daddy was really worried because he always noticed when the backpack was there. Usually because he tripped over it.

Cody washed fast, bouncing up and down while he waited for the sonic cleaner to finish with his teeth, then ran back out into the living room. He jumped on the couch and snuggled close again, and his dad covered him with the blanket that Garrett's stepmom had sent them. It was the softest thing Cody had ever felt and had a warmer built into the fabric. Daddy turned the holoscreen on, but he turned the volume down and stroked his hand through Cody's damp hair, slowly untangling the curls.

Cody didn't want to sleep yet, but the show was boring, and his eyelids just got heavier and heavier. He wasn't going to sleep, though. He was just going to close his eyes for a while. Just ... for a little ... while.

## Page 2

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### Chapter two

#### Jonah

Jonah watched Cody run off to get cleaned up and waited until he was back in his room, out of hearing distance, before he called the lab. Dr. Sims answered almost immediately. “Jonah?”

“Martina, what’s happening?” The relief bell sounded, and Jonah felt a corresponding tremor of relief resonate through his chest. They’d reopen the environmental shields now. “You’re sendin’ someone out after him, right?”

“Soon,” she said, but her tone was more annoyed than comforting. “But it’s not just the tsunami, Jonah. There’s a hell of a storm on the coast, and the equipment that Garrett’s working on is in the thick of it. The security team won’t go out after them until it’s safe to fly, and that’s not going to happen for at least a few hours.”

“Have you at least contacted him?” Jonah asked, trying hard to keep his voice down for Cody’s sake but really wanting to yell. This was important, damn it. “Is he okay?”

“We haven’t heard from him for several hours.” Martina didn’t believe in sugarcoating the truth. “One of our com arrays is down, thanks to the storm, and it’ll take some time to get it up and running again. He made it out there without problems, though.”

“Who’s his pilot?”

Martina sighed. “Jonah, try not to worry. We have protocols in place for what to do if things get a little hairy. Garrett knows them all even if he doesn’t have to use them very often. He’s fine.”

“Why was he the one filling in for Lila anyway? Why not a technician?”

“Garrett’s had some training in Lila’s geological equipment, more than any of the technicians. It’s one of her experiments that’s on the line here, and she’s not well enough to head into the field right now.”

Jonah knew that Lila had trouble with Regen treatments every now and then, like almost all of the people living on Pandora. That said, she wasn’t completely immune to the effects of it like Cody, who was destined to grow old and die much faster than 99.9% of all humanity. None of the treatments used to prolong human life, developed over thousands of years of genetic experimentation, would work on Jonah’s son. He was a natural, a throwback to an earlier and harder time. Jonah tried not to dwell on it.

Garrett, on the other hand, was perfectly healthy. He was only a contractor on Pandora, and even though he’d promised to stay here with Jonah and Cody, Jonah sometimes thought that it inevitable that Garrett was going to leave someday. He was brilliant, beautiful, sophisticated, and used to things going his way. Being stuck in the middle of nowhere in the middle of a storm, unable to contact anyone, wasn’t going to put him in a good headspace.

“I’ll get him back to you as soon as possible,” Martina promised.

“Okay.” Jonah turned off his com and stared at nothing until Cody came out of the bathroom and jumped on him, pressing in close. Jonah covered them both up with a blanket and turned the holo back on to one of Cody’s shows, and he kept it on until he felt his son drift off into sleep. Jonah put the show on mute and stared down at his

child.

It was funny, actually, how much Cody looked like Garrett. His hair was a darker blond, curly instead of straight but still close in appearance, and he was a little small for his age, delicate instead of long and lanky like Jonah had been as a child. Jack, Cody's other biological father, was dark haired and dark eyed and damn handsome, but he didn't have much in common, physically, with their kid.

After Cody had been taken out of his growth pod and handed over to them for the first time, Jack had commented, numbly, on how little their son looked like him. It had been the first sign of the problems he'd had with Cody and the first cold dash of impending reality for Jonah.

Jack was gone now; he'd been out of their lives for years. Jonah had talked to him all of once in the past year, and that was via message, not face-to-face, not even over a holoscreen. It was good that way, better for all of them.

It had been twice that long since he'd talked to his own mother.

Garrett talked to his family at least once a week, and he did his best to include Jonah and Cody in the conversations. Over the past six months, Jonah felt like he'd grown closer to Garrett's family than he could ever remember being with his own, and Cody couldn't get enough of Robbie and Wyl, Garrett's best friends. Once they had the time, it was pretty much a given that they'd all go back to Paradise for a visit, which was a good sign. They were balancing their lives, they were stitching themselves together. Jonah just hoped that they could stitch tight enough.

Cody stretched and pushed his face against Jonah's thigh, as unable to keep still asleep as he was when he was awake. Jonah kept stroking his head, switching sometimes to rubbing soothing circles over his back. Cody settled after a little bit, taking away Jonah's distraction, so he played Garrett's message again just to hear his

voice.

“Hey, babe, I’m not going to be able to meet Cody after school. I’ve got to go fix a piece-of-shit system in the middle of nowhere before some practically valueless data is lost.” He laughed softly. “ I’m sure you can tell how thrilled I am. I don’t know when I’ll be back in, but I’ll make it up to you guys, okay? I love you.”

Garrett ended every message with “I love you.” Even when he was annoyed, pissed, or genuinely upset, he always made it a point to say that at the end of his messages. Garrett was surprisingly good at talking things out—a lot better at it than Jonah, who tended to ignore problems in the hope that they’d work themselves out over time. Garrett managed to make Jonah talk, even when he wasn’t interested in doing so, instead of letting things fester. Being forced into functionality, when he hadn’t even realized he was dysfunctional, was a strange experience.

Jonah shut his eyes and leaned his head back against the top of the couch. He wasn’t going to sleep, he knew that much, but the only thing that was preventing him from getting up and pacing was the weight of Cody’s head on his leg, and he didn’t want to wake up his kid. He sucked in a deep breath, held it for a moment, then let it out slowly. He tried not to dwell on how much he wanted to talk to Garrett right now, how much he wanted to feel him, how much he wanted to be the one flying him around instead of entrusting him to some other pilot who might not know what he was doing.

It was better to think about other things. Cody rolled over and pressed his face against Jonah’s stomach, and Jonah smiled briefly. That was another thing his boys had in common. Neither of them were inclined toward stillness. Garrett slept deeply, but he cycled between clinging like a limpet to shifting, rolling, and grabbing during the night. Jonah would often wake up sweating under Garrett’s weight or so tightly wrapped in his arms that it was hard to breathe.

He loved it. It was the closeness that both of them craved without having to talk about it, which Jonah appreciated. And it very often led to sex, which both of them appreciated. And ...

And it was so not the thing to be thinking about when he was sitting up on the couch with his sleeping son. Jonah sighed again, quietly, and turned his attention back to the holoscreen. At least with Cody asleep, Jonah could change the channel away from cartoons.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:08 am*

### Chapter three

#### Garrett

It was cold, wet, and dark—a perfect trifecta of discomfort. Garrett resisted the urge to cover his ears against the continual heavy pound of water on the bunker roof and tried to ignore the crawling, itchy dampness of his clothes. The fabric was designed to move water away from the skin, but when you were basically marinating in a frigid, foot-deep puddle, there wasn't much that could be done.

A few feet away, his pilot leaned up against the wall, closed eyes cast upward, a picture of misery. Her brown hair clung like limp seaweed to her face, obscuring her pale, square features, and the only noise she made was an occasional sniff. Garrett wanted to say something consoling, but there wasn't any way he could approach that genuinely. After all, he wasn't the one who had mistimed things and lost the shuttle.

It wasn't entirely LeeAnna's fault either. The wave had come faster and higher than anyone had predicted, which stung because Garrett's environmental modeling had been way off this time around. The colony's single weather satellite was on the fritz, so it wasn't reliable either, and by the time they'd made it out to the coastal lab, the storm had taken out the closest communications array. There was no way to get back in touch with the Box, and so they'd taken refuge in the underground bunker, per emergency orders, and waited for the wave to pass.

Then things really got fucked up. LeeAnna didn't secure the ship well enough to the landing pad, and the enormous tsunami had washed it away like a grain of sand. The bunker withstood the wave but not well enough to keep water out, and now there was



the rain on top of that. Continual dripdripdrip s of water splashed into the dank pool at their feet, an unsynchronized accompaniment to the gloom.

It was so much like a scene out of obnoxiously atmospheric literature that part of Garrett was tempted to laugh. A small part—a jerky, perky part. The rest of him felt better being pissed.

“They’re never gonna let me fly again,” LeeAnna said suddenly, her voice quivering a little. Garrett didn’t know whether it was from the cold or her state of mind, but she sounded pathetic either way. “I can’t believe I lost an entire shuttle.”

“You’re not the first one,” he replied philosophically.

“No, I am!” she insisted, her voice rising a little at the end. “Danny just scraped the bottom of his on a landing, and yeah, it flipped, but at least there’s something left to repair. Mine is completely gone. Gone! Fuck, I should have stuck to sims and kept my job with the factory. They’ll never trust me again. Shit. Shit. ” Her teeth were chattering now, and she wrapped her arms around her chest even more tightly.

An unhappy thought occurred to Garrett. “Are you a natural?”

“Why?” she demanded, suddenly angry. “What, you think we can’t be shuttle pilots just because we’re naturals? Think we can’t do the work, huh? Is that what you think?”

“No ...” he said slowly, revising his words before they came out. Time to tread cautiously. “It’s just, it’s cold down here. There’s who-knows-what kinds of bacteria in the water, and I don’t want you to get sick.” He forced a chuckle. “Hell, I don’t want to get sick either. We should conserve body heat.”

She looked suspicious. “Aren’t you married?”

Garrett rolled his eyes. “I’m not coming on to you, I’m cold. Just come here.”

LeeAnna pried herself off the wall, shivering too hard to really argue the point. She sloshed over to him and tentatively leaned in. Garrett took over and pulled her close, wrapped his arms around her, and briskly rubbed her back. After a few seconds of stiffness, she folded into his embrace with a quiet moan of relief, and he felt her muscles unknot in ragged jerks. The movement helped bring up his own temperature a bit.

You’re not my type anyway. His type was hours away, someplace warm and dry, probably sleeping at this time of night. All alone in their huge bed ... Just the thought of Jonah sprawled out beneath their comforter made his chest tighten a little. Surreptitiously, Garrett checked his com. No signal. He hadn’t had a signal for hours.

It was the perfect storm. No way to communicate, no way to get out of here, and “here” was an absolute bitch. It wasn’t as though it was Garrett’s first time in a bunker; he’d played a part in too many of his father’s war games to be unfamiliar with bunkers, and the last time he’d been “kidnapped,” he’d been held for three days. But that bunker had come with amenities, including entertainment and a bored, suggestible soldier who was more than happy to keep his “prisoner” occupied while they waited for the counterassault.

This bunker had none of the same attractions, and even if Garrett had been standing chest to chest with the sexiest man alive, he still wouldn’t have been compelled to do anything. That was monogamy for you, taking all the fun out of ways to combat boredom.

Hopefully, Cody hadn’t been too upset when Garrett hadn’t come home. He was a smart kid, he knew the drill, but Garrett still worried. Hell, worrying was kind of his job now. He was practically a parent. Jonah would say that Garrett was Cody’s parent, but Garrett knew that that wasn’t technically true. They weren’t married, after

all, despite LeeAnna's perception. The subject had never even been broached.

Why the hell hadn't it been broached?

Because Jonah is scared to push, scared to ask, scared to make any extra demands. Despite everything, Garrett knew his lover was still worried that he was going to take off. His ex had done a number on the man's self-esteem, and no matter how many times Garrett told him he loved him and was staying, it still hadn't sunk in. Jonah just smiled and kissed him or changed the subject. The man was a master at avoidance.

And now here Garrett was, hugging a distraught, distrusting woman in the middle of nowhere while they waited for rescue, so tired and cold he could barely stand, wet in all the wrong places, and chafing mercilessly. Perfect time to think about marriage; why not? It wasn't like he was any stranger to crazy.

Honestly, Garrett had never considered getting married before, not even to Robbie. Marriage was an ancient institution that didn't have the same social consequences these days; it was more symbolic than anything. There were enough alternatives to marriage out there that the majority of couples across the Alliance just didn't bother. His parents had been an exception, driven by the old-world conservatism of his grandmother into a traditional relationship.

Garrett had always found marriage so ... quaint. Legal partnerships were more common, and simple contracts even more so, but when he considered the options, Garrett knew that those weren't going to cut it. A contract would send the wrong signal, and a formal partnering wouldn't be emotional enough, not for either of them.

Garrett wanted forever: he wanted Jonah and Cody to officially be his family. He wanted there to be options for them if something moronic like this happened in the future, and he ended up dead. He wanted Cody to be able to get advanced medical treatments back in the Central System, and that would be a lot easier if they were

married. He wanted Jonah to look at him and realize that he wasn't going anywhere, because he loved what they had together, and what they were together.

He never wanted it to end.

“Huh.”

“What?” LeeAnna mumbled against his shoulder.

“Nothing.” Just coming to a life-changing decision here. Marriage. Garrett wanted it. So many of his exes would be laughing their fucking heads off if they knew.

Garrett spent the next hour daydreaming—or maybe it was closer to hallucinating, he was practically out of his mind with fatigue—about how he'd propose. Something romantic, definitely. Dinner out at a restaurant, a custom-made ring or a brand or whatever Drifters used to signify permanence. Fancy suits, decadent dessert, getting down on one knee, the works. Classic. It would be awesome. They'd be awesome.

“Awesome,” he slurred happily. Yeah, he could do that.

Finally, the rain let up enough for another shuttle to reach them. No one said a word as the rescue crew hauled them up out of the bunker, other than to ask if they were okay and attach portable warmers to their clothes to start raising their body temperatures. LeeAnna fell asleep as soon as they were strapped in, but Garrett fought to keep himself awake. He couldn't sleep yet; he still had to get home to his guys.

Martina was waiting for him back at the lab. “What happened to you?”

“Got stranded,” Garrett muttered, rubbing his hands together. The heater was good for his core temperature, but it kind of sucked with the extremities. “Lost the shuttle,

lost the coms.”

“And the experiment?”

“Fuck the experiment.”

Martina scowled. “That equipment is expensive, Garrett, and nature getting in the way is no reason to scrap months’ worth of work. Tell me you re-secured it before you took cover.”

“I re-secured it.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying!” he exclaimed. “I’m too miserable to lie right now! I re-secured the damn equipment and uploaded the latest data to my pad before I scuttled into a hole in the ground like a fucking cockroach. Where I was cold and wet and stuck with a bitchy pilot and didn’t have my husband or my kid for comfort, so excuse me for being abrupt with my honesty!”

“Your husband?” Martina smiled slightly. It didn’t at all look like a natural expression on her. “Are you and Jonah planning on getting married?”

“We will be as soon as I ask him,” Garrett assured her. “Can I leave now?”

“Sure. I’ll even give you a lift.”

“What’s the catch?”

She sighed exasperatedly. “There isn’t always a catch when I offer to do something for someone. I’m just trying to make things convenient for you. And it will give me

time to transfer the data to my own pad.”

Ten minutes later, Garrett let himself into their small, stone-sided home. He wasn’t expecting the light to be on in the living room, and he really wasn’t expecting both Jonah and Cody to be waiting up on the couch. Well, Jonah was waiting up. Cody was asleep, but seeing both of them together still sent a thrill of warmth up Garrett’s spine. “Hey.”

“There you are.” Jonah twisted as best he could and held a hand toward Garrett. He looked tired but so relieved. “Hey, darlin’.”

“Hey.” Garrett took off his heavy coat, worked his feet out of his boots, tripped over Cody’s backpack, then came over to the couch. He took Jonah’s hand and let himself get pulled down so he was sitting on the arm. Jonah lifted Garrett’s hand to his lips and pressed a tender kiss to his knuckles. It was ludicrously charming.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” Garrett nodded slowly. “I am. Just tired.”

“I bet. You wanna head up to bed? I’ll join you as soon as I put Cody back in his room.”

“I want to marry you.” The words just slipped out before he had a chance to censor them.

Jonah’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head slightly. “You must be real tired, darlin’,” he said in a joking tone, but—no. Garrett was serious even if this wasn’t the way he had meant to go about proposing.

“I am, but that’s not why I want to marry you. I’ve been thinking about it all day. I

want this, this life with you and Cody. I want everything. I don't want to leave, I don't want that to even be an option. I want you to look at me and know that I really want to be with you. I want us to get married." He grimaced. "And I wanted it to be all romantic, but that didn't happen. Fuck. Can we start over?"

"This is plenty romantic," Jonah breathed. His grip on Garrett's hand got tighter. "No do-overs. But baby, are you sure? Marriage is a ... it's a big shift. I'd never make you do that."

Garrett frowned. "See, that's the problem. You think I have to force myself, but I want to do this. I want to marry you, I want to be Cody's real dad, I want ... all of that. Public recognition, legal status, all the good stuff and all the shit that comes with it. You're my ... my everything. I want all of you."

"You're really sure?" Jonah's eyes were darker than usual, and his lips were still open, parted just enough to tempt. Garrett wanted to fall against him and consume him, but Cody was there. "You want to marry me? Marry us? 'Cause it's not just me, it's both of us."

"I love Cody, and I love you." Garrett slid off the couch and down onto his knees so their heads were at the same level. "Marry me. We can symbolize it however you want. I'll get you a ring, I'll tattoo your name on my forehead, anything. Just say you'll marry me."

"Darlin'." Jonah pulled Garrett closer and brushed a kiss against his mouth, just a brief caress, but it was electrifying. "There's nothin' I want more."

Relief flooded Garrett's chest, blended with a giddiness that was only partially due to his utter exhaustion. They kissed again, deeper, longer, and astonishingly, he felt his libido start to kick in despite his damp and horrible clothes and the awkward angle, and maybe, just maybe, they could—

“G’rett?”

They stopped kissing and looked down. Cody was rubbing his face against Jonah’s thigh, his sleep-crusted eyes slowly opening. “Garrett?”

Ooo-kay. That put a damper on the kissing side of things. “Hey, Cody.”

“You’re back!” Thin arms wound around his neck and gripped way too tightly for such a small kid, and Garrett pulled Cody up against his chest and kissed his hair. “I was worried about you.”

“I’m sorry you were worried. I came back as fast as I could.”

Cody pulled back a little and frowned. “You’re all wet.”

“I know. We got stuck out there for a while because of the storm, but it wasn’t too bad.”

“You missed dinner. Daddy made mac and cheese.”

“Really?” Garrett glanced over at Jonah. “I’ll have to ask him to make it again.”

“There’s enough left for you,” Cody assured him. “Daddy didn’t eat much.”

“Aww, because he was pining?” Garrett asked with a grin. Cody looked puzzled.

“Never mind, I’m just tired. You ready for bed, Cody?”

“Will you tuck me in?”

“Sure,” Garrett said. He stood up and lifted Cody into his arms with only a little wobble. “I can do that.” He and Jonah shared a smile. “I can do that.”



He could do it for as long as they needed.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:08 am*

### Chapter four

#### Garrett

All right, so the circumstances that had led Garrett to propose to Jonah were somewhat irregular, and yes, his reputation of decades as a cavalier playboy was now ruined. But this kind of reaction was just excessive.

“It’s not that funny, damn it.”

“It is!” Wyl howled, doubled over until just the top of his head could be seen on the holoscreen. “No, it really is, it is ! You, all wet and smelly, like a drowned catterpet, and him, all worried, and you just up and ... like, out of the black, you ... you spring a proposal on him ... fuck !” He kept laughing, loudly, one hand beating on the table he was leaning on, and Garrett had finally had enough.

“Call me back when you’re done, you freak.” He shut off the call and glared at the screen for a few moments before getting up and mixing a drink. It was frothy and purple and not the sort of thing he usually went for outside of very pretentious parties, but it was sweet and alcoholic, and the chemical reaction in it sparked tiny lightning bolts against the glass. It was the sort of cocktail you drank to cheer yourself up, and that was what Garrett needed right now. He stuck a slice of lemon in it and took a sip. Not bad.

The chime of the com sounded, but Garrett ignored it in favor of savoring his drink. It wasn’t Jonah or Cody, and he wasn’t worried about offending anyone else. The news of his proposal had prompted some smiles and a little teasing here on Pandora, but for

the most part, everyone seemed excited for them. There were far more couples and families than single colonists living in the colony, and most of them were married, not just contracted or partnered. Apparently, when life was abnormally short, people tended to take commitments more seriously.

Not that life would be short for Garrett and Jonah. Both of them were fully capable of using Regen, and if they were lucky, they'd have each other for many, many years. The only member of their small family that couldn't use Regen was Cody, and he was still just a child. He had his whole life to live, and who knew how long that might be? Secondary treatments were getting better; Cody might live to be a hundred. He might live even longer. He might ...

The chime kept ringing. Garrett rolled his eyes and put the empty glass in the autoclave, then went back to the couch and sat down. He turned on the screen, expecting to see a repentant Wyl.

Instead, he saw Jezria Dowd, the administrative chief of Pandora City and the woman who had originally hired Garrett to come and work here. He put on his professional face. "Jezria."

"Garrett. I was wondering if I'd have to send city security over to check on you. You always answer your com."

"I was busy." He plowed ahead before she could ask what he'd been busy with. Jezria was an old family friend, and she thought that just because she'd first met him as a toddler, she had the right to ask about his personal life. Which she kind of did, but now wasn't the time. "Are you approving my request for time off?"

"In part."

He frowned at her. "What do you mean, in part? Which part? Why not all of it?"

“Garrett, you’re asking for three standard months’ worth of leave. That’s a long time for the colony to be without its forecaster, not to mention one of its most versatile pilots.”

“I am not a forecaster ,” Garrett interrupted with a groan. He was an expert in climate modeling and long-term climate prediction, not local weather forecasts, but somehow his responsibilities had morphed into taking on the task of short-term weather prediction as well. Still, he hated the term. “Weatherman implies some smarmy piece of meat hamming it up for the vacant masses. I’m a scientist, not a soothsayer.”

“Regardless,” Jezria continued smoothly, “it’s a long time to be gone. I’ll approve two months.”

“It’s a three-week trip! That would give us two weeks with my family before we had to come back, which is next to nothing.”

“Two months, or you agree to work a three-day week from Paradise for the duration of your stay there. Three full days, Garrett, spent on Pandora’s issues, not half-heartedly fussing with your modeling program while you play with Wyl and Robbie.”

Garrett gaped at her. “You’re brutal.”

“I’m just holding you to your end of the contract.”

For the umpteenth time, Garrett mentally kicked himself for signing his employment contract before reading it all. “Any restrictions on Jonah?”

“None at all. He hasn’t taken the time off that you have so far, dear.”

“That was a family emergency!” A bomb putting his father into a coma and knocking his best friend into a Regen tank for weeks definitely qualified as a family

emergency.

“Yes, but after two months, family emergency leave is calculated against your regular leave. Honestly, didn’t you read any of this section?”

“I skimmed it.” Sort of. “Fine, three days a week in exchange for three months leave.”

“And you have to keep Cody up-to-date on his lessons.”

“Oh, for fuck’s—”

Jezria wasn’t having it. “This is for his own good, Garrett. He shouldn’t get behind the rest of his class just because his daddies have decided to be romantic. His teacher will be sending you a lesson plan shortly. There are homework assignments in there that he’ll need to show when he gets back.”

“You sort of suck the life out of spontaneity, you know that?”

“I know.” She smiled slightly. “I wish I could be there for the ceremony, though.”

“I’m sure my father will immortalize it so he can embarrass me forever. Ask him for a copy.”

“I’ll do that.”

The com light blinked soundlessly, letting him know that another call was coming through. “I’ll talk to you again before we leave, okay?”

“All right.” They cut communication, and Garrett put the next call in through the holoscreen. When he saw that it was Robbie, he relaxed slightly.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Sorry about that.” Robbie shook his head slightly. “Wyl’s low on sleep and running on fumes; he didn’t mean to be offensive. I’ve put him to bed.”

“No problem.” Garrett shrugged. They stared at each other in silent, comfortable companionship for a moment. Robbie was one of Garrett’s exes, the only man before Jonah he had been remotely serious about, and even after they had called their relationship off, they had continued to get along. The fact that Robbie’s partner, Wyl, was Garrett’s best friend bound them together in ways that had the potential to be awkward, but it never had been.

Robbie looked good. A little more gray in his short-cut, sandy-brown hair, but his face was unlined save for the corners of his eyes, and the clinging T-shirt he had on modeled his perfect physique very nicely. Robbie was, without a doubt, the most classically handsome man Garrett had ever been with. Not the most personable, though. Jonah liked him okay, but he knew Wyl a lot better. Wyl was outgoing, and easy to speak to, and not quite so physically imposing.

Plus, Garrett and Wyl had never fucked. That might have something to do with Jonah’s comfort level.

“Congratulations, Gare.”

“Thanks.”

“Where are your guys?”

“At the hospital,” he said with a sigh. “Cody’s got to get boosters before he can go anywhere, and they tend to make him feel ill. Jonah’s staying the night with him, and I’m getting things ready to go here.”

“When are you leaving?”

“In a few days.” The sooner, the better.

“You told your dad yet?”

Garrett would have been courting disaster otherwise. “Yeah, I called him first. He and Claudia are putting something together for us. Something small.”

Robbie quirked a smile. “Have you seen Claudia in event-planning mode? Small isn’t really her thing.”

“She’ll restrain herself for us; she promised.”

“If you say so.” Robbie was quiet for a second. “I thought you should know that there are some Drifter ships in orbit right now. We haven’t seen much of the folks down in the city, they’re mostly keeping to themselves, but they’ll probably still be here when you guys arrive. You might want to let Jonah know, just in case.” Robbie knew some of the background info about Jonah and Cody’s split from their Drifter clan; not the gory details, but apparently enough to concern him.

“I’ll let him know,” Garrett said. “Thank you.”

“Gare ...” Robbie started blushing, but he pushed through his embarrassment to get the words out. “You know we’re happy for you, right?”

Garrett grinned devilishly and batted his eyelashes at Robbie. “Oh, darling. I know I’m inspirational to you in so many ways. My happiness is your happiness, my tears of joy moisten the verdant fields of your soul—”

“Oh, shut up and go pack your trousseau, princess.”

“I love it when you order me around,” Garrett purred.

This time Robbie was the one to hang up, but Garrett was still smiling as he shut down the holoscreen. He looked around the living room and sighed. He should start packing, he really should; they were leaving in two days, and a lot of that would be spent getting Cody ready, but the house ... it was too quiet. Kind of lonely, actually. And Cody was in the hospital, after all.

Screw it. Packing could wait.



### Chapter five

#### Jonah

P andora City's hospital was probably the nicest building in the entire colony. Of course, it was the building that got the most use, and so setting it up to be a comfortable, efficient place was a reasonable expectation, but it wasn't just nice there: it was posh . There were private suites for families, decorated with beautiful but resilient furniture, a playground for children, a small theater that played a new holo every day and took requests when there wasn't a waiting line, and a dedicated health worker for every new case that came in. Even simple, routine visits like updating Cody's vaccinations warranted the red-carpet treatment.

Dr. Reynaud checked the sleeping boy's temperature and smiled over at Jonah. "Still a slight fever, but it's gone down a degree in the last hour. I think he'll be back to his normal self by morning."

"Hyper and noisy?" Jonah joked, but honestly, that was how he preferred his kid, not this quiet, listless version that whimpered with discomfort as he dozed. Jonah stroked his fingers carefully through Cody's damp curls, his go-to gesture for comfort.

"Just like a little kid should be," Dr. Reynaud agreed. "I've talked with the chief medical officer on the governor's staff on Paradise, by the way, and made sure he'll have all the necessary technology and medications on hand that Cody might need. I'm still sending doubles of some pills with you, though, just in case."

Jonah looked up at her in surprise. Before he could ask, though, she said, "Garrett

asked me to make sure everything was in place before you left, just in case something needed to be ordered on their side.”

“Thorough of him,” Jonah commented, thinking that it was something he should have remembered to take care of himself. Then again, one of the benefits of having a partner—a fiancé, his subconscious teased him, fiancé, fiancé, whispering it like it was something secret and special and rare—was that he didn’t have to take care of everything by himself. Garrett was good at planning, and Jonah was more than happy to cede over a lot of the details of their trip, mostly concerning himself with getting Cody ready and squaring things at work.

He tried not to think too hard about what they were getting ready for or the people they were going to go see. Garrett’s family. The most important people in his life, behind Jonah and Cody, and part of a social circle that Jonah knew very little about.

Not that he hadn’t talked with all of the major players more than once. Jonah was comfortable with them over a com, but heading into their turf with nothing to recommend him except Garrett’s sometimes-baffling regard and their admittedly incredible kid was a little daunting.

“Mr. Helms?”

Jonah jerked his head up. “I’m sorry?”

“I said, I’ll be back in another two hours, all right?” Dr. Reynaud repeated. “Cody should sleep through the night, and I recommend you get some rest yourself. There’s a bed in the adjoining room there.” She gestured toward a smoky glass door. “You don’t want to be too tired to deal with him when he wakes up.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Dr. Reynaud smiled one more time and turned toward the door. Jonah was ready for silence to descend again, leaving him with his swirling thoughts, but instead, he heard a soft exclamation. He looked up and saw Dr. Reynaud almost run into Garrett in the hallway right outside the room. “Dr. Caractus! I didn’t think you’d be by this evening.”

“I didn’t either, but happily, I was wrong,” Garrett said, his voice low and rich, none of its expressiveness lost despite being quiet for Cody’s sake. “How are you, Rickie?”

Didn’t it just figure that he knew the staff well enough to call them by their first names when Jonah was still struggling to remember all of the pilots on the colony’s roster? “Fine.” Dr. Reynaud—Rickie—grinned. “Cody’s sleeping better now; he should be a hundred percent by tomorrow morning.”

“That’s great.” A few more polite words and Garrett was in the suite, silently closing the door behind himself. He came over, and Jonah stood up to meet him, pulling him into a tight hug.

“I thought you were gonna pack tonight,” he murmured into Garrett’s hair, savoring the warmth of his strong arms across Jonah’s too-cool skin.

“I got bored. Thought I’d come and see my guys instead.” Jonah ignored the frisson of contentment that sent down his spine and let Garrett pull away to look at Cody. “He’s a little flushed.”

“Still has a bit of a fever,” Jonah admitted. “It’s gone way down, though. He’s restin’ better too, not so tossy and turny now.”

“Good.” Garrett laid the back of one of his hands against Cody’s soft cheek, his eyes a little misty as he looked at him. “Is it weird that I just want to crawl into bed and hold him for a while?”

“Nah, I fight that impulse all the time.” Jonah chuckled. “He used to have nightmares, wanted to sleep in my bed. Those went away around his fifth birthday, and I swear I went into withdrawal when he stopped comin’ in.”

“Whipped.” Garrett nodded sagely. “Whipped is a good descriptor for this sad state of affairs.” He turned and wrapped his arms around Jonah again, this time twining them around his neck. Garrett was a little shorter than Jonah, just enough for him to make it look naturally sexy and not just coy when he gazed up through his long dark lashes, like he was now. “I guess I’ll just have to crawl into bed with you, then.”

“We’re in a hospital,” Jonah protested before he could stop his stupid mouth. Fortunately, Garrett wasn’t put off.

“We’re in a private suite,” Garrett replied, slowly pushing them back toward the glass door. “With two bedrooms, note. And unless Cody is planning on waking up, which I doubt as long as we can be quiet, we’re not going to be disturbed for several hours.” He smiled, and there was nothing coy or scheming about it, just happy desire. “And I missed you, and I want you now, and you’re going to let me have my way because you love me.” He twisted the handle on the door and ushered them through effortlessly.

“You make a good case for it,” Jonah said a little breathlessly, his hands starting to wander across his lover’s— fiancé’s —lower back, skimming down his hips and across his ass. Garrett arched into the touch even as he shut the door behind them.

The room was dark, with no windows and low, slowly oscillating white-and-blue lights travelling up and down the walls. The colors were meant to be calming, but all they did for Jonah was make him more and more desperate as they cast Garrett’s face into shadow, accentuating the sharp lines of his cheekbones and chin, the sultry twist of his mouth, and his pale eyes, somehow bright in the darkness, almost as though they were backlit. His sleek blond hair was styled away from his face, and Jonah gave

into his impulse to mess it up and slid one hand up Garrett's spine, across the smooth skin of his neck, and into the soft, feathery strands. He got a grip and pulled Garrett's head back, just enough to expose his throat, then bent and scraped his teeth across the point of Garrett's jaw the way Jonah knew he liked, the way that always made him shudder.

"You haven't even gotten to my closing argument," Garrett gasped, grabbing Jonah's free hand and sliding it down his back. He slipped their fingers beneath the waist of his pants and down the silky skin of his ass, then nudged Jonah's hand toward his crease. A moment's exploration found the surprising slickness, and Jonah felt his arousal go from simmering to nearly boiling over in a second.

"You got yourself ready for me?" he asked, his voice so grainy he barely recognized it, but Garrett seemed to like it if the sudden hitch in his breathing was anything to go by.

"I didn't want to waste time if there wasn't much of it," he said, coiling one leg around Jonah's thigh.

"And this is what you want, baby?" Jonah circled his finger around Garrett's hole, covering the tip with moisture before he pushed inside. Garrett groaned. "Shh," Jonah chided him, pressing his finger deeper into that slick heat, almost dizzy with how turned on he was. "Can't be loud, don't want to wake our boy."

"I won't," Garrett gasped, getting onto the tiptoes of his feet in an effort to make it easier for Jonah's fingers to penetrate him. "I just—I want you, I don't want to wait."

"What if I want you to wait?" Jonah asked, turning them so that Garrett's back was toward the bed. He removed his finger and pulled his hand away, then cut off Garrett's complaint by picking him completely up and letting both of them fall onto the mattress. They bounced once before the pressure controls caught on and leveled

off their momentum, and Jonah used the newly firm surface to grind down against Garrett, torturing his own needy arousal through three layers of clothing. Just because his lover didn't feel the need to wear underwear didn't mean Jonah was about to go commando.

"What if," Jonah growled, biting at Garrett's collarbone even as he opened the front of his shirt, "I want to take my time with you? What if I want to suck your cock until you're begging for mercy, what if I wanted to open you up by rimming you instead of you cheatin' at home with your fingers? What if I want to make you suffer for me, darlin'?" He licked a line up Garrett's neck, then mouthed hotly at his earlobe, loving how it made Garrett whine.

"Then I'd have to remind you," Garrett managed around his breathy exhalations, "that we're on a timetable, and that we're not exactly alone here, and sometimes speed is a necessity—a necessity—fuck it, it's an evil, but so are you, so just fuck me already, damn it!"

"Quiet," Jonah said as he pulled back just far enough to get Garrett's slacks down and off his long, golden legs. He shed his own clothes with a minimum of interference, just far enough out of Garrett's reach to make him pouty but not grabby, then leaned back in and slid his hands under the backs of Garrett's knees, bending him in half. Garrett went gracefully, way too hot to look ridiculous in that position like almost every other person alive would, and Jonah's heart gave an unexpected lurch as he looked down at his fiancé, brilliant and beautiful and giving everything he had to Jonah, to Cody, to the idea of them being a family.

It made Jonah want to be tender, but Garrett was writhing against his hands, needy and demanding without saying a word. He clearly didn't want tender. Jonah dipped two fingers into Garrett's body, closing his eyes as they went in easily, helped by lube and Garrett's personal preparations. Then he put Garrett's calves over his shoulders, lined up, and slowly pressed his dick inside the hot, tight ass that belonged

to him now.

The hiss that slowly left Garrett's mouth was music to Jonah's ears. They had a lot of toys; Garrett liked variety in the bedroom, and Jonah was learning to like it himself, but sometimes there was nothing like a simple, straightforward, and completely relentless fuck, and that was what Jonah gave him. The first stroke was the slowest, to make sure there was enough lube that it didn't hurt. Then he picked up speed, staying long and deep while keeping complete control of Garrett's hips, leaving him unable to do anything but lie there and take it. He couldn't even make the noises that Jonah knew he wanted to, and Jonah treasured the wanton frustration on Garrett's face even as he got closer to the edge himself.

He let go with one hand and reached for Garrett's cock, but Garrett shook his head. "After," he panted, and Jonah nodded tightly, then grabbed his hip again and hammered into him. Jonah's eyes closed, and his head arched back as he lost himself in Garrett, pounding his tight, clinging hole faster and harder until one last thrust tipped him over the edge, and he slammed in balls deep and came with a near-silent groan.

Garrett held him in place with his heels against Jonah's back, quivering quietly while Jonah came down from his orgasm until Jonah felt like he could move without getting dizzy. He pulled out slowly, absorbed Garrett's sigh with a kiss, then shifted positions until his face was level with Garrett's cock, flushed bright and hard. Jonah laid his lips reverently over the head even as he brought his hands up between Garrett's legs and slowly pressed three long fingers into his warm, sticky hole.

"Yesss," Garrett whispered, his voice wrecked even though he'd barely made a sound so far. He rocked his hips desperately, sliding between Jonah's mouth and his hand. Jonah took him as deep as he could, loving the taste of Garrett, loving his scent and the soft, squelching sounds his fingers made as they fucked his loosened body. Garrett's hands pressed down on his head, his lungs heaving like he was running a

race, and Jonah decided, finally, to have mercy. He curled his fingers so that they hit Garrett's prostate and rubbed, gentle for a few thrusts, then hard.

Garrett clenched around his fingers, thrust his cock as far down Jonah's throat as it would go, and stopped breathing, coming in absolute silence, all tremulous tension and exhausted restraint.

Jonah hummed and swallowed, then relaxed his hand and slowly pulled his fingers out, one at a time. He wiped his fingers off and moved up the bed to lie next to Garrett, kissing his shoulder and chest and marveling, like he did almost every time, at the fact that they were actually doing this. Not just fucking, but loving, having a relationship, getting married . Garrett was his fiancé , he was going to tie himself to Jonah and Cody legally as well as emotionally. It was kind of overwhelming.

"You'll be happy to know," Garrett said after a few minutes of quiet worship, "that my ship has really excellent soundproofing. Really, truly fantastic. Each room is like an island unto itself."

"That's good news, darlin'," Jonah murmured, smiling against his lover's sweaty skin.

"I thought so. Otherwise, I might have an aneurysm trying to keep quiet one night, and that would be tragic."

"A terrible waste," Jonah agreed. He pulled back and sprawled out beside Garrett, grateful now for the cool temperature in the suite. "To show my appreciation, I'll let you take the first shower."

"We could shower together," Garrett suggested hopefully. "Cleanliness-oriented activities only, I swear."



“Can’t trust you.” Jonah shook his head mock regretfully. “You’ve got odd ideas of what constitutes an activity. Besides, one of us should be with Cody, just in case.”

“Oh, fine.” Garrett heaved himself up with a sigh, grabbed his clothes off the floor, and stalked off to the attached bathroom, giving Jonah an excellent view of his bare ass and thighs shining with cum and lube. It was hot enough that Jonah felt himself stir despite his recent orgasm, and he mentally smacked himself for insisting on being responsible.

He rolled to his feet, walked to the door, and cracked it open, just to check. Cody was still on his side, eyes closed, completely still except for his quiet breathing. The room was otherwise empty.

Maybe there was time for a friendly shower after all.

### Chapter six

#### Garrett

Three solid weeks of flying through space equaled definite boredom after about the first week. The fastest route from Pandora to Paradise didn't get close to any sights interesting enough to detour for, and the blackness beyond the hatch was rarely broken even by a distant star.

Most of space was just ... empty. Of everything. No life, no color, no heat or fission or exciting chemistry. Just unending expanses of nothingness that could drive a person insane if they let themselves go.

Garrett had never been bothered by the vastness of space. Of course, he'd been a rather dramatic teenager, the sort to color his entire room black and listen to angry, hopeless music. The melancholia of such nothingness had appealed to his angsty side, and the solipsist in him kind of liked the idea that he was the only sure thing that he knew was real, and that everything else was just something he'd dreamed up. He got a strange sort of comfort out of looking around and seeing a forever's worth of nothing.

Jonah just ignored it all. He didn't like it, didn't dislike it: for him, flying was his job, and it didn't really matter where he was doing it, he just had to worry about getting from point A to point B. If he played his music a little louder in the ship than he did at home, and if the lights were a little brighter, well, those were valid coping mechanisms, and that was fine. Being on a ship was second nature for Jonah, having grown up a Drifter, and Garrett knew he didn't have to worry about his fiancé.

The problem came with Cody, and it was one that Garrett felt he should have seen coming and planned for.

Cody was a kid, an active, bouncy kid who liked to run around and climb things and generally got his kicks exhausting himself. He hadn't grown up shipboard like his dad, and he wasn't used to tight quarters like Garrett. He'd been adequately distracted for a while, working his way through the movie holos, finishing the homework packet that was supposed to last the entire three weeks, and learning the basics of flying a ship from Jonah.

For about a day after that he was antsy, unable to sit still, fighting back against every suggestion for how to pass the time that either of them came up with. The next day he was worse, listless and sleepy but not wanting to go to his room and protesting vigorously when either of them tried to get him to go to bed.

Cody finally cried himself out and fell into an exhausted sleep in Jonah's arms while Garrett spelled him at the controls. They stared at each other over his head and shared a tired smile.

"We're going to have to figure something else out," Garrett said quietly. "We are not doing this for another two weeks."

Jonah scrubbed a hand over his face tiredly. "I know. Not sure what more we can do, though."

"Well, he's not sleeping when we are, clearly. I have the white noise generator going in his room, and it's set to mimic the sound of rain falling at home, but it's not doing the trick. He's not comfortable enough to fall asleep even with that."

"Huh." Jonah looked down at Cody and then back up. "This is probably gonna annoy you, but ... we could try letting him sleep in our room? It worked when he had

nightmares, and he's not that much older now."

"Why would that annoy me?"

Jonah quirked an eyebrow, and Garrett chuckled. "Well, yes, that , but I can be a monk for the duration of this flight if it means Cody's in a better mood. What I can't deal with is him being as moody as I remember me being at this age. I know exactly how much of a pain in the ass I was as a child, and there's no way our kid is heading down that road."

"It's a short-term solution," Jonah warned. "He needs something to do while he's awake, or he'll start breakin' stuff."

Garrett waved a hand dismissively. "I have an idea about that too. He's done with his work, so now he can help me with mine."

"Cody's a little young for complex climate modeling, don't ya think?"

"He's not too young to learn to use the simulator," Garrett replied. "I don't need it right now, but I can teach him to use the animate feature. He's tired of watching shows? We'll let him make one instead."

"Martina would kill you if she knew you were lettin' him play around with the priciest piece of equipment in the lab," Jonah said with a smile. "I'm kinda surprised she let you bring it with, honestly. Doesn't she have a tendency to hang on to things?"

"Like a vulture clutching a carcass."

"A what?"

Oh, right. Minimal experience with animals. "A vulture is a type of bird, a scavenger.

It's big and ugly and smart, and it's very opportunistic. They've been introduced to over a dozen worlds in the Central System, in part to keep down the rest of the cloned animal populations.

"By the way, whoever thought redesigning Old Earth animals, and putting them in wildlife reserves based on their 'cuteness,' was a goddamn idiot. There's this zoo, Chibi World?" He shuddered. "Most frightening experience of my young life. They crossed a panda with an orangutan, and the thing ripped through its enclosure and rampaged around the park during my visit there. My class had to barricade ourselves in the cafeteria and wait for the robots to tranq it, which took hours." Garrett shook his head, then pointed a finger at Jonah. "Speaking of which, the pet thing? Is an absolute no as far as I'm concerned. Pets are nothing but pain and suffering."

Jonah stared at him with slightly wide eyes. "What the hell's a panda?"

"I'll show you sometime when Cody isn't around, being all impressionable." Garrett set the helm to autopilot and stood up. "Let's go to bed and see if it works out."

Cody didn't even wake up as they all settled in, and he slept a solid eight hours nestled between the pair of them. He woke up when they did, though, and insisted on being with at least one of them at all times, which meant fast, solitary showers and accompanying him to his room to change his clothes. Breakfast was a little subdued, with Cody on the edge of pouting as he chased his cereal around the bowl with his spoon.

"So," Garrett said cheerfully as he finished his coffee, "are you ready to go to work?"

Cody frowned. "I don't have any more schoolwork; I finished it all."

"Not that kind of work. This is special work. Something very, very exciting, something completely brand new."

“How exciting?”

“ So exciting,” Garrett confided. “And important. And I need your help to do it.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He stood up from the table. “You ready?”

Cody glanced at Jonah, who smiled. “Go on, bucko.” Those few words of approval were all Cody needed, and he grabbed Garrett’s hand and pulled him down toward the makeshift lab that used to be the ship’s gym.

“Is it in here?”

“Yes,” Garrett said, heading over to the simulator and turning it on. He loaded up the simplest visual program and pulled a chair over for Cody. “It’s got to be done with this.”

Cody stood on the chair and looked into the viewfinder of the machine. “But I don’t know how to use this.”

“I can teach you,” Garrett said. “We’re going to use it to make a holofilm. One about what things are like back on Pandora since my family hasn’t gotten to come and visit us there yet. We can load images and sounds, and you can draw the things that aren’t in the database.”

Cody looked at him solemnly. “That sounds really hard.”

“It’s going to take some time, that’s true, but you’re smart. I wouldn’t ask you to do it if I didn’t think you could,” Garrett assured him. “I’ll help whenever you need me to, but I think this would be a great gift for when we arrive.”

“Do you think it will make your family like me better?”

How was this even a question? “Are you kidding me?” Garrett scoffed, leaning in and hugging Cody around the shoulders. “You’re their absolute favorite. Every time they call, who do they want to talk to first?”

“Um ... me.”

“Exactly. They can’t wait to see you. I’m hoping this will make them like me better.”

Cody giggled. “They already like you!”

“Yes, usually, but a little extra ammo never hurts. So. Want to learn how to load the environments?”

“Yeah.”

The morning was pretty slow, hampered by Garrett’s compulsive need to step in and help until Cody finally told him he could, “Figure it out by myself, okay, please, Garrett?” The afternoon went better, Garrett only stepping in when Cody needed help drawing something or tracing a movement pattern in 3D. Jonah joined them after dinner so Cody could show them what he’d come up with so far, and he duly gave it the praise it was due.

That night, as Cody lay sleeping between them, Jonah whispered, “You know, you’re kinda brilliant, darlin’.”

Garrett smiled lazily. “What, because I kept Cody distracted?”

“Because you made him happy,” Jonah corrected. “You came up with a game plan, something to do to keep him interested, and it’s educational too. Maybe you should

moonlight as a teacher.”

“Mmm, no. I’d sooner shoot myself in the face than stare down a class full of seven-year-olds every day, but thanks for thinking nice things about me, babe.” He grinned. “Between you teaching him to fly and me teaching him my job, I think Cody will be ready for colony-wide domination at around ten. Then we can move on to the rest of the Fringe. He’ll make a wonderful despot.”

“Don’t give him ideas.”



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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:08 am*

### Chapter seven

#### Cody

“How close are we now?” Cody demanded, staring intently out at the blackness beyond the viewport.

“Close,” his dad said for the millionth time as he checked the gauges that monitored the ship’s velocity and angle. Cody knew all about those. He could name every single gauge on the flight console, and he could read most of them too.

“Can’t we go faster?”

“Nope,” his dad said cheerfully. “This is as fast as it gets until we get a little closer to Paradise.”

“And then can we speed up?”

“Then we slow down, bucko. Gotta be safe.”

Cody flopped across the back of the copilot’s chair with a sigh. “Safe is so booooring.”

“Poor kid,” his dad crooned. Cody frowned. Whenever his father used that tone of voice, Cody knew he was being sarcastic. “Doomed to a life of dullness and despair by being forced to obey all the safety rules and regs. Angels weep for you, my son.”

“You’re not funny.” Cody pouted. It was a dumb joke; his dad wasn’t funny at all. He

stared ahead again. “How close are we now ?”

His dad gave that slow, special sigh that Cody knew meant he was running out of patience. “Not close enough for you to be askin’ me that again. How about you go finish gettin’ ready to land?”

“I’m ready,” Cody replied quickly. He was too; he’d showered and brushed his hair and dressed in his best clothes, the ones Garrett ordered him that made him look kinda like a Space Ranger. They were blue and green and so cool. He even had shoes to match.

“Then how about you go help Garrett get ready? I’ll holler as soon as there’s somethin’ to see.”

“Fine,” Cody huffed, rolling his eyes. He knew a dismissal when he heard it. He jumped down from the chair and marched off toward his dad’s room, where Garrett was probably still picking what to wear. He had more clothes than Cody and his dad combined, and it took him forever to get dressed.

The door was closed. “Garrett?” Cody asked as he knocked. “Are you ready yet?”

“Almost,” Garrett called out.

Cody thought about that for a moment, then said, “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

He pressed his palm to the door, and it swung open immediately. The room was kind of a mess; there was a pile of clothes on the bed, another heap thrown over the chair, and the whole place smelled moist, like the shower had been going for a really long time. No Garrett, though. “Where are you?”

“In the bathroom.”

Cody picked his way across the floor and squeezed into the tiny bathroom next to Garrett, then looked up at him. His mouth dropped open. “Wow.”

“Wow, huh?” Garrett teased, smiling at Cody through his reflection on the mirrored wall. “That’s nice.”

“You look really pretty.” He did, too, in some kind of bright-blue suit that was just as soft as it looked and sharpened his corners so much that he almost looked like a Build-A-Bot toy. He’d styled his hair into weird crisscrossing layers that reminded Cody of waves, and his skin was almost glowing. Plus, he smelled good, like some of the flowering trees in the arboretum back home.

“Pretty. Well, that’s acceptable, I suppose, although I was going for stunning.”

Cody frowned. Stunning? “Like you want to knock people down?”

“Metaphorically speaking, yes.”

“Oh.” Cody considered that for a moment, then patted Garrett’s back. “Maybe you will, then.” He didn’t want Garrett to think all his work was for nothing, but Cody didn’t really think he was going to actually start knocking people down. “Um, what’s ‘metaphorically’?”

Garrett opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say anything, the ship’s com sounded. “Passenger vessel, this is Paradise Tower 115, please identify yourselves.”

“We’re here!” Cody yelled. He ran out of the bathroom and almost fell over a pile of shoes on his way back to the cockpit.

“Tower, this is the Icarus , registration number PD37592, out of Pandora,” his dad said into the com as Cody launched himself into the copilot’s chair. His dad looked over at him and made a “shhh” motion, and Cody obeyed even though he didn’t want to. He could see Paradise now, a bright orangey-brown circle in the distance, dotted with swirls of white.

The air changed scents as Garrett joined them, and when his dad turned to look at him, his eyes got wide, and his jaw dropped a little. He didn’t even seem to hear the person over the com respond, and Cody wondered if that was what Garrett meant when he said “stunning.”

Whatever, it was annoying, and they were going to get in trouble if his dad didn’t talk back. Cody nudged him with his foot.

“Sor—sorry, Tower, repeat that last transmission, please?” his dad said, turning reluctantly back to the console. Garrett just grinned and placed a kiss on the top of his dad’s head as he came around and shifted Cody into his lap so they could share the copilot’s seat.

“You’re cleared for landing at the governor’s private dock. Berth six. Just follow the coordinates, Icarus , you’ll do fine.”

“Roger that, Tower. Icarus out.” His dad shut off the com, and they all watched as Paradise grew larger and larger in the viewport.

“Will your family be there when we land?” Cody asked, his nerves overcoming his impatience for the first time that day.

“Probably, unless there’s some emergency,” Garrett said, like emergencies were just boring, everyday kinds of things.

“Do I look as nice as you?”

“You look great,” Garrett assured him, giving Cody a kiss as well, and even though he wasn’t a little kid anymore and didn’t need kisses, it was kind of nice to get one.

“You both do.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” his dad said briskly, but he was smiling too. “Time to strap in, guys, we’re going to hit atmosphere in thirty.”

“You heard the man,” Garrett said. He set Cody down and gestured to the small seat that was specially installed for him at the back of the cockpit. Cody pulled it down, hopped up, and buckled himself in. Garrett checked that the fit was snug before going back to his own chair and fastening his harness.

The planet got larger and larger, all the black vanishing from the viewscreen, and then they hit the top layer of clouds. The ship began to rumble. Cody watched the viewscreen go totally white from clouds, and he clenched his hands around the edge of the seat. How could his dad really tell where they were going? It was easy in space; there was nothing to run into, but now there might be something in the clouds, and they wouldn’t even see it, and they could hit it, and then they’d crash.

“It’s okay, bucko,” his dad said softly, and Cody figured he must have made a noise. “We’re fine. We’ll be down in a minute.” The clouds thinned, going from white to gray to light brown, and then there weren’t any clouds at all, nothing but clear sky and distant, orangey rocks and, right in the middle, a silver city.

“Wow,” Cody whispered. It was so different from the Box, so much brighter.

“That’s Rapture,” Garrett told him, craning his neck back so he could look at Cody. “The capital of Paradise. It’s the biggest city on the planet, with around a million people living there. Most of the military’s facilities are there as well.”

A million people? “That’s a big city.”

“Compared to the Box, yes,” Garrett agreed. The ship turned slightly and headed for a large white structure on a hill. “That’s the Governor’s Mansion. That’s where we’re going to be staying.”

It was huge. “Your dad lives there?”

“Yes, but so do a lot of other people. You won’t get bored.”

“I just don’t wanna get lost.”

Garrett chuckled. “That too.”

Daddy was quiet all through the landing, guiding them down onto the fluorescent landing circle and settling the ship with a faint hiss from the compressors. Maybe he felt nervous too. As soon as the light went off, Cody unbuckled and went to stand next to his dad. He took his hand and held it tight. Garrett peered out of the viewport and grinned. “There they are! Ready to meet everyone?”

Cody’s heart felt like it would jump out of his mouth if he tried to say anything. He just nodded and held onto his daddy’s hand tighter.

Garrett led the way down the ramp. Cody’s feet felt stuck, heavy and hard to move, and the bright sunlight stung his eyes. He buried his face in his daddy’s side, and a second later, he was picked up and held tight. “You okay, bucko?” his daddy asked gently.

“My eyes hurt,” he confessed.

“Yeah, mine too. We’ll be inside soon, though.” His daddy ran a comforting hand

through his hair and kept walking forward. Cody kept his eyes closed, feeling tears seep out at the edges. He couldn't see, but he could hear what was going on up ahead.

"Gare!" There was a slapping sound, like someone getting a really hard hug. "Finally! You know you're almost a day late, right?" It was a light voice, not high like a girl's but excited. Wyl's voice.

"Don't pretend you learned how to tell time," Garrett teased him. "Where's Robbie?"

"Last-minute disciplinary session; some moron accidentally discharged his rifle into one of the tanks. No damage done, but Robbie couldn't put off dealing with it. He's making us all dinner tonight as an apology."

"Does he know that?"

"I'll tell him when he gets here," Wyl said cheekily.

"Wyl, stop monopolizing him," a woman said. "Gare, welcome! And Jonah, Cody, don't hang back!" Slender arms enveloped both of them, and then soft hands touched his face. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"The sun's makin' his eyes tear up," Daddy explained for him.

"Oh, poor thing, of course. Here, give him to me, we'll go to the terrace and get into the shade." Daddy passed him over, and Cody found himself tucked against a very different body. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had held him, but it was nice. She smelled even better than Garrett. He heard his daddy explaining things to the others while she walked until the intensity of the light and heat suddenly vanished.

Cody blinked his eyes open, and the first thing he saw was Claudia's face a few

inches from his. She was wearing a long white dress and had her dark hair loose around her shoulders. It made her look younger than she usually did over the holoscreen.

“Hi,” she said with a smile. “Better now?”

“Yeah,” Cody replied, wiping his eyes on the palm of his hand. “Sorry.”

“Oh, you don’t have to be sorry, sweetheart. I’m sorry I didn’t think ahead.” She kissed his cheek and set him down but kept one hand on his shoulder. Cody let her pull him close. “You’re even more handsome in person.”

“Thank you,” he said, still shy but starting to feel better. He looked at the table they were next to. There was a bassinet on top of it, rocking itself gently. “Is Renee in there?”

“Yes. She’s sleeping right now, but you can still take a look if you want.”

“Sure.” He stood on one of the chairs and leaned over to see into the bassinet. There was baby Renee, hair wild around her head and one foot stuck in her mouth. She was sucking on it as she slept. “She’s eating her foot,” Cody whispered.

“Maybe it tastes good,” Claudia whispered back. “Like chocolate. You could lick it and see.”

“Gross!”

“Or maybe she’d like yours better,” Claudia suggested. “You could let her use it for a while, see if she thinks it tastes good too.”

“Not these feet,” Garrett said, suddenly behind him. Cody used his hand to help jump



down and looked around for his dad. He was heading toward them, still talking with Garrett's dad, Miles. "They get spontaneously covered with dirt, it's like magic. Even on the ship, I don't know how he does it, but I find fresh grass stains on his clothes."

"But not today," Cody argued, "'cause I just took a shower!"

"It doesn't matter if they're dirty or not, Cody needs his feet," Wyl cut in. He was a little shorter and skinnier than Garrett, with dark hair, dark eyes, and a wide grin. "Remember what I said we'd do when you got here?" he asked Cody.

"Go for a bike ride?" Cody said.

"Exactly! And you can't ride a hoverbike with a baby attached to your foot."

"You keep your bike away from my baby," Claudia scolded him.

Cody finally began to relax. It was like talking to them over the holoscreen; they were just as funny and kind except it was better because they were really here now. He reached out and took Wyl's hand. "When can we go?"

"Only after you put your things away in your bedroom," Daddy said as he and Miles finally caught up.

Cody didn't know Miles very well; he was working a lot of the time when Claudia called. He looked a lot like Garrett, except gray hair instead of blond, a little taller and a little less polished. He held out a hand to Cody, who shook it.

"Welcome to Paradise, Cody," Miles said warmly.

"Thank you, sir."

“Not sir. Just Miles. Ready to see your rooms?”

“I get more than one?” Cody gaped.

“Oh, son,” Miles said, turning him toward the mansion, “have you seen the size of this place? You could have ten rooms if you wanted them, but I thought we’d start with three. Want to take a look?”

“Yes,” Cody said, following him toward the door.

Three whole rooms all to himself, hoverbike rides, Claudia, and a huge house to play in ...

This was going to be so much fun.

### Chapter eight

#### Jonah

The mansion was immense. That was really the only word for it. Jonah had been inside some damn big houses before; hell, he'd lived on a Drifter commune ship that had been cobbled together to consume a cubic mile, only cohesive in the central core. That had been damn big, but it wasn't the same as this place. This house was intended for a single family: the governor's. The governor of an entire Alliance planet who was also Garrett's father, and a general, and the son of one of the oldest, wealthiest Central System dynasties. To say that Jonah was comfortable with the situation would have been grossly overstating it.

Cody was having the time of his life, though. His shyness had lasted all of about a minute, and from there on out, he became the cheerful, friendly, and above all noisy child that Jonah recognized. He bounced between the different members of the welcoming committee, talking nonstop about the movie he'd made for them and how soon they could watch it, about how different it was here and whether there were any toys in his room, when they could have dinner and what it was going to be, and when he could go for a ride on Wyl's bike. Wyl was encouraging him, and Claudia looked completely smitten, even with the baby in her arms. Miles was quieter, but Jonah kind of liked it that way. The man intimidated the hell out of him.

They got to Cody's rooms, which were around the size of the entire top floor of Jonah's house back on Pandora, and his kid promptly lost the last of his self-control and just ran around, eyes wide, mouth open, and joyfully whooping at everything he saw. The rooms looked like they had been designed for Cody. They probably had

been, actually, given the company. The walls were covered with Space Ranger holograms, the bed was shaped like a rocket bike, and the floor had pressure sensors that triggered a lightning-bolt effect wherever someone took a step.

“You can change it to do other things,” Wyl added, pulling up a control pad on the wall beside the bed. “Jump.” Cody jumped, and a ripple effect flowed from his feet across the floor.

“Wow ...”

“Jump again.” This time it was fireworks, a different color every time.

Cody looked over at Wyl worshipfully. “What else can it do?”

“Oh, man, whatever you can think of; come here.” Cody ran over to join Wyl, and they settled in to play with the floor. Claudia held up Renee to watch the colors change as she stepped around the room, and the baby seemed transfixed.

“That’s it, hand her over.” Garrett made peremptory, grabby fingers at his stepmother. “You’ve had her forever; it’s my turn to hold my little sister.” Claudia rolled her eyes but handed Renee over to Garrett, who curled her into the crook of his arm and grinned at her. It was an expression Jonah didn’t see very often on his fiancé, one that was totally open and uncalculating, even more than with Cody. Renee was too little to need teasing or coaxing—all she wanted was Garrett’s undivided attention and apparently his face to grab onto. Garrett let her little hands roam freely over his mouth and nose but backed up a bit when they got close to his hair.

“What?” he said when he saw Jonah smile. “It took forever for me to get it this way.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can hear you thinking it,” Garrett said with a sniff, turning to look back at his little sister. “You’ve got good genes, Renee, but remember, being beautiful still takes work. You can’t let the haters bring you down to their sartorial level.”

“Hey, I like the way you look no matter what,” Jonah protested.

“Gare spent hours in front of the mirror as a kid,” Miles said. “I’m hoping Renee won’t be quite so attached to her own reflection.”

“We can’t heeear you,” Garrett singsonged, spinning in a slow circle. “La la la la la ...” Images of blue orchids sprang up beneath his feet, the result of Wyl and Cody’s latest try, and Jonah couldn’t have looked away if he tried.

A quiet knock sounded by the door. They turned, and Jonah finally saw Robbie Sinclair, the last member of their intimate group. He was in his marine uniform, a black military jacket and slacks with a colonel’s insignia on each shoulder. His hair was short, sandy with gray at the temples, and he had a calm, almost grave expression on his handsome face. It changed to a smile as soon as he and Garrett made eye contact.

“There you are! Honestly, what is wrong with your people, shooting guns at tanks and making you late for the important things in life?” Garrett grouched. “Hang on a sec.” He turned to Jonah. “Can you take her for a moment?”

“Uh ... sure.” An instant later, Jonah’s arms were full of baby, and Garrett was at the door and in Robbie’s embrace. It was tight and warm and ...

Jonah turned his eyes back down to Renee. She stared back at him with bright, curious blue eyes. They looked a lot like Garrett’s, actually—the same warmth and long, long lashes. She reached for his face, and he intercepted her little fingers with one of his own, letting her tug on that instead. It had been a long time since he’d held

a baby. Those had been a tense couple of years with Cody, always worried about his health and dealing with a slow and painful separation from the life Jonah had always known. Renee started to squirm, and a moment later, Claudia was there, reaching for her.

“She’s probably hungry,” she explained. “I should take her back to our wing and feed her. Miles—” She turned toward the door, then frowned. “Where has he gotten off to?” Miles and Robbie and Garrett were all missing although Garrett came back into the room after a few seconds.

“Sorry, Robbie had to steal Dad because he’s a heartless bastard with a lousy sense of timing,” Garrett explained nonchalantly. Wyl sent him an aggravated look. “I’m sure it’s nothing serious,” Garrett added. “Some kind of a thing over a thing, whatever; their work is never done. So!” He looked at Jonah. “We should get moved in ourselves. Our suite is right down the hall.”

“We should get Cody settled first, grab the rest of his stuff out of the ship—” Jonah started, but his son looked up with wide eyes.

“No, not yet! Wyl has to show me how the rest of the room works. Can we do it later? Please?”

“It’s not a problem, I have nothing else on my schedule today,” Wyl added, his fingers tapping fast against the tops of his thighs. He never seemed to get entirely still. “I’d love to spend some more time with Cody. You guys go get moved in, and you”—he smiled at Claudia—“feed your baby. We’re good here.”

“You sure, bucko?” Jonah asked. All he got was a distracted nod as Cody began experimenting with sound effects.

“I guess we’ll all meet for dinner.” Claudia sighed. “Your rooms are all set up, Gare,

but just let me know if you need anything else.”

“I’ll let the staff know, not you,” Garrett chided her. “Honestly, woman, are you not busy enough? Do you need another baby to use up that extra time?”

“One is enough, thanks,” she said dryly. She left, and after a few moments of reassuring himself that Cody would be fine, Jonah let Garrett tug him out of his son’s rooms. They walked fifty feet down the hall and turned into the open door.

Garrett’s suite was huge. The ceiling was vaulted marble, the furniture was sparse, and there were no rugs to soften the hard, cold lines of stone and metal. It felt oddly sterile and sort of uncomfortable. Garrett shut the door behind them, then looked around.

“I almost never stayed in these rooms,” he said. “I always preferred sleeping on my ship. I’ve had the Icarus for more than half my life, and no matter where I was living, it was a constant place that was just mine, where I could do what I wanted to.”

“Yeah, this place is ... it’s ...” Jonah wasn’t quite sure how to express how awkward he felt there—not just in these rooms but in this entire place. He had none of his son’s ease of integration; he felt every footstep like it hurt. “Different,” he finished.

“I know. Try to ignore it.” Garrett took Jonah’s hand and pulled him further into the suite, past an uncomfortable-looking couch and a tremendous holoscreen. “Honestly, the only advantage that these rooms have over the ship is the size of the bathroom and the size of the bed.” Garrett pulled Jonah through an archway with a holographic barrier for a door, showing a stone facade on the outside. Jonah flinched a little as he passed through, then relaxed once he saw they were entering a bedroom.

“Wow.” That was a big, big ... “That’s a big bed.”

“Yeah, I think the original decorator just lost their mind when it came to this room and decided, fuck it, let’s just fill it all with mattress.” It covered the entire back wall and left a slender walkway around the edge of it so someone could get to the bathroom and a retracting closet in the left wall. “I mostly used this place to store my wardrobe.” Garrett considered the bed for a moment. “And to have threesomes, but I didn’t really do that very often.”

Jonah could just see it. “You sure we can’t sleep on the ship?”

“Oh, baby, are you jealous?” Garrett wrapped long arms around Jonah’s back, holding him securely. “You don’t have anything to be jealous about.” Warm lips pressed to the back of Jonah’s neck. “I never loved my life here, no matter who I was with. I never even came close to loving it with anyone who came into this room. But I love my life now. And I could totally love you on my bed right now.”

Sometimes sex was the question and the answer all in one. “Hope they’ve changed the sheets since the last time you were in here,” Jonah said.

“Oh, they’re fresh,” Garrett assured him, swiveling around Jonah’s body and sitting down on the edge of the bed. “White and virginal. Perfect for making all delicious and filthy and debauched.”

“You wanna debauch our sheets?” Jonah asked, distracted by Garrett’s swift undressing. Blue cloth fell away and was tossed aside as Garrett got nude. He wasn’t hard yet, but he looked well on his way.

“Well, I want to debauch you on them. It’s debauchery through osmosis, baby.” Garrett tugged Jonah closer, then set to work getting him naked. Jonah tried to help, but Garrett slapped his hands away. “Mine,” he said simply. Jacket, shirt, belt, pants ... Jonah’s brain went back online when he realized he was effectively hobbled as long as he kept his shoes on, and he kicked them and his pants off before joining



Garrett on the bed.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Jonah mumbled around the kisses they shared, both of them on their knees, touching each other nonstop. “Cody could come in here any time.”

“No, Wyl knows the score. He’ll keep him occupied for at least half an hour,” Garrett said, biting gently at Jonah’s lower lip. “That’s enough time for me to blow you.”

“Oh, hell.” Jonah clenched his eyelids shut for a moment. “Gotta save some time for me, darlin’. I don’t want to leave you hangin’.”

“I can come just from looking at you,” Garrett assured him. “But we’ll see.” He pushed Jonah onto his back and crouched between his legs. He looked strange there, beautiful and a little untouchable all made up as he was, and Jonah reached down and worked his fingers into Garrett’s sculpted hair, messing it up as well as he could from that angle.

“Better?” Garrett asked archly, no word about his hours of work gone to waste now.

“Almost.” Jonah tugged, and Garrett bent down immediately and sucked him into his mouth.

Fuck ... there was nothing like this, nothing. Being inside of his fiancé’s body was good, it was so good, but when it came to coming hard and fast, there was no substitute for Garrett’s mouth. Warm heat enveloped Jonah’s length, sliding up slowly, with his slick tongue bathing the underside of the shaft and circling the head eagerly. Eager, Garrett was always so fucking eager to take him in ...

A hint of teeth caught at the flare of his foreskin. “Fuck,” Jonah groaned, his body caught between flinching away from the sensation and moving into it. Garrett

hummed appreciatively as he pulled back.

“Good?”

“Naughty,” Jonah said, and Garrett smiled.

“That means good.”

“Garrett—”

Warmth again, heat and pressure and fast , this was going to be really fast, so fast it would have been embarrassing if they were at home, but this was the first time since they’d left that Garrett had really laid hands on him outside of a few very tight, very hurried showers on the ship, and fast was all Jonah was capable of giving right now. Fast, hips rocking up without him realizing it, noises he hadn’t approved coming out of a rebellious throat, all of it tight and on the edge of losing control, the very fucking edge, and when Garrett just opened his throat and took him deep and pressed down hard on the skin right beneath his balls—

It was over. Done. He came with a flash of light, with a flare of darkness, all the effects Cody had been displaying on his floor erupting behind Jonah’s eyelids. He came hard and panting and mostly delirious, and Garrett just let him flail and grasp and hold his once-perfect hair way too tightly as he rode out the sensations, one shivering wave at a time.

Slowly the tension slid away and so did Jonah’s grasp on Garrett, dissolving into pleasant lethargy. Garrett petted his thighs gently for a moment before straddling his chest. Jonah’s arms were trapped by his sides, and it was all he could do to open his eyes and look at his lover as Garrett took himself in hand and beat off quickly, short, jerky strokes of his wrist culminating in a spray of white all across Jonah’s neck and chin. The scent of it filled his nose and made his mouth water. Garrett, because he

had to be psychic, caught his breath and swirled a finger through the mess, then lifted it to Jonah's lips. He took it into his mouth and suckled gently, cleaning it off with his tongue.

"You're mine," Garrett said hoarsely, his expression strangely fevered and needy. "We're for each other. Nothing else matters."

"Just you," Jonah said, wondering how they had gone from sexual to soothing so fast. "Course it's just you, darlin'."

For a second it looked like Garrett would say something else, something serious, but then his body became like liquid, and he slid down onto his side, draping himself casually over Jonah. "Good. Shower? Because no offense, but you're a fucking mess, baby."

"I blame you."

"Fair enough."

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:08 am*

### Chapter nine

#### Garrett

At 0300 in the morning, not even a day after arriving on Paradise, Garrett shouldn't have been awake. No matter that the artificial days and nights on his ship didn't match up perfectly with the cycle on Paradise, it had still been an exhaustively long day, and Garrett should have been too tired to be up.

In truth, he was too tired to be up. There was nothing he wanted more than to be nestled face-first into the gigantic bed in his ridiculous suite, taking up more than his fair share of the space and getting away with it because Jonah was good that way. He could be sleeping in his fiancé's arms right now, and instead, he was dressed (in loose, informal house clothes, but still, dressed was dressed) and making his way to the juncture of the Governor's Mansion and the military's headquarters. All because Robbie had to "talk."

Garrett didn't usually care for Robbie's talks. They too frequently had the dual purpose of shaming and educating him; just anticipating it was making Garrett defensive. The worst thing about it was, no matter what Robbie had on his mind, it was probably worth listening to. Because he couldn't be happy with being a superior human being on his own time, he had to try to improve everyone else too. Fuck. Some of Garrett's most epic bitch sessions with Wyl had been on this very subject although Wyl was better about having his imperfections pointed out to him than Garrett was.

It wasn't until the marines let Garrett into Robbie's office and went off to fetch their

commanding officer that Garrett realized, a little too late to be useful, that when Robbie had said, “We need to talk soon,” and had given him that meaningful look, he might have meant sometime during the actual day, not at 0300 in the morning. But the prospect had gnawed at Garrett, taking tiny, vicious bites out of his subconscious until he had given up sleep as a bad deal and forced himself up with a sigh.

If he had been a little more forthcoming, Garrett probably could have avoided this whole conundrum in the first place. He knew what this talk was going to be about. But honestly, it wasn’t relevant—it wasn’t —that there was a Drifter ship in orbit above Paradise. There were hundreds of Drifter clans, probably thousands of ships. There was no reason for this one to be important, not even to Jonah. So why bother mentioning it?

It might not be relevant, but Garrett knew it would bother his lover. Jonah was the type to brood if he thought he could get away with it. Garrett had just been saving them all some grief. So naturally, of course, Robbie was about to undo all that patient circumspection with his own brand of taking care of someone, which was forthrightness, honesty, and a bunch of other crap.

“When I said ‘talk,’” Robbie said from the door, and Garrett swiveled around in the chair he had claimed to face him, “I didn’t mean ‘wake me up to come and deal with your issues at all hours.’”

“Not true,” Garrett teased with a smile, determined to get his jabs in while he still had a leg to stand on. “You’ve never put limitations on discussions of serious subjects. You should; it would make you a healthier and more rested person, but you don’t. I can only assume that’s the military training taking over your greatly diminished free will.”

“Do not be an asshole to me right now, Gare, I’m this close to yelling at you,” Robbie growled. He had on gray gi pants and a black T-shirt, and he looked completely

edible. Robbie had always worn “annoyed” so well, with that little line between his eyebrows and the harder line of his mouth. Garrett appreciated the fact that he could look and not want, now. It made the teasing easier. “You were supposed to let Jonah know about the Drifters.”

“I don’t really see why.”

“Because it’s something that might affect him, and you’re supposed to discuss things like that with your significant other, Gare.”

“Still not seeing the relevancy.”

Robbie rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. “Here’s some relevancy for you: that ship has been up there for over a standard month, keeping a careful distance from the surface and only trading through intermediaries, like most Drifter ships do. Now all of a sudden, just minutes after Jonah landed your ship, actually, they want permission to dock a shuttle. Not just that, they want to dock it in the closest port in Rapture to the mansion. Any guesses as to what prompted their sudden request?”

Garrett had spent his entire life surrounded by tacticians. It didn’t take more than a second to figure out what Robbie was referring to, and why it had taken him and Miles away from the group yesterday. “Oh, damn it. They must have a skimmer.”

“Exactly,” Robbie agreed. “They heard Jonah’s transmission to the Tower here, recognized the accent, and now someone’s curious. That in and of itself isn’t a problem, but ...”

“If they heard that, what else have they been listening to?” Garrett finished. He felt really tired all of a sudden, tired down to his bones, tired on the inside of his skull, just behind his eyes. “They’ve been listening to ship transmissions going into and out of Paradise.”

“With a pretty high-tech skimmer, too, because we didn’t detect anything when we inspected them before allowing them a long-term space dock,” Robbie said. “It’s just circumstantial right now, but I’m betting that tomorrow we’ll start seeing some of them in town, asking questions, maybe even trying to get in touch. I think they’re interested in Jonah. I’ve got several theories on why.”

“And you want me to facilitate testing those theories by telling Jonah about these newly loquacious Drifters.”

“He can hear it from you, or he can hear it from me,” Robbie said. He was wearing his “determined” face now, and Garrett knew there was no gainsaying it. “For all I know, they just caught a sliver of conversation, and someone recognized him and wants to say hello. It’s not impossible that Jonah would appreciate that. He shouldn’t be denied the right to make a connection just because you’re nervous.”

Garrett scowled. “Fuck you.”

“No, thanks.” They sat and stared at each other in silence for a minute. “What are you really worried about?”

“Nothing I can put a name to,” Garrett said morosely, resigned at this point to telling Robbie the truth.

“Is it the wedding?”

“Only insofar as I wish the wedding was over already, so that I have proof that Jonah and Cody belong to me.”

Robbie raised an eyebrow. “They’re here, with you. Isn’t that proof enough?”

“It’s never enough,” Garrett scoffed. “You know me, I want a dozen impossible

things done for me before breakfast just to feel secure enough to go about the day.”

“You’ve gotten a lot better, Gare,” Robbie said soothingly.

“Yes, well. ‘Better’ is always a relative measure.” He sat quiet under Robbie’s gaze, then gave him a half smile as his former lover walked over to him and clasped his shoulder in one broad, warm hand.

“You’ll be fine,” Robbie stated. No prevarication, just belief. “Both of you. You’ll tell him in the morning?”

“Yes.” Garrett sighed. “Can I make it seem like I just learned it, or does that not queue up with your code of honor?”

“Whatever makes you more comfortable.” Robbie squeezed his shoulder again, then let go. “Now I’m going back to bed. Wyl won’t get any sleep if I don’t.”

“Aww, you’re his teddy-Robin,” Garrett cooed, happy to have a change of subject.

“Don’t call me that.”

“But it’s your legal name: Robin of Locksley.”

“Go to bed , Gare.” Robbie left, and Garrett swung the chair back and forth in a ninety-degree arc, rhythmic and blank.

Go to bed. He could do that; in fact, most of him yearned to slide back into his warm bed and cuddle up to his own teddy-Jonah. But he was awake now, wide awake and pensive and jittery, and he’d be a miserable bedmate at this point. Better to let Jonah sleep. Coffee was what he needed and some time alone. By the time his fiancé woke up, Garrett would have worked out what he needed to do—he’d have found that fine



line between Robbie's abject honesty and his own penchant for obfuscation.

Coffee, then deep thoughts. Garrett got up and headed toward Claudia's kitchen.

### Chapter ten

#### Cody

Breakfast was a big meal here on Paradise. Back home, Cody might eat with his dad or with Garrett but not usually with both, 'cause they had to get to work at different times. Here, though, everyone showed up. Maybe they only did because it was a “special occasion,” like Claudia said, but everyone was there, even Miles and Robbie. They probably made sure to come because the food was so amazing. Cody got to have pancakes with chocolate, caramel, and whipped cream on them, all coated with bright-purple syrup. Dad's pancakes were plain, and Garrett just had coffee, which was weird because he usually ate some cereal or something, but today he looked really tired and kept staring down into his mug. Cody patted him on the knee.

“I think you need a nap.”

Garrett raised one eyebrow. Watching it drove Cody crazy—he had been trying to learn how to do that for months, but he still hadn't figured it out. “Really?”

“Yes. You look sleepy.”

“Huh.”

“You sound sleepy too.”

“Out of the mouths of babes,” Wyl intoned as he made another espresso. Cody frowned.

“I’m not a baby,” he told Wyl. “I’m seven.”

“It’s meant to be taken as kind of a metaphor ...” Wyl began, then sighed. “Never mind. Why are you so tired anyway, Gare?”

“I had an early morning meeting.”

Dad looked over at him. “So that’s where you got off to last night. Who were you meeting?”

“He was with me.” Robbie didn’t speak loudly, but everyone always stopped what they were doing and looked at him when he spoke up. “I wanted to pass on some information I thought you might find interesting. The timing of the rendezvous, by the way, was completely Garrett’s idea. I was all for sleeping through the night.”

“Oh, you traitor.” Garrett threw his unused napkin, which he’d folded in the shape of a spaceship, at Robbie’s chest. “See if I ever lie for you again, Benedict Arnold.”

Cody was completely confused by now. “Who’s Benedict Arnold?”

The table was quiet for a moment. “He was a general on Old Earth,” Miles said at last. “He tried to betray the army he was working for to the enemy. His plot was foiled, but after that, people started using his name to refer to traitors.”

“Note the personal contiguity that I’ve tailored to you with the military nature of the reference,” Garrett added, his fingertips tapping out a rhythm on the tabletop. He didn’t seem to notice he was doing it. “I could have gone with Judas, or Brutus, but one was too religious and the other too political.”

“I’d prefer to be compared to Guy Fawkes if I have to choose,” Robbie said.

“Well, too bad, because traitors can’t be choosers.”

“Mind telling me what the information is?” Dad finally interjected.

Robbie stared at Garrett. Garrett stared back, his fingers tapping faster and faster against the table. Dad finally reached over and took his hand, stopping the rapid beat.

“Darlin’?”

“Yes. Right. There’s a Drifter ship in orbit right above Rapture.” Garrett said it fast, like he was spitting out words that didn’t taste good. “They’ve been here for a while.”

“What’s the name?”

“Is it Grandma’s?”

Cody and his dad spoke at the same time, but Cody hoped they would answer his question first. It would be fun if it was his grandma’s ship; he hadn’t seen her for ... oh ... he couldn’t even really remember the last time he’d seen her. Everything that had happened in his life up to Pandora was kind of blended into one big “before.” The things he did remember were short, tight hallways that went up and over and under, like ropes tied in a big knot, with rooms in strange places and bluish lights that flickered on and off. There had been lots of other kids to play with but lots of sharp edges too.

This one time when he’d been playing hide-and-seek, Cody had wedged himself into a crawl space that went all the way back to the bulkhead. It had been really cold back there, and he’d cut his shoulder scootching all the way in and hadn’t even realized it, because the metal was so frosty it made him numb. None of the other kids found him, and Cody didn’t realize that they’d given up, and the game was over, until he heard his daddy shouting for him. By then he was too cold and stiff to crawl back out. They’d had to move parts of the ship to reach him, and Daddy hadn’t been happy

when he'd found Cody injured.

"It's called the Gondola," Robbie said. "The family name is Dechiara."

"Kilroy," Cody's dad said thoughtfully. "I know him. He usually does business out of the Triad cluster, though. Strange for him to be here."

"Strange how?" Robbie asked immediately.

"Strange in a way that's none of our business, because we don't care," Garrett interjected. He and Robbie stared at each other again. Cody felt his shoulders tense up and didn't know why.

"O- kay !" Wyl's voice was a little too loud, but at least he got everyone's attention.

"I think I've had enough to eat. Cody, are you full?"

"Well ..." Really, he could eat another pancake, probably, but Wyl probably wanted to do something fun. "Yeah. Why?"

"I thought now might be a good time to go for that hoverbike ride. It's not too awfully hot out there yet."

"Yes!" Cody slammed down his fork and kicked the chair back, ready to go.

"Ah, but—" Garrett held up a hand that stopped him. "You're supposed to start your lessons today. If we get back to Pandora and you're behind the class, your teacher will hang me up by my toes."

"Mister Hugelin-Padin just says that," Cody reassured Garrett. "But he never actually does it. I mean, I've never seen him do it."

“If anyone could drive him to it, it would be me,” Garrett said, but he was smiling now. “Okay. Or it’s okay with me as long as you’re back by lunchtime, but you should ask your dad.”

“Fine with me, bucko.” His dad ruffled his hair fondly. Cody rolled his eyes and tried to smooth his curls back down. “Have fun with Wyl. Be good.”

“I’m always good!” Cody paused just long enough to kiss his dad’s cheek, then Garrett’s, before hopping onto the floor and heading out of the kitchen at Wyl’s heels. “Where’s the bike?”

“It’s in the lot, in my personal parking space,” Wyl said, buzzing them through the connecting door between the mansion and the military base. “It’s my favorite way to get around here. Robbie likes tanks, but I think they lack subtlety.”

“I’d like to ride in a tank!”

“I bet you would.” Wyl chuckled.

“I would be very careful if you let me drive it too,” Cody continued, using his “wide, innocent eyes” look on Wyl. It got him what he wanted all the time with his dad and Garrett, but Wyl just smirked.

“Nice try, Cody, but no. Now.” They stopped in an equipment room, where a bored-looking army guy sat reading a magazine at a desk. Behind him was a cage of some kind, with a glowing, filmy outline. “Sergeant Powell.”

“Mr. Leyton,” the man intoned flatly.

“I’d like to requisition a helmet for my friend here.” That had the army guy looking up, and when he saw Cody, his eyes went wide. “I had one ordered special a few

months back.”

“Yeah, I think we have something like that.” The sergeant stood up and swiped his palm over a reader, then hummed low in his throat. The glow vanished, and he opened the door. “Just a second.” He went inside, and Cody bounced anxiously on the balls of his feet. When the man came back out with a shiny, nearly transparent helmet that had the black Space Ranger emblazoned on top of it, Cody’s mouth fell open.

“Wow.”

“Your dad said you’d like this one.” Wyl grinned. “Try it on.”

Cody shoved the helmet down over his head and pressed the loose strap to the other side. The strap bonded to the helmet with an audible snap . “You have to use a special tool to release it,” Wyl explained. “It’s the safest version on the market right now.”

“Cool, can we go now?” Cody didn’t want to hear about how safe it was, he just wanted to go fast .

“I think your friend’s got an agenda,” the sergeant noted.

“I guess so. C’mon, let’s head out.”

Cody didn’t pay attention to anything other than the weight of his sweet new helmet and how awesome it must look until they were in the lot, and Wyl’s bike was right there in front of them. It was so much better than Cody had imagined. “You didn’t say it had lightning bolts!”

“How could it be perfect without lightning bolts?” Wyl replied. He took his own helmet off the handlebars and put it on, then started up the bike, which rose to hover a

few feet from the ground. He lifted Cody onto the back of the bike, then swung his own leg over. He revved the engine, which growled dramatically. Cody shivered with excitement and wrapped his arms tight around Wyl's waist.

"You ready?" Wyl shouted over the noise.

"Yes!"

They roared out of the lot and into the sun, and if Cody's initial yell of joy was a little tempered by a momentary squeeze of fear, well, Wyl would never tell anyone.



### Chapter eleven

#### Jonah

Contrary to what a lot of people seemed to think, Jonah was not, and had never been, easily fooled. It wasn't hard to tell that there was a lot of discomfort in the air, most of it stemming from Garrett. There was a newfound wariness between him and Robbie, something beyond simply being former lovers surrounded by present ones. Jonah didn't press his fiancé about it even though he was curious, because there was another strange new edginess in the air as well, resting firmly between himself and Garrett, and he didn't know what to do about it.

That it pertained to the Drifters in orbit, Jonah knew. That Garrett thought their existence somehow meant that Jonah was suddenly going to abandon everything he had and whisk Cody away into the stars to live with his history again, well, there weren't even words for that kind of crazy. He'd never give up what he had now, not without a hell of a fight, and he couldn't say it any more clearly than that.

There were layers to Garrett's anxiety, stacked up and sifting over and through each other, changing a little more every day. The man had the most complicated heart that Jonah had ever encountered, and if blunt declarations didn't do the trick, then Jonah could be more subtle. He spent every night in Garrett's arms, no matter how hot it got or how long it took him to fall asleep. He woke up with him every morning unless Garrett had taken off first. He kissed him whenever he saw him, light and easy, and every time, his lover smiled a little more freely.

Their bed became a strange, sort-of-sacred space, one where they almost never spoke.

Two weeks into their visit and they were still making love every night or morning, more often if Garrett could get him alone during the day. Garrett was determined, creative, and exhaustive, and after the first couple times, Jonah welcomed the addition of a sound-dampening cloth strung up over their bed like a canopy, muffling all sound to the outside world but encapsulating it for the lovers inside, giving each gasp or laugh or moan a special sort of poignancy.

Jonah pulled out of his lover and stretched out beside him, overheated despite the cool temperature of the room. Garrett's skin was tacky with cum and lube and sweat, and they stuck together a little wherever they touched. Neither of them minded very much. "No school with Cody today?" he asked idly, stroking his fingers into Garrett's hair. It was starting to grow out again, silky gold shining against Jonah's tan hand.

"No lessons, no work, no checking in with Jezria, and Claudia has promised to leave us alone," Garrett replied, groaning with satisfaction as he rubbed his thighs together. Claudia had taken it upon herself to organize their wedding, and she was being thorough. Very, very thorough. Jonah hadn't even known what a boutonniere was before yesterday. "Wyl and Robbie are taking a mental-health day for themselves, and Miles has to work, so I thought we could take Cody into Rapture. We haven't been to the bazaar yet."

"Sounds like fun." They'd gone into Rapture several times in the past two weeks, but once was to a restaurant and the other was to a huge indoor mall, each time with a few plainclothes marines at their sides. Paradise had settled considerably in the past year, but it could still be dangerous, and Miles wasn't taking any chances with a member of his family. Garrett seemed to enjoy the fact that the marines kept any gawkers at a distance and was even more pleased that they hadn't run into any Drifters in their wanderings.

"It will be. There are all sorts of stalls that offer everything from fresh food to cloned pets to body art. By the way, tattoos? I say Cody has to be at least twelve before his

first one.”

What? “He wants a tattoo?” Jonah asked, nonplussed. “Since when?”

“Since he saw Robbie’s Devildog Squadron tattoo. It’s a marine thing. They’re easy to get removed,” Garrett added with a smile. “A little iontophoresis and you’re good to go. I got my whole body done for a party, once. It took a while, but the result was worth it.”

“The things you do for beauty.”

“Fashion takes time,” Garrett agreed. “So, shower, breakfast, bazaar. Yes?”

“Sure.” And no tattoos for his kid, not even if they could be removed. Not by twelve either. Maybe by twenty. Maybe.

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They took a private car into the city, past the skyscrapers and flashy buildings and out toward the edge of downtown. They had a pair of marines as escorts, again, but Garrett seemed to know one of them and was enjoying himself by needling her. “Thérèse, were you pining for me?” he asked coquettishly, tilting his head to one side and batting his eyelashes at her. “Is this your way of asking for attention?”

“No.”

“So loquacious, darling, be sure you don’t hurt yourself lifting all those heavy words now. And your partner is ...”

“Kelly,” the man driving them offered. “Corporal Kelly, sir.”

“Nice to meet you, Kelly. Do you mind if I shorten it?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Thérèse muttered. Garrett laughed, and Jonah and Cody just looked at each other and shrugged. Garrett got a huge kick out of bothering the marines, but as long as Cody didn’t start imitating him, Jonah didn’t mind. Most of them thought it was more amusing than anything else. Thérèse might be an exception, though.

A few minutes later, they were at the western edge of the bazaar, a market that encompassed about a square kilometer. The rest of downtown was for Alliance imports and elites; the bazaar was where you found the native Paradisians, rural traders, and small-time interstellar shippers. It was a huge, teeming place and more of a security risk than anywhere else in the capitol, but the city’s security forces as well as the marines were patrolling. They should be safe enough.

The hardest part about it wasn’t making their way through the crowd, which was bustling, but keeping Cody close. Every time there was an explosion (and there were plenty of them, generally small ones that were brightly colored, and some shot sparks or holograms into the air) Cody wanted to go there, tugging out of Jonah’s grip. Garrett was more proactive and settled his grip onto the back of Cody’s collar. That handhold slowed the kid down.

By the fifth time, Jonah was getting tired of it. He knelt down and looked sternly at Cody. “Bucko, if you keep tryin’ to run away, I’m just gonna pick you up and head back to the car. I don’t want you gettin’ lost, okay?”

“Sorry,” Cody said, staring abashedly down at the ground. His feet were twitching, though. “But can we go watch the fire dancers, please? Wyl told me all about them, and he says they’re the best, and they’re really close, I saw the flames shoot up—”

“Sure, we can go.” Jonah straightened up and turned around, only to come face-to-face with a girl in green. She had bright-red hair tied back with a sash and wore a long, heavy skirt. Her face was round, and her cheeks were pink, and Jonah knew her the moment he laid eyes on her. She smiled broadly at him.

“Mr. Helms! Fancy meetin’ you all the way out here!”

Jonah felt more than saw one of the marines move up behind him. “Hello, Charlotte,” he said, keeping his voice pleasant and light. The last thing he needed was for Garrett to get nervous and signal their escorts to do something rash. “I’d heard the Gondola was in orbit.”

“And you didn’t call? Da will think you don’t like him,” she admonished.

“Your da and I didn’t part on the best of terms.”

“Oh, that’s nothin’ but old worries, Mr. Helms, for old days.” She reached out to take his arm, and now one of the marines—Kelly—stepped up next to Jonah warningly. She withdrew her hand but kept her smile. “And that must be your boy, hmm?” She turned her brightness on Cody. “I’ve not seen you since you were a baby. You’ve grown so big!”

Cody looked a little confused, and Garrett kept a firm hand on his shoulder. “Is there something you want?” he asked, his tone flat. “Or were you just looking to interrupt our day together as a family?”

“Not at all, sir.” And now Jonah winced internally because “sir” was an insult among Drifters. “I’d never dream of interrupting you without a reason. My da asked me to keep an eye out for Mr. Helms here and to offer to share a drink, for old times’ sake, if I saw him. Our tent’s not far.” She looked back at Jonah. “As long as you can spare the time.”

“Sure.” Charlotte grinned, and Garrett glared, and Jonah turned back to his fiancé. “This won’t take long,” he promised. “You can go see the fire dancers, and I’ll be with you in a couple minutes.”

“Fine. Take Kelly with you.” Jonah started to protest, and Garrett held up his free hand. “It’s protocol for family members, Jonah.” His face was unyielding, and Jonah finally nodded. “Good. Lovely to meet you, Miss Dechiara.” He smiled politely at Charlotte, then turned and headed toward the dancers, Cody and Thérèse firmly in tow. Jonah and Kelly were left with Charlotte, who turned and led them back through the crowd.

Jonah smelled his destination before he saw it, the tent exuding a particularly harsh blend of tobacco that he knew Kilroy favored. The whole of the Gondola had reeked with it. And there Kilroy Dechiara was, sitting on a chair under a bright-red canopy, an assortment of robotic parts laid out on a blanket on the ground beside him. He was tall like Jonah, broader through the shoulders, and had the same red hair as his daughter. He stood up as soon as he saw them.

“Jonah Helms! Well, you’re a sight for sore eyes!” He pulled Jonah into a rough embrace. “Who’s your company, then?”

“Corporal Kelly, with the governor’s marine guard.”

“Ah ... so it’s true, then.” Kilroy’s grin showed a few too many teeth. “Charlotte, why don’t you take the corporal to have a drink over at Mindy’s?”

“No, thank you,” Corporal Kelly said immediately. “I need to remain with Mr. Helms.”

“Then perhaps you could do us the courtesy of givin’ us a little space?” Kilroy suggested quickly, not at all put off. “Just a few extra yards for a private

conversation. I'd be greatly obliged, sir."

Kelly waited for Jonah to give him a reluctant nod before letting Charlotte draw him a little way off. Kilroy motioned to the empty chair next to his, and they both sat down. "I'll be damned. I'd heard you found a Alliance man out on that colony of yours, I just didn't know he was quite so important. A member of the governor's family, no less. Pretty, too, or so I've heard. A man like that doesn't have to work to live, I reckon."

"He's a climatologist," Jonah snapped, offended for Garrett's sake. "He doesn't get by on his looks. And if that's the tenor of what you have to say to me, I'm gonna be going now."

"Slow down," Kilroy said calmly, holding out his hands. "I didn't mean to upset you. Lord knows you've got reason to want something different after what your mama put you through. I was just makin' an observation." He poured two cups of grin out of a dented metal pot on a little table between them and set one down in front of Jonah. "Proper brew. Been awhile, huh?"

Hell, it had been a while. Grin was a purely Drifter drink, a mélange of whatever happened to be in the stores, usually bad coffee, cocoa powder, old tea leaves, berry crumbs, and caffeine extract if you had some. The maxim was that you just had to grin and bear it when you drank, hence the name. Jonah took a swallow, felt the lining of his throat start to tickle and had to cough. Kilroy laughed. "Can't hold it anymore, boy?"

"Only you would add juniper berries to grin," Jonah said hoarsely. "That's terrible."

"Wakes you up in the morning, though." Kilroy swallowed his own cup down, then sighed with satisfaction. "S'pose you wake up to coffee every morning now."

“I like coffee.”

“An’ I like nekkid women, but you don’t see me indulgin’ in ’em every day. Honestly, boy, don’t you miss the old life even a little bit? Or is it all smooth sailing with your pretty scientist?”

“The old life didn’t want me, and it didn’t want my son,” Jonah said firmly. “If this is all you’ve got to talk to me about, I’m leavin’.”

“It ain’t all. But”—Kilroy grimaced now—“this ain’t exactly the spot for a real conversation. What say you come back to my ship, and we talk there?”

“Not gonna happen. Come to the Mansion, and we can talk there.”

“Oh, I think not.” Kilroy chuckled. “That’s a little rich for my tastes. Let’s say a neutral location in the city, sometime next week?”

“I could do that,” Jonah said cautiously.

“Good, good. I knew you wouldn’t turn your back on an old friend.”

“You were always my mama’s friend, Kilroy, not mine,” Jonah said, and if there was a little regret in his voice, he tried not to let it show in his face. “Talkin’ to me isn’t gonna get you in any better with her. I haven’t spoken to her for over a year.”

“I’m not here to bring up bygones,” Kilroy insisted. “Let the past lie, s’what I say. I’m interested in the future. It’s hard days for Drifters now, even in the Fringe, and gettin’ harder every second. I’m doin’ my part to keep our lifestyle alive.” He glanced over at Kelly, who was ignoring Charlotte’s charms in favor of staring at both of them. “And again, this ain’t the place to talk. Here.” He handed over a slip of paper—actual paper, fuzzy at the edges—with a communication code written on it.



“This is my personal com. Call me up, and we’ll meet this week. There’s plenty needs talkin’ about, Jonah. Don’t let your new friends make you forget your old ones.”

Jonah didn’t say anything, just took the worn piece of paper and tucked it into his pocket. He finished off the grin , ignored Kilroy’s sudden smile, and rejoined Kelly. “We can go now.”

“Yes, sir.” As they turned away, Jonah saw Charlotte’s eyes roll mockingly as she mouthed, Yes, sir! at him. He shook his head and walked toward the bright-red flames that leapt into the sky.

Garrett and Cody and Thérèse were there, standing at the edge of the crowd and watching the display. Cody didn’t even notice when Jonah rejoined them, he was so entranced, but Garrett saw him coming and reached out a hand as he got close. Despite the tension between them, his grip was warm and reassuring. Jonah leaned in and kissed his cheek.

“Everything all right?” Garrett asked almost soundlessly.

“Fine. Tell you about it later.”

Garrett searched Jonah’s face with an unusually intense gaze before he finally nodded. Jonah had the feeling that later wasn’t going to be much fun.

### Chapter twelve

Garrett

Jealousy. It was an ugly word. It was also a word that Garrett had heard thrown in his direction by far too many people to completely discount. Garrett knew, he was perfectly aware, of his tendency to be proprietary toward people and things. He played and he tasted and he sampled, but when he found something he wanted to keep, he sank his claws in and clamped down tight. He had tried to break that mold with Robbie, and look what that affair had turned into: history.

Jealousy was indicative of all sorts of other less-than-savory emotional and physical habits, like clinginess, a sharp tongue, a complete disregard for personal privacy ... in short, it led to Garrett acting like an asshole. So he tried to reel it back, tried to consciously prevent himself from behaving like an ingrate for Jonah's sake.

It was hardly his fiancé's fault that he was too polite to tell Kilroy Whoever-the-fuck-he-was to take his overture of friendship and shove it. The man wanted to "talk." That was fine, Jonah could talk with whomever he wanted to. Garrett knew, he did, that nothing the man could say would persuade Jonah to go back to that life, so there really wasn't anything to worry about.

Plus, he was too busy to worry. Garrett had let his work schedule slip those first couple of weeks, and after a firm discussion with Martina over the com, he threw himself into the backlog. That, plus tutoring Cody for four hours a day, plus helping Claudia decide between cream-colored or ecru linens, daily conversations with Wyl and occasionally Miles and Robbie, and doing his damndest to exhaust his lover

every night meant he was completely played out. There was no time for indulging subconscious fears.

Well ... that wasn't completely true.

"You want a what?"

"A slimdisc. Just for listening!" Garrett emphasized. "I don't need visual, I just want to be able to hear what they're saying."

"Gare ..." Robbie looked as close to floored as Garrett had ever seen him. "You do realize that you're asking me to help you spy on your fiancé? You don't think that's overkill? You could just ask him about his talk once it's over with?"

"Jonah's not going to tell me the things he thinks will upset me, though."

"And that might be smart," Robbie rejoined, "given the way you're acting now."

"Oh, please, as though you aren't just as interested in finding out what those Drifters are up to," Garrett scoffed. "You'd have him bugged yourself if you thought he'd agree."

"But he won't. I know that, without even having to ask, which is how I know that Jonah isn't going to appreciate this from you."

"He doesn't have to know."

"Gare—"

Garrett slammed his hand down on the desk between them. The noise startled both of them. "I'm coming to you with this because I need this, Robbie. It's ugly, and it's

stupid, and it's unworthy, but surprise! That's me sometimes. I can't sink any lower in your estimation of me, you've known me for too long, but I'm trying to preserve Jonah's illusions for just a little bit longer, so please, help me with this. Or I'll risk what's left of my reputation by asking around on the open market."

Robbie looked honestly bewildered. "What ... Gare, I don't think badly of you." He narrowed his eyes. "You're sweating. What's really going on? Are you sick?"

"I'm fine." And he was. Completely fine, except for this strange, tugging ache inside of his chest. It felt like someone was hammering, very gently, on his heart, trying to pry it loose from its attachments. Anxiety . It was just anxiety. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"Fucking hell." Robbie made a face, then stood up and turned to one of the in-wall cabinets. One touch opened the drawer, from which he took a small plastic container. He pulled something out of it, resealed the drawer, and came back to sit on the desk beside Garrett. "Slimdisc," he said, putting the transparent circle in Garrett's hand. "The transponder number can be read by and synced to your com. It's got a very limited range, and it's very fragile, so don't get it wet or run it into anything. Take the tab off the back, and it'll stick to his clothes."

"Thank you," Garrett said fervently. He stood up and hugged Robbie, enjoying the way it made the hammers in his heart slow down for a moment.

"Just don't make this into a slippery slope," Robbie grumbled. "And if you hear anything about bugging us , I want to know about it immediately. That's the justification for me giving you this tech, got it?"

"Got it." Garrett pulled back and tried not to wince as his chest began to hurt again. "I'll be good. I promise." He left and tried not to let the irony of his last statement get the better of him as he brushed his com against the slimdisc, then went to find Jonah

so he could attach it to him before his meeting.

Jonah and Cody were at the family breakfast table along with Miles and Claudia and Renee. Cody was eating, but all Jonah had was a cup of coffee in his hands. He stared at it pensively, brows drawn together, but he perked up when he saw Garrett.

“Hey, darlin’.” He reached an arm out and pulled Garrett into a kiss.

It was almost too easy to slip the slimdisc under the hem of the front of his shirt, and as soon as he did, a wave of guilt racked Garrett, so strong that he felt weak in the aftermath. He covered it up by sliding onto Jonah’s lap and turning their kiss into something deep and long and almost overpowering. Distantly, he heard Claudia giggle and Cody make a gagging sound, but he didn’t care. Everything was fine as long as Jonah didn’t push him away.

The kiss finally ended, and Jonah looked at him starry-eyed. “What brought that on?”

“Oh, nothing in particular,” Garrett said easily, waiting for his legs to stop trembling so he could stand up. “Just indulging a whim.”

“Try to hold off on indulging like that until you’re in the bedroom,” Miles said dryly from across the table. He had Renee in his arms and was feeding her a bottle. “The rest of us are trying to eat.”

“You’ve seen worse.”

“Oh, I know. That doesn’t mean I want to relive your teenage years.”

“You’ve done worse yourself,” Claudia reminded her husband, coming in on Garrett’s side. “I think it’s sweet. And hot.”

“Ooh, naughty step-mommy!” Garrett grinned. He felt his legs steady and got to his feet, resolutely not staring at the spot where he’d left the slimdisc. “What are you two doing today?”

“I’m talking to the caterer at three,” Claudia said. “Will you be here?”

“I should be. I’ve still got a ton of work to catch up on, though.”

Cody’s face fell. “Does that mean you still can’t come look for salamapedes with me and Thérèse?”

“Sorry, Cody.” Garrett squeezed his shoulder gently. “But you’ve got the container I made you to put one in, right?” Cody nodded. “When you guys get back, we can look up the taxonomy of it together, okay? Your teacher will be so impressed with your biology study when we get home.”

“Can Daddy help too?”

“If Daddy is home by then.” Garrett arched a brow at Jonah.

“I should be,” Jonah said. “Can’t imagine my meeting with Kilroy’ll last more than an hour or so.”

“Lovely. And you’re taking Kelly?”

“I’m taking Corporal Kelly,” Jonah agreed, rolling his eyes. “Anything else?”

“Not a thing.”

They went their separate ways after breakfast, and Garrett retreated to his ship, where he did all of his work. Also, from there he could copy the transponder onto the ship’s

com, which would make for easier listening.

Really, at first it was pretty boring. Garrett calculated out climate-modeling equations, modified his various programs, and tried not to feel relieved when the minutes passed and all that Jonah and Kilroy talked about was common acquaintances, shipside issues, and various ports they'd visited. Maybe his paranoia had all been for nothing. Maybe everything really was fine. Maybe ...

"Can't get a permit to land on Ostria anymore," Kilroy griped over the line between noisy sips from a mug. "Can't get permits on half the planets in the Fringe these days, not for the big ships, and our little shuttles just ain't big enough or fast enough, y'know? If we had an emergency and had to land, some places would as soon shoot us out of the sky as look at us."

"That's rough," Jonah said, and he really sounded like he meant it.

"It is. Havin' to resort to other options these days. Lotsa people don't like Drifters but tell 'em you're something else, and they can't welcome you fast enough. I came into Gregoryville broadcastin' an Alliance signal, and they rolled out the red carpet."

"Broadcasting another ship's transponder code is illegal."

"We don't use 'em more than once," Kilroy said placatingly. "Not lookin' to get pinched by Alli or ruin anyone's reputation. It's not a charade we can keep up for long, you know, pretendin' to be Alliance. Independent merchantmen, they're a better bet but a little harder to get codes for."

There was a long silence before— "So you do have a skimmer."

Kilroy grunted. "How'd you figure that, Jonah?"

“It’s how you found me, isn’t it?” His voice was angry. “You’re skimming ships as they land here. God damn it, Kilroy, do you know how much trouble you’ll be in if Alli soldiers can confirm it? Your whole clan could be brought in for questioning, they could arrest people ... hell, even if they don’t, the fines would cripple you. You can’t do this any longer.”

“We got no other choice,” Kilroy said softly, but he was just as angry. “You don’t see it anymore, do you? The Alli planets’ constant disdain. Their classist bullshit. Like we’re nothin’ to them, like we’re not even people just because of how we choose to live: free, not tied to a single planet. You used to care about this, Jonah. Used to get you riled up, how people would disregard us, lie to us, ignore us. You used to be a fighter . Then came a pile of shit about your kid and your momma and your man—”

“Don’t talk about Cody to me.”

“And you gave up. Gave up on the life you love, the life that made you the man you are, because your little feelin’s got hurt. Well, guess what, boy? The wound don’t vanish just cause you slap a bandage over it. You ain’t seein’ it now, but us, we’re livin’ it still. And if I gotta steal a few codes to get my people fed, to get them care and support them, then that’s what I’ll do.”

In the sudden silence, Garrett realized he’d just typed over a thousand zeros in a row because he wasn’t paying attention. He began to repair the code, slowly, captivated despite himself.

“I don’t see what you want from me,” Jonah said at last, sounding tired. “I won’t tell anyone you’re skimming.” Garrett bit his lip as he heard that part, feeling guilty about Jonah and Robbie now. “But I’m just a guest here.”

“But you have friends in high places. If you heard the right things, got into the right places ... maybe left a microskimmer here and there—”



“I am not helping you spy on my fiancé’s family!” Jonah hissed. “That’s a military facility as much as a residence, and when—not if, when—they found the skimmers, you could go down for treason. They could hang you for that, Kilroy.”

“Not if we were already gone. I’m that desperate, Jonah.” And determined, from the sound of it. “Figured I might not be enough to convince you, though. Soon as I heard you arrive here, I sent word to a mutual acquaintance of ours. Someone you might be more willin’ to listen to than me. Someone with personal business with you.” There was the sound of a chair scraping back, and a moment later, Jonah’s breath caught in his throat. Another chair scraped, then there was the sound of breaking pottery, a cut-off swear word—

Then nothing. The slimdisc went dead.

“Oh no.” Garrett checked the transponder signal, then tried his com. Nothing. “Oh no no no ...”

Shit. The connection was gone. From the sound of things, it had probably gotten wet when the whatever-it-was broke. Shit . Mutual acquaintance? Personal business? If it was someone Kilroy knew, it couldn’t be good.

Garrett’s first urge was to call up Jonah and tell him to come home immediately. His second urge was to track Jonah down and bring him back in person. Neither of those options worked if he wanted to keep his bug a secret, though.

He’s okay . Physically, Jonah had to be fine. Corporal Kelly was nearby, and if anything was wrong, he would have sent an alarm back to Robbie before diving into the fray. The kid was a brutal fighter—Garrett had seen him exercising with the other marines. He could handle a Drifter; hell, he could handle a dozen of them. So Jonah was fine.

But that sound, oh ... that choked sound of surprise and shock. That hadn't been good. Garrett's own throat tightened just to remember it. But there was nothing he could do. He had to wait for Jonah to come home. He just had to wait.

Garrett stared at his program but didn't see it and clenched his hands in time with the painful hammer of his heart. He just had to wait. That was all he could do now.

### Chapter thirteen

Jonah

“J ack.”

Jack Jack Jack ... Jonah numbly shook out the bottom of his shirt, soaked with water from the glass he'd just fumbled and dropped. Jack ... it hardly seemed possible that the man could be here. Jonah hadn't spoken to Jack since the night he took himself and Cody away from his mother's ship, and then it had only been via com. He hadn't seen him in person for ... god ... three years. Four. Not since Cody was barely walking.

Jack looked so close to how Jonah remembered: tall, a little thicker through the torso and thighs, but strong and solid. His hair was a dark, curly mess, the same texture as Cody's. His face, roughhewn but attractive, wore a hard expression. He sported enough stubble to practically qualify as a beard, and there were a few gray hairs in the mix that Jonah had never seen before.

Mind on the matter at hand. “Where the hell did you come from?” Jonah demanded.

“Been prowling this system for months, ever since I figured out who your new paramour is,” Jack said as he sat down at the table, spitting the word “paramour” like it was a curse. “I thought you'd head here eventually. I couldn't afford to fly all the way out to Pandora to see you, but I've got enough connections out here that I found the work to keep me close.”

“But why are you here at all?” Why the hell are you here? Why are you fucking with my life right now?

“‘Cause I decided I’m not gonna let you be the judge of whether or not I can be a part of our kid’s life,” Jack said flatly.

“What?” Surely Jonah wasn’t hearing this right. “As I recall things, you dictated the situation to me back in the beginnin’ when you said we couldn’t take him and oughta throw him back.”

“I was in shock , Jonnie.”

“Don’t say that,” Jonah snapped. “Don’t start callin’ me by names that you think mean something. You don’t have that right.”

“And you don’t have the right to keep me from my child just because I made a bad decision years and years ago!” Jack replied, his own voice rising with strain.

“Ho-kay, lads,” Kilroy said, raising his hands placatingly. “Let’s just calm things down now—”

“So, what, you had some grand moment of goddamn revelation and decided the best way to fix your woes was to throw your lot in with this jackass?” Jonah demanded, completely ignoring their third wheel. “Do you have any idea what he’s askin’ me to do? And you wanna help him commit fucking treason by forcin’ me to betray the confidence of people who never treated me like anything other than kin, just so you can reclaim some sort of happy-family daydream? It’s not gonna happen, Jack.”

“If Kilroy’s the only way I can get close enough to make you work with me, then I’d help him burn this whole place to the ground,” Jack said. There was no give in his face, no flexibility in his expression. “I’d make a deal with the devil himself to make

my point to you, Jonah Helms. Kilroy ain't quite the devil, but he'll do."

"No need to be insultin', now," Kilroy protested, but he shut up a second later as two sets of eyes glared in his direction. "Fine, fine, I'll just ... I'll just go talk to your young man, huh, Jonah?" He stood heavily and wandered over in the direction of Corporal Kelly, who was looking rather grim faced on the other side of the room.

Jack watched him go. "That's not ..."

"Not my fiancé , no. He's my bodyguard, and I'm less than a minute away from feignin' an injury and havin' him take you out for me, so why don't you tell me exactly what you want, Jack? We've known each other for too long to dance around like this."

"I agree." Surprisingly, Jack backed down, the rigid line of his broad shoulders relaxing some as he looked down at his hands. He had big, firm hands, heavily calloused, so different from Garrett's. Jonah could remember the way they felt on his hips, his back, his ... He squashed the memory down viciously.

"We were together for a long time, Jonah. I've known you since we were kids; your mama was like my own. I switched allegiances and joined your clan when we got together even though we could have gotten our own boat because it was what you wanted, Jonnie—Jonah, sorry. Jonah." He raised his eyes and looked straight across the table. "You've been a part of my family for most of my life. It wasn't always easy, but we made it work for a long time. We could have made it work with Cody."

"He can't live on a ship," Jonah said, remembering this argument from before. "It's not clean enough, goes too many places. Doesn't matter how many things we vaccinate him against, he needs a stable environment to be healthy. You didn't want to give up on the lifestyle, you didn't want the burden of a kid who's gonna grow old and die in a third of your lifetime, you didn't want us . Those are your words, not

mine, Jack. And gettin' my mother on your side, gettin' her to speak to me for you ... that was low."

Jack ran a hand through his curls. "It wasn't the best play, but I was out of options by then. You'd already run with my first, frightened impressions and cut me off. Yeah, frightened," he added when Jonah scoffed. "I was scared shitless, Jonah; how was I supposed to be acting? Calm and collected, reasonable, even when things were changin' so fast I couldn't keep 'em all straight in my head? You stopped livin' with me, you cut me off with the rest of the ship. I had to get my own boat after all, only this time it was just me, no one to share it with, no family.

"Then when our kid gets big enough to start interactin', becomes someone I can really get to know, you decide it's time to take off for a bright new world. Leave all the rest of us behind and take the dregs of the life I always wanted with you.

"Well, no more." Jack leaned in close, speaking softly but firmly. "I've made mistakes in my life, Jonah, and lettin' the two of you go is something that I regret every day. But while I know better than to try and get you back, I'll be damned if I let you keep me from our kid any longer. When it comes down to it, legally speaking, he's half mine. You never served me papers, and I never gave up my parental rights."

Jonah stared in astonishment, his hearing a little muffled. He could barely feel the tips of his fingers for some reason. "So, wha—" He cleared his throat, then tried again. "What, are you saying that you're throwin' your lot in with Kilroy as a way of forcing me to give you access to Cody?"

"I'd be pushin' for it no matter what," Jack replied, "but there are two ways I can go about this. I spoke with a lawyer already, a good one. I could legally claim that by takin' Cody away without gettin' me to sign off on it, you were kidnapping him."

" Bullshit ," Jonah growled. He had never wanted so badly to hit another man as he

did in that moment.

“I could ,” Jack continued warningly, “or I could keep this just between the people it really concerns. We could work out a deal to let me see him without gettin’ the law involved. That’s what I want, Jonah. I never wanted to hurt you. I did, and I’m sorry about that, but I’m not gonna back down just because I made some mistakes in the past. You work with Kilroy, we’ll take that path. You don’t ...” He let it drift off.

“You’re blackmailing me.”

“I’m doin’ what I’ve gotta do to see my boy. He’s it, Jonah. The only good thing I have left from the life I always wanted, and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna vanish into the dark like some sort of specter just ’cause it’s easy.” Jack sighed deeply. “You get any paler, I’m gonna have to force your head between your knees, just like when you were sixteen and pulled too many g’s in that shuttle.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” Jonah choked out.

“I don’t reckon I am,” Jack said, and he sounded genuinely sad about it. “I’m sorry, Jonah. I mean that.” He pushed his chair back and stood up. “You’ve got three days to get us an answer. You could give us up to the Alliance, but there’s no evidence of wrongdoin’ yet, and that ain’t gonna make me go away. It’s just gonna make me fight harder.” He turned and left, and Kilroy followed him out.

Corporal Kelly came over to the table, frowning. “Are you all right, sir?”

Jonah couldn’t catch his breath in time to speak, so he just nodded. It was maybe the biggest lie he’d ever told.

### Chapter fourteen

#### Cody

It was hot at the edge of the mountains, out on the dry, rocky expanses of barren soil. Thérèse dotted Cody's face with sunscreen and watched it spread to cover all his exposed skin before giving him the okay to leave the shuttle, and even then she made him wear a hat. "It doesn't even have any of the Space Rangers on it," Cody complained. "My helmet has lightning bolts."

"And mine is plain old brown. Be happy you get a blue hat," Thérèse advised unsympathetically. "And no running off. You stay within ten feet of me the whole time. Don't touch any of the things that you see without checking in with me first."

"What about a rock?" Cody grumbled, wishing again that Garrett or his daddy could have come with him. Or Wyl. "Can I touch a rock?"

"No. There could be rock spiders."

"Really?" Actually, that sounded pretty cool. "Spiders that look like rocks?"

"Spiders that live under them. They're black, and they have eight long legs, and they're aggressive. Don't move the rocks."

"Then what can I do?"

"You can stay close to me and ask before touching anything," Thérèse said. "Now.



Where do you want to start?"

Cody stared out at the landscape. Red rocks, brown dirt, and tiny swirls of dust where the wind kicked up eddies. "Are you sure there are actually salamapedes out here? How can anything live without water?"

"There's some water," Thérèse said, walking over to a small rocky outcropping. "When it rains, the water seeps into the ground and the cracks in the rocks. It stays there for a long time, and these plants"—she pointed to a small, hard nubbin that looked almost the same as the surface of the rock itself—"grow down to use it throughout the year." She pulled the small, rough bud free and opened it up with the edge of her nail. Cody leaned in close and saw how the pulpy innards glistened a little. "Little creatures feed on the plants, and other creatures feed on them. Plus, most of the animals that live out here don't need a lot of water to survive."

"Oh." Well, that was neat. "I'm more used to fish stuff."

"That makes sense," Thérèse agreed. "Since you live on Pandora. Are there many fish?"

"I think so. Garrett said most of them are too big or live too deep in the ocean to be seen, so I've only seen two types. The marine biologist he works with brought the little ones to show our class. One had all these little tentacles that would poke out of a hard shell to cling to the rocks, and the other one was about this big—" Cody held his hands about six inches apart. "And it was round and almost flat with just a little bump on top, and the bump had an eyeball in it! It was really cool." He grinned.

"It sounds really cool," Thérèse agreed. "There are some cool things here, though. Let's look around for them."

Thérèse wasn't from Paradise; she came from the same home planet as Claudia, but

she was really good at tracking. She identified bug trails in the dirt, they watched a whole colony of linky ants build body chains that stretched over five feet long, and they even saw a fluffy little pikka stick its head out from behind a rock and make a grab for a shiny piece of dirt. “What was it getting?”

“Silicates,” Thérèse explained. “It uses them to lay a trail out in front of its burrow to help attract a mate. I guess the female pikkas like a shiny house.”

“I like shiny things too,” Cody confided. They watched the little pikka scuttle away, so light it didn’t even kick up any dirt. “Once I made my whole room reflective, even the ceiling. Daddy couldn’t even go in, he said it made him dizzy. Garrett liked it, though. He said it showed off his good side.”

Thérèse sniffed derisively. “He thinks every side is his good side.”

“Why don’t you like him?” Cody demanded.

She frowned. “What makes you think I don’t like him?”

“Because you never talk nice to him. You just make fun of him or ignore him. I know you thought I didn’t notice,” Cody added, and he knew he sounded a little like a brat, but his daddy wasn’t here to tell him not to, and it had been bothering him. “People always think kids don’t notice things, but I do.”

“So you do.” Thérèse pursed her lips for a moment. “I admit that Garrett has never been my favorite person, but it’s not really personal. We have very different backgrounds. I tend to ... be a bit abrupt with people I don’t understand.”

Cody frowned. “And that’s okay?”

“Oh, heavens.” She rolled her eyes. “We’re through talking about this. We’re

supposed to be finding salamapedes.”

“But you said they live under rocks, and you won’t let me touch any of those!”

“I’ll turn some over with my boot.”

They went around to different structures and found loose rocks, small enough for Thérèse to tip over with the toe of her combat boot. Three of them were barren underneath, and one had a small rock spider that curled up into a ball and rolled into a sandy tunnel before Cody could get a good look at it.

The fifth one, though, did have a salamapede beneath it, a small, flat creature that reared up as soon as the rock was removed. It raised its foremost legs and waved them threateningly, turning from dusky brown to a brilliant crimson color in a matter of seconds.

“Wow!” Cody knelt down next to the rock and leaned in to get a better look. “It’s so pretty! I thought you said the animals wouldn’t be bright colors ’cause that isn’t good camouflage.”

“Some of them change colors when they feel nervous or alarmed, or when they’re defending themselves,” Thérèse told him, crouching down next to him. “Oh, even his eyestalks are changing color. He’s a mad little guy.”

“We should put him in the container Garrett made,” Cody said. “Then we can take him back for my science project, and then we can bring him back out here so he can be in his home again.”

“Where is the container?”

“I left it in the car.” Thérèse gave him a look , and he said defensively, “It’s too

heavy to carry around for hours and hours! Will you go get it, please? Pleeeeease? I can't run as fast as you, and he might be gone by the time I get back!" He widened his eyes a little and clasped his hands pleadingly.

"You're already too much like him," Thérèse grouched, but she pushed up from the ground and walked in long strides back toward the shuttle. Cody turned back to watch the salamapede, entranced by the way it waved back and forth, back and forth. It was kind of ... hypnotizing. He leaned in a little closer, putting his hand down on the overturned rock to help hold himself up as he did. He didn't even see the tiny, almost translucent insect huddled behind a plant bud that he almost crushed or feel its stinger scratch the base of his palm. He did feel the heat blossoming immediately in his hand, though, making it feel stiff and spiky.

"Ow!" Cody sat up and looked at his hand. It was pink, becoming red, and there was a little black circle down near the bottom of it, right in the middle of the irritation. "Thérèse?" he called out, not really scared but starting to feel a little dizzy. Uh-oh. Dizzy wasn't good. "Thérèse ..." He slumped back onto his bottom and watched his fingers multiply before his eyes. It looked like a monster's hand.

There was the sound of something falling, then fast footsteps running to his side. "Cody?" Thérèse was there, holding him up in her arms as she bent her head close to his. "What happened?"

"I just put my hand on the rock," he protested, "there wasn't even anything there. I just wanted to look a little closer." His hand spiked with pain, enough to make him whimper. "I don't feel good."

"We have to get you back to the mansion now," Thérèse said briskly. She hoisted him into her arms and started walking again, fast but not quite running. Cody's vision was a little blurry, but he could tell when they were back in the shuttle, and he felt the sudden tightness of a pressure bandage around his arm. The shuttle was moving, and

Thérèse was talking into a com.

“I need to know if antihistamines are contraindicated for him. No, he was stung by something, I don’t know what. No ... no, he needs medical help now , I didn’t have time to look for the animal.” Cody felt her hand press lightly on his throat. “No, no problems with his breathing yet, and his pulse seems regular. But he said he doesn’t feel good, he was on his side when I found him, and he’s in pain. Yes. I’ll bring him in that way.”

They weren’t far from the mansion. It only took ten minutes to get back at top speed, but by then Cody’s hand was itching as well as painful, and he scratched at it fruitlessly before Thérèse noticed he was doing it and held his other hand down. “No, no, Cody,” she said to him, gentle but not right . She wasn’t who he wanted. Tears welled in his eyes, and he couldn’t stop them even though he didn’t want to cry now; he was too big to cry.

The shuttle stopped, and people were there, strange hands and strange people, and Cody didn’t like it. He felt cold and hot all at the same time. They laid him down on a soft surface, and he was okay, he really was, until something sharp went into his arm. He wailed and tried to kick, but he wasn’t strong enough.

“He doesn’t like needles,” a new voice said, and it was one of the best voices. Cody’s vision was blurry, but he turned toward Garrett anyway. “Let me through.” A second later, the bed shifted, and Garrett guided Cody’s head onto his lap.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Cody felt a cool kiss on his forehead. All of Garrett felt refreshingly cool. He buried his face in Garrett’s stomach and whimpered. “I know, it sucks, buddy. But they have to give you another couple shots, okay? It’ll make you feel better. I promise.”

“Don’ like ’em.”

“I know, but it’ll be over with soon. I promise.”

Cody sighed heavily. “kay.”

“Thank you.” Garrett ran his hands through Cody’s hair and distracted him during the other shots and when the doctor took blood. He got kind of fuzzy after that, but what he did know was that Garrett didn’t leave. He stayed, and it was almost as good as having Daddy there.

### Chapter fifteen

#### Jonah

The bright spot was, Cody would be okay. That was the one glowing, sparkling, shiny fucking bright spot in Jonah's life right now. The doctor had figured out what stung Cody and given him the appropriate antivenin, but because he was a natural, it was going to take a lot longer for his body to deal with both the toxin and the side effects of the cure. The dizziness and nausea the poor kiddo was suffering from would taper off gradually, though he'd need to be under observation for a few days. Cody was going to be fine, though.

Jonah didn't want to think about the rest of it. Decisions had to be made, he had to ... he had to ... fuck, he had to tell Garrett what was going on. He had to tell him about Kilroy, about Jack, even though something deep in his soul quailed at the thought of betraying his people. Except Drifters weren't his people anymore, Garrett was his people, Garrett and his family, but ...

Jonah knew it would just take more time. He had to acclimate to a new way of living, but he couldn't look around this place without thinking about how far beyond his scope it was. Even on Paradise, where they had their own house, it was still modest. Three bedrooms, a communal living space, a decent-size kitchen, bathrooms, and storage built into most of the walls, and it felt cozy. It felt right.

This place, it was just too big. Too opulent. God knew Jonah appreciated the private infirmary, the doctors, all the toys for Cody, everything that Miles' position and prominence could do for his child. There were no permanent treatments for being a

natural, but apparently, there were a lot of private therapies that could help boost immune efficiency and even do a little to prolong life. All of that was great.

What wasn't so great was the waste . There was so much space here, too much for so few people. The mansion was a status symbol, Jonah got that, but it was the kind of symbol he had learned to dislike and distrust from an early age. He could sympathize with Kilroy despite all of the man's crudeness and backhanded ways because he knew how terrible it could be on a ship when your potential ports were drying up, and supercilious authorities jerked you around and denied you access to medical facilities, to credit, to the chance to set up shop. It was a terrible thing to be so isolated and alone, especially when you were in need. And it was hard to reconcile those early experiences with what he was living now.

Garrett stirred against his chest, slowly coming out of a fitful sleep. Jonah bent his head and inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the scent of his lover as he took a long look at his face. Garrett looked tired, and he still felt cold despite their close embrace. His skin was strangely waxy, and sweat dotted his forehead and the dark circles just beneath his eyes. Jonah had seen Garrett exhausted, he'd seen him stressed, and he'd seen him in a state of drugged-up post-operative fugue, but he'd never seen him look quite this bad.

Guilt assailed Jonah, and he pulled Garrett a little closer just as his fiancé's pale eyes opened. This was his fault; Garrett was worried sick, and there was no reason for him to be. Or, well, actually there were plenty of reasons but not for what Garrett was probably thinking about.

"Hey, darlin'," Jonah said, speaking softly so he wouldn't wake Cody, who was stretched out against his leg. The infirmary bed was surprisingly big and could accommodate all three of them without too much trouble.

"Hey," Garrett replied, his voice a little hoarse. "Sorry, did I wake you?"



“Wasn’t sleepin’,” Jonah confessed.

“Why not?”

“My brain’s too busy.”

“Oh, dear,” Garrett drawled, soft and smiling. The smile transformed his face back into the one that Jonah loved best, tender and teasing and private, something that was just for him. “You know, putting brains to sleep is something of a specialty of mine.”

“Is that right?”

“It is,” Garrett said, slowly drawing away from the bed and standing up. “And I have the perfect place for just such a thing. It’s kind of a delicate operation, though, requires a lot of space.” Jonah glanced down at Cody, but Garrett drew his eyes back with a gentle touch to his shoulder. “He’s fine,” he said softly. “He’s sleeping. You need sleep too, and you won’t get it unless we can turn off your brain. Come on, sweetheart. Come to bed. You’ll be back before he wakes up.”

Garrett never had to work hard to convince Jonah to go to bed with him. He stood up, let his fingers linger for a moment on his boy’s head, then followed Garrett out of the infirmary. Their suite wasn’t too far away, and as soon as they entered it, Jonah expected to get jumped, but apparently something else was on offer tonight.

The lights stayed low, and Garrett’s arms wound sensuously around his neck as he pressed his lips to Jonah’s chin, to the line of his cheek, his temple, and the side of his nose. Jonah pressed forward with his mouth, seeking out a kiss, but Garrett evaded him. “No pushing,” he murmured, “no straining. Just relax. Come on.” He backed off and led Jonah over to their bed, nudged and tugged and pressed until Jonah was lying back against the blankets, his head cushioned by pillows, and his body laid bare to Garrett’s ministrations.

“You’re beautiful,” Garrett told him seriously, brushing a kiss against the base of his neck before sliding down his body. Jonah wanted to protest or maybe confess, but then Garrett took him into his mouth, and all of his thoughts vanished. Jonah used to need more time to get his body on board for sex, but for some reason, Garrett was the exception to the rule. His mouth enveloped Jonah, all of him, hot and smooth and just holding him while Garrett’s hands went everywhere, climbing across his chest and down his sides and across the firm flesh of his ass. Jonah hissed and lifted his hips, making more room for his fiancé’s wandering hands.

He hardened slow and easy, pushing deeper into Garrett’s throat until just the very base of his cock was exposed to the air. Garrett didn’t pull back and didn’t stop moving; it was incredible, Jonah didn’t even know how he was breathing, but it felt amazing. Garrett rolled his balls in one hand, tugging gently while he circled Jonah’s hole with one cool finger.

“Garrett,” Jonah moaned. “Darlin’, come up here, let me—” There was a barely perceptible head shake, an increase in pressure around his cock, and then Garrett slowly pushed his finger, dry, a little way inside.

“Oh,” Jonah breathed, “oh, fuck, Garrett ...” He got deep enough to brush against Jonah’s prostate, and that was it, too much, and Jonah tipped slowly and inevitably over into orgasm, thoughtless, peaceful, and so right. He drifted for a while, barely noticing when Garrett moved away and cleaned up before coming back to bed.

When Jonah reached down to start to return the favor, though, he found Garrett soft. That was strange; he was never soft after giving a blow job. “Darlin’?”

“I’m just tired,” Garrett assured him, pulling the blankets over both of them and curling in close. “Later, sweetheart. Get some sleep.”

“No.” Jonah sighed. “I need to talk to you. I’ve made you wait long enough.”

Garrett froze, absolutely still for a second, then relaxed against Jonah's body. "Tell me."

Jonah sighed deeply. This was it. Moment of truth. "When I went to meet Kilroy, there was someone else there. It was ..." Just get it over with. "Jack."

"Wait, Jack Jack?" Garrett lifted his head a little, real surprise in his eyes. "Your ex, Jack?"

"That's the one."

"What the hell did he want?"

"To ..." Jonah tried to sit up, to make some space, but Garrett held him down. "It's complicated."

"Just tell me in the simplest way you can," Garrett urged. "Is Jack working with Kilroy?"

"After a fashion. Kilroy wants ... he wants information. He wants me to"—fuck fuck fuck —"to put skimmers in the mansion. He wants ship names and numbers for false identities. I didn't, I won't, obviously I won't, but—"

"Okay," Garrett said soothingly. "Okay, we can deal with that. You haven't done anything yet, you're fine, and there's no reason for you to do anything. What else? What's the connection with Jack?"

Jonah sighed again. "Jack is Kilroy's ace in the hole. He wants rights to Cody."

Garrett's mouth dropped open in shock. "What?"

“I know.” Jonah covered his face with both hands. “I never thought it would happen. He was so against the whole idea of it when I brought Cody home, he was so adamant, I just ... I didn’t tie up loose ends. I took Cody and ran away and tried to leave that all behind, but Jack’s got a lawyer now, and ... shit.” Jonah took a deep breath, then pulled his hands away and looked straight at Garrett. “The deal is, if I help Kilroy, Jack will work somethin’ out with me. If I don’t, then he’ll sic his lawyer on me, and I could get forced into an arrangement that’s ... not good. He might be able to take Cody away from me.”

Garrett’s expression had gone utterly blank. Jonah lay still, frozen with fear until his fiancé spoke. “First things first: it’s not just you. It’s us . And no matter how good your ex’s lawyer is, I can find one that’s better.”

“You can’t know that,” Jonah insisted. “Law as it applies to Drifters is complicated, and we didn’t exactly get our boy on the up-and-up. That’s what Kilroy’s banking on, to get me to deal with him.”

“He’s coercing you; he can be arrested for that.”

“He can just deny it all; there’s no record of the conversation.”

Garrett squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. It almost looked like he was fighting himself, but when he opened them again, they were clear and calm. “It’s going to be okay. We can handle this. No one is going to take Cody away.”

“Garrett ...”

“No, sweetheart. That’s not going to happen. It simply isn’t an option. Even if the impossible happens, and Jack’s got a leg to stand on, I’d be willing to pick up everything and fly our family somewhere not even a Drifter could find us.”

Jonah's heart lurched a little. "What, leave Pandora? And Paradise?"

"If it means keeping us all together."

"How could you just—baby, you've got so much here, your whole family, your career—"

"It doesn't matter. You two are more important." He leaned in and kissed Jonah, long and hard enough to take his breath away. "But it's not going to be necessary. I promise." He kissed him again, then settled in against Jonah's side. "Go to sleep, sweetheart. Go to sleep." He rubbed his hand rhythmically against Jonah's chest, and despite himself, Jonah drifted into unconsciousness.

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Garrett slowly extricated himself from Jonah's embrace and out from under the blankets. Jonah stirred but didn't wake, and Garrett was relieved. His heart was stabbing in time with the burning coal of shame in his stomach.

He hadn't told Jonah the truth. That had been his chance, and he hadn't said anything.

But it wasn't necessary! Yes, Garrett had a recording of Jonah and Kilroy's conversation; his ship's com automatically recorded and saved calls coming through it for two standard months, and yes, that could help in the long run, but it wasn't going to be necessary. And all right, yes, he had promised to tell Robbie if Kilroy had proposed spying on them, but he knew that Jonah had a soft spot for the Drifter no matter what he said, and he didn't want to damage that relationship any more than it already was.

A distant part of Garrett's brain tried to point out to him that he was behaving irrationally, and that it was something to be concerned about. He ignored it. He had

other things to do, better things to do. He could handle everything. He got out of bed, straightened his clothes, and left his lover sleeping as he slipped away.

### Chapter sixteen

#### Garrett

So to be clear, Garrett was an adult. He was a goddamned adult, he had been making his own decisions for years, and he was perfectly self-sufficient. He was . But when his life got really confusing, when things looked like they were careening straight into the gravity well of a black hole, and he didn't have the energy to escape it, he tended to fall back on the lessons he'd learned in his childhood. The main one, the one that had stuck with him since he was fourteen, was this: when his back was to the wall, the one person he could always rely on was his father.

It didn't matter how messed up Garrett was, or what stupid thing he had done, Miles would always help him. He was an organizer, he was a planner, he thought things through. Miles could multitask with more efficiency than anyone Garrett had ever known, outside of people with specialized implants, and he did it all with the kind of ruthless competency that made him an effective military officer and an invaluable politician to the Alliance. He was calm, collected, and good at synthesizing, and that was exactly the kind of perspective that Garrett needed right now. Garrett was never really calm and collected on his best days, and for some reason, his brain had been a little ... bouncy lately. Too much going on to focus, maybe.

It was early, too early for most Paradisians to be up, but that norm didn't apply to the governor of the planet. Garrett found his father sitting on the living room couch in the first family's wing, documents and graphs pulled up on the tabletop and some of them projected into the air above it. He was moving them back and forth, quietly asking the computer for new comparisons and statistics, and Garrett's heart warmed a

little when he saw the antique spectacles perched on the end of his father's nose. His eyes were Miles' one point of personal vanity; he insisted they didn't require any corrective surgery even though it would only take a minute, and he just put the glasses on "when his eyes were tired" for close-up work.

"Hey," Garrett called softly as he stepped into the room. He was carrying two cups of coffee, made in his own apartment because he knew his father wouldn't want to risk waking his wife and baby with the noise of their own machine.

"Hey, Gare." Miles looked over at him and smiled, pulling the glasses off and putting them on the edge of the table. He scooted over a bit and made room for Garrett, accepting a cup of coffee with a sigh. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"You're up early."

"Mmm." Garrett stalled by taking a sip as he tried to pull his scattered thoughts together. Coherence. Coherence was important when you were trying to talk to someone. "I didn't sleep, actually."

"You do look pretty tired." Miles' expression was going from "friend" to "concerned Dad," and Garrett didn't want that, so he plowed ahead.

"I need your help." He took a deep breath to marshal his thoughts. "This has to do with Jonah and Cody, and it's kind of complicated, but before I start, I need you to know that Jonah hasn't done anything wrong or illegal."

"Sounds serious," Miles said, his tone mild and soothing.

"It ... could be." Garrett felt his hands try to tremble, and he tightened his grip on his



mug. "I assume you've been getting reports from Corporal Kelly."

"Yes."

"So you know, generally, where we've been going, and what we've been doing."

"I know you met with Drifters at the bazaar. I know Jonah's met with them again since, but I don't know any of the details, and I didn't ask for them. It's not my place to pry into your life, son."

Garrett forced a smile. God, that topic had been a hell of a fight when he was a teenager. Garrett had been fresh out of rehab, sent back home and newly confronted with the fact that his father, who had been absent for most of his young life, was not only going to be around, but he was also going to be involved. Garrett had accused him of prying, of forcing his presence where it wasn't wanted, of being too little too late. His father had taken all that abuse calmly, then told Garrett that while he wasn't going to pry, he wasn't going to disappear either. He was going to be there every hour of every day whether his son liked it or not, and what Garrett got out of it was up to him.

It had taken a few months before Garrett had come around to the idea that his father actually did care about him, cared enough to take an indefinite leave of absence from the marines and stay at home with his damaged son and do everything he could to help him heal while still giving him the space to breathe. They'd started talking, just a little at first, but by the end of a year, Garrett could barely remember a time when his father hadn't been with him and interested in him. Miles had gone back to the marines shortly afterward, but things between them had changed for good and for the better.

"I know that," Garrett assured him. "You never pry. This is something I need your advice on, Dad, because I honestly don't know what to do, and Jonah's riding the

edge of what he can take, especially with Cody in the infirmary.”

“Go on.”

Garrett plunged into the story. He told Miles about the first meeting with Kilroy in the bazaar, then recounted Jonah’s story of what had passed between him, Kilroy, and Jack in the second meet. He skipped over how he had been listening in because really, that had no real relevance to the situation at this point. He finished up by revealing Jonah and Cody’s situation with regards to Jack, Drifters, and the law, which was just as tangled up as Jonah had promised. Garrett had looked into it before coming to his father this morning, and ... damn. The red tape was epic.

After he finished, they sat in silence for a long moment. Garrett watched his father closely, and as soon as he drew his index finger down the center of his lips, he knew the man had had an idea. Garrett had observed him deep in thought for decades, and he knew all of Miles’s tells.

“It seems that there are two separate problems here,” Miles said at last. “Kilroy and Jack are only vaguely connected to each other. Split their issues up and we can take a leg out from under both of their cases. Each of them is just using the other for leverage, after all. So we need a different sort of leverage.” He glanced back at the table and slid his glasses back on, peering at a few charts. “Hmm. Interesting.”

“What’s interesting?” Garrett demanded.

“We’ve had an influx in both capital and local population since the arrival of the Gondola . It happens every time one of their big ships comes in. Drifters are a point of interest in a world as isolated as this one is, and since they’re seen as outside the normal Alliance infrastructure, people who otherwise wouldn’t be interested are willing to do business with them. Even knowing that a big percentage of the money changing hands is happening on the black market, it’s still a significant boost to the

economy. More income makes for happier citizens, and that's the sort of thing I want to encourage, coming out of a state of civil war."

"But you know that a lot of what they're dealing for is probably equipment that some people plan to use to fight you," Garrett pointed out with a frown.

"True, but that's not what the Drifters care about. They care about making the biggest profit they can in the time they have here. They steer clear of local politics." Miles laced his fingers together and stared at the charts. "What I need to do is figure out how to incentivize them into doing things legally while still providing people with the opportunity to deal with them with an air of privacy."

"You're talking about creating a new layer of society?"

"More like providing the people of Paradise with a choice. It'll start out as a fairly stark choice, them or us, but as time goes by, those lines will blur.

"Here's the thing, Gare." Miles pulled off his glasses and looked over at him. "There are still people here who hate the Alliance, hate us with everything they are. They don't care that it was their government that originally petitioned us to come here and take them into the fold; all they see is the loss of their independence. There are a lot more people who are happy with us, but they're afraid of rocking the boat because the rebels have proven themselves willing, over and over, to be indifferent to civilian casualties in the course of coming after us.

"It isn't the rebels I care about, it's the people who have to deal with them and are too afraid to come to us for help. Drifters provide them with a source of goods and information that can be seen as clean, in a sense. This Kilroy thinks I'm trying to make things harder for him, when in actuality, I'd be more than happy to have more Drifters make Paradise a common harbor as long as they're willing to obey our laws, but the trouble is that they don't stay long. The new problem becomes persuading

Drifters to do more than a transient business here, which is a challenge because transience is literally a part of their name.”

“So you provide them with, what ... legal status?”

“Immigrant status,” Miles clarified. “Giving them rights as transitory citizens of this planet. Offering them access to medical clinics, entrance into our education system, and the rest of the benefits that come with being licensed and legitimized. If a particular ship wants to leave for any reason, they can. If they want to come back, they can. I’m talking about finding Drifters a place in this society. I think it’ll do more than enhance the economy: it’ll broaden the horizons of a populace that’s been left behind as the rest of the inhabited universe moves forward.”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “And frankly, I have to do something because there isn’t a lot of clout in the Senate right now for improving the lives of member planets on the Fringe, but the need is stark.”

“You’ve thought about this before,” Garrett said, putting the pieces together. His dad was good, but this was a lot to come up with on the fly. “You’ve been thinking about it for a while, haven’t you?”

“Ever since I woke up out of that coma,” Miles confessed. “Paradise is still sparking with rebellion just under the surface. I want to tamp that down, and I want to cut down on the percentage of illegal goods making it into circulation. One of the terms of any agreement with Drifters would be submitting their shuttles to a search before they land. A thorough one, enough to detect skimmers and drugs and most weapons. It’ll be a delicate balance, but if I can get Kilroy Dechiara on my side and spreading the word to other Drifter ships, it will be a huge coup.”

Garrett smiled at his father. “You’re kind of smart, you know that?”

Miles laughed. "I'm surprised you're not calling it my 'aged wisdom.'"

"I can't insult you before I hear what you think we can do about Jack."

Miles shrugged. "He's the easy half of this equation. I've got three lawyers in my corps here, and one of them specializes in family law. Even if Gunny can't speak to all the issues, he'll know someone who can. I'll send for him as soon as his shift starts, and we'll figure out what needs to be done to make sure Cody stays with you and Jonah."

"You're amazing." Garrett finally let himself smile back. "I'm so impressed you've managed to avoid the dementia that plagues most of your generation."

"And there is it," Miles said sarcastically. "I almost didn't recognize you without the snark, son."

"I'm a fuckin' chameleon," Garrett agreed, feeling pretty perky in the wake of his father's reassurance.

Miles looked at him a little strangely. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" Why did people keep asking him that? "Just tired from lack of sleep."

"You aren't acting tired, you're acting ..." Miles reached out and laid a hand on Garrett's cheek, then frowned when Garrett jerked away. "Have you been checking your levels?"

Levels? Levels, levels ... what, hormone levels? His drug levels? His mood stabilizers? "Of course." Of course he had been. He had used the med gauntlet, what, last week? Or maybe the week before? That was plenty recent. Somehow Garrett didn't think that his father would see it that way, though, since technically he was

supposed to be using it every day when he traveled due to the additional stresses on his system.

But he wasn't some delicate little child any longer, and he was doing fine. Wasn't he doing fine? He had known enough to bring his problems to Miles, that wasn't the mark of an off-balance person. "I might have forgotten yesterday," he added, seeing that his dad wasn't buying it. The frown line stayed, but Miles looked a little more relaxed.

"You should go and take care of that, Gare. It's important to stay up-to-date."

"I know," he said and tried not to fidget as Miles kept staring at him. He opened his mouth, probably in preparation for inserting his foot, but a high, thin cry interrupted the moment. Miles pushed off the couch and disappeared into the master bedroom, and Garrett took a second to school his expression back into imperturbability. When Miles came back with a fussy Renee in his arms, Garrett stood up.

"I should go. I'll talk to Robbie and bring him in after we go see Cody. He'll be a good resource for you when it comes to dealing with Drifters."

"Go and get yourself checked out first."

Garrett rolled his eyes. "Yes, sir." He put their empty coffee cups in the kitchen and watched his father cradle his sister, rocking her gently in his arms and not minding when her chubby fists smacked his chest or chin. "Can I get you something for her?"

"There's a bottle of juice for her in the preservator."

Garrett opened it up and saw the bright-purple bottle. "Oh god, Claudia has her drinking bissap already?"

“Apparently, it’s the first thing they wean babies with on Kalmia. It’s full of essential nutrients or something like that.” Miles took the bottle that Garrett passed him and offered it to Renee, who latched onto it and started drinking voraciously. Miles smiled down at his baby, and Garrett felt a pang of ... not jealousy ... maybe nostalgia? Could he be nostalgic for something that had never happened? He knew enough about his own childhood to know that Miles had been deployed when he’d been born and hadn’t actually seen him until he was six months old, and his mother had been way too much of a diva to bother with feeding her own child. Anyone who had cared for Garrett as a baby had been an employee.

Garrett came over and kissed his little sister’s fluffy black head, then squeezed his father’s shoulder. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Sounds good.” He left the two of them bonding over juice and headed for the infirmary.

Garrett bypassed the nurse at the front desk by telling her he was just going in to check on Cody but stopped one room short and ducked into the automated medical suite. There was a med gauntlet there that had his specs loaded into it, and after turning it on, he gingerly placed his hand inside. There was a tiny prick, and then ...

“Doctor Caractacus,” the holographic doctor began seriously as he appeared. Garrett immediately turned the volume down to low. “Your blood work shows pronounced signs of hormonal instability. I recommend a full dose of your normal medications as well as a time-release dose over a period of two to four days. I recommend that you place yourself in stasis for the duration of the transition.”

The program wanted him to sleep for four days? Hell with that, Garrett didn’t have time. “Can you give me a stabilizing dose now in order to delay the need for stasis?”

“A stabilizing dose would still merit stasis at this point,” the doctor said, sounding

rather chiding. “You’ve gone too long without any medication whatsoever.”

“Then I refuse treatment for now.”

The doctor looked unhappy. “Sir—”

“As soon as my current affairs are put in order, I’ll submit to treatment.” And oh, wouldn’t knocking himself unconscious for a while irritate Claudia, with him not able to help plan his own wedding. “No more than a day or two.”

“Sir, the longer you wait, the more imbalanced your mental state will become. The need for stasis will only become more vital with every passing hour.”

“I’ll take it under advisement. Seal this record unless specifically asked by my medical proxy.”

“Yes, sir,” the doctor said unhappily. Garrett shut the program off and withdrew his hand.

Well, shit. How could he have forgotten for so long? He needed the meds, Garrett knew he needed them, but really, he was handling things fine so far. He could handle them a little longer, long enough to take care of the Jack situation and not leave Jonah alone to deal with it. Then he’d be able to afford going into stasis until his blood work was back to normal.

Garrett left the automated suite and went on to Cody’s room. The boy had kicked his blanket onto the floor and was now curled up in a ball at the very bottom of the bed. Garrett bent down and grabbed the blanket, then slid his arms under Cody and shifted him up the bed until his head was back on his pillow. Cody stirred as Garrett was tucking the blanket in around him.



“Garrett?”

“Yes?”

“I’m too hot,” he said with a sniffle.

“I’m sorry, buddy. You’ll feel better soon.”

Cody reached up and patted his face in a strange echo of Miles. “You feel good.”

How nice that cold and clammy translated as “good” to Cody. “Do you want me to stay with you for a while?”

“Yeah.”

“All right.” Garrett got into the same position as yesterday afternoon, with Cody’s head on his lap, and ran his chilly hands through Cody’s hair and across the back of his neck. Garrett was wired, he wasn’t going to sleep, but at least he could do something for Cody for a little while. Before he went and got Jonah, before they talked to Miles again, before they met with a lawyer, before they had to deal with Jack ... this was definitely going to be the least complicated part of Garrett’s day.

He shut his eyes and tried to enjoy it.

### Chapter seventeen

#### Jonah

It was the speed of it all that surprised Jonah the most.

In retrospect, he knew he shouldn't be so surprised. Garrett was capable of incredible efficiency when he wanted to be, and he had to have learned it somewhere. Apparently, his role model was his father, and where Garrett was good, Miles was absolutely astonishing. Jonah woke up alone (again) and went to check on Cody, who was happily ensconced on his bed with Garrett, watching a projection of the latest Space Rangers movie. Apparently, they were fighting giant mutant frogs in a swamp ruled by a wicked sorceress.

Well, someone had to do it.

"Hey, guys."

"Daddy!" Cody turned happily and held up his arms. He'd been a little clingier since the bug incident, which didn't bother Jonah at all. Jonah sat down next to them and pulled Cody into his arms while Garrett turned off the movie. Cody was warm in his embrace, but when he took Garrett's hand, it was so cold it shocked him. "You been sittin' in ice water, darlin'?" Jonah asked, only kind of joking at that point.

"I'm fine," Garrett said with a smile. "Maybe it's lack of sleep."

"I noticed that."

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” There was something anxious in Garrett’s demeanor, and Jonah wanted to dig deeper, but Cody was demanding his attention.

“Daddy, I had fish for breakfast.”

“What?” He stared over at Garrett. “How’d he get fish? How’d you get him to eat fish?”

“They were taiyaki , pancakes cooked in the shape of fish and filled with red bean paste,” Garrett clarified. “Claudia has a special pan to make them with; they’re a favorite where she’s from. We colored in the gills and scales with blue whipped cream.”

“Sounds like a pretty good breakfast,” Jonah said as he pictured it.

“The red was like guts,” Cody said gleefully. “And I pretended to be a shark when I ate it.”

“It was a good but messy breakfast,” Garrett added. “It required copious use of cleansing facecloths to recover from.”

“Yeah? Did you pretend to be a shark when you ate yours too?”

“Garrett didn’t have any,” Cody told him. “He said he wasn’t hungry.”

Jonah looked up at his fiancé. “Did you already eat?”

“Not long ago.”

“What does that mean?” Jonah asked, but Garrett just shrugged. “Maybe that’s why you’re so peaked now. You’ve gotta eat, darlin’.”

“I’m fine. I’ll eat a big lunch, I promise,” Garrett said with a dismissive wave. “So, I talked to my dad this morning about the situation.”

Jonah frowned. “Don’t you think that’s the sort of thing we should have done together?”

“You were sleeping. You were tired, sweetheart. I just wanted to get the ball rolling, and my father is the last person who would judge.” Garrett looked a little worried. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“Ma—no, I’m not mad ,” Jonah said, and he really wasn’t. It was only ... “I just don’t want you to take on too much of the responsibility for this. It’s something we should deal with as a team. You said it yourself, this is us , right? I know I don’t want to do it alone, s’why I told you about this mess.”

“Oh.” Garrett still looked worried. Jonah leaned across the bed and pulled him into a kiss. Garrett’s lips were soft and yielding, and it made Jonah want to take him back to the bed he’d been avoiding, but then Cody made a very pointed “ugh” sound. They pulled apart and looked down at Cody, who rolled his eyes.

“Can I get up now?” he asked. “The doctor said I could get up today. My fever is totally gone.”

“I don’t think that should be a problem,” Jonah said. “How about you go get into some of your regular clothes, bucko?” Cody crawled out of his lap and bounded toward the door. Jonah watched him go, then turned back to Garrett. “So what did your dad say?”

“He’s preparing to offer Drifters an economic incentive to do business legally on Paradise. He’s got the framework set up already; it’s something he’s been thinking of for some time. He’s got an appointment to talk to Kilroy Dechiara later today. He’s also got a family-practice lawyer on staff who’s collecting information that can help us once Kilroy and Jack break ways. Which they will, once my father is through with Kilroy.”

“That’s ... wow.” That was a lot of doing in a few short hours. Jonah felt kind of superfluous. “What does he need us to do?”

“Be prepared to talk to Gunny—the gunnery sergeant, Fred Bowman, he’s our lawyer—and prepare yourself to deal with Jack once he gets here.” Garrett tilted his head. “Are you worried? You look worried.”

“About Jack?” Jonah leaned against the head of the bed and shut his eyes for a moment. “I’m always worried about Jack. That hasn’t changed. It’s hard because while he hasn’t been a part of Cody’s life, he’s ... he’s a part of him, you know? He’s in Cody’s blood, he’s part of his DNA. He’s half of my boy. And I love every part of Cody.”

“You feel guilty.”

Jonah nodded. Garrett sidled a little closer and leaned his forehead against Jonah’s. “You have a soft spot for him, and it bothers you. Of course, you have a soft spot, he’s your son’s other biological father. But that doesn’t mean he has a right, legal or moral, to jam himself into your life now, yours or Cody’s. And he’s being an absolute bastard about it.”

“True.” Jonah opened his eyes and looked at Garrett. Their faces were only a few inches apart, close enough that Jonah could almost count the pale-silver flecks in Garrett’s irises. “I love you, darlin’. You’re the best man I know.”

Garrett smiled weakly. "I'm not so great."

"Of course, you are."

Garrett shook his head, then drew in a deep breath. "There's something I have to tell you."

"What?" Jonah stroked his fingers along the side of Garrett's face. Garrett turned his head and kissed the trailing fingertips, but he looked tense. "What, baby?" Garrett looked at him in silence for a long moment, then opened his mouth.

"Daddy! Garrett!"

The stillness of the moment shattered. They both turned to look at Cody. "What is it, bucko?"

"Grandpa needs you in his office, he says Mr. Dechiara is coming, and he wants you guys to be there for the meeting, and there's stuff you need to know first."

"Tell him we'll be right there, please," Garrett said, pushing himself into an upright position. Cody nodded and ran off, and Garrett sighed. "I guess we'd better get a move on."

"No, darlin', tell me what you were gonna say." Whatever it was, it was clearly eating at Garrett. "Just tell me fast, get it out."

"It's not the sort of thing that can really be told fast," Garrett said wryly. "But don't worry about it. I'll tell you as soon as we can take a break. I promise."

"I'll hold you to that."

“Good.” He smirked, trying to lighten the mood. “Sometimes I need a firm hand.”

Jonah nipped at his chin. “We’ll see later just how firm a hand you can take, baby.”

“Dad! Garrett!” Cody was back at the door, but this time he had his hands dramatically clapped over his ears. “Gross! Come on!” He ran away again, and this time, his fathers followed.

### Chapter eighteen

Garrett

The first part of the day was ... tolerable. That was the best word Garrett could think of to apply to it, and it didn't cover the soul-deep loathing that he held for Kilroy Dechiara, a man he'd met all of once and who probably didn't deserve to be thought of in the graphically destructive ways Garrett was thinking of him, but fuck it. He was exhausted, hopped up on too much strong coffee and not enough sleep, and his brain felt like it was moments from going offline or shattering. His vision literally hazed over with color at times, and his stomach roiled with nausea. It had been so long since Garrett had had such acute symptoms, he'd forgotten what it was like.

Apparently, it was like being poisoned. Fabulous.

He had to hold it together, though, long enough to get through the day. Then he could confess, and then he'd take whatever punishment his fiancé decided to dish out, and finally he'd go blissfully unconscious for a while as the autodoc reset his hormone levels and put his brain back in order. But first ... game face. He and Jonah and Miles sat across from Kilroy and his daughter, Charlotte, and Garrett dug the fingernails of his left hand into his palm and reminded himself to keep his breathing easy and his face calm. Calm. It was all fine.

Kilroy was, admittedly, both scared and skeptical when he was brought into the Mansion. He stared hard at Jonah and said, "So this is the way of things, then, eh?"

"Not the way you think," Jonah replied. The tension in his voice was like a live wire,



quivering and sparking through the air. Garrett wanted to grab it and wrap it around his hands and then hit that arrogant asshole of a Drifter in the face until he was quivering too. He could see it all in his mind, and it made him feel better to have a plan.

“Sit down,” Miles said. You didn’t talk back to Miles when he used that voice, and Kilroy and his daughter sat down almost before they could think about it. It was like they’d been hammered into place.

Hammer voice ... that was an interesting concept, actually, a sonic hammer that you could level against people who needed to be put down mercifully; although honestly, who really merited that? Someone had certainly invented a nonlethal sonic hammer at some point; Garrett could look those specs up and make one for himself, he was good at that. Then he could hammer the shit out of people who bothered his family, and they’d back off without having to be dead or disfigured. It was another good plan; he was really on fire right now.

Words happened, they passed through the air from mouth to ear, reverberated for a while and then came out again all rearranged. Garrett tried to be attentive, but honestly, who could really listen when you had the shapes of all those words to consider? Trade , it was built like an old-style ladder, climbing across nothingness until the next person swallowed it down. Ha, food for thought. Or thought as food. Or something ... what?

Kilroy looked dumbfounded. That was a great word, heavy and rubbery. Garrett keyed into what he was saying for a moment. “Why in the sky would you offer us all of that?”

“Because you need it, and we need you,” Miles said simply. “Paradise is in a very brittle state. A third party would help to defuse those tensions and give the populace another choice, and at the same time your people would have the option of a home

base and a way to expand your livelihoods without having to worry about being displaced. As long as you didn't directly aid in any terrorist activities, of course," he added, and now his voice was hard again, the hammer voice. It kind of hurt to hear it, it was too much like anger. "This offer is contingent on you behaving like law-abiding citizens and being willing to let us perform sweeps of your ships to prove it."

"It's a good deal, Kilroy," Jonah said, and his voice was soft and persuasive, and Garrett just wanted to wrap it around his aching head and let it muffle all the harsh light and loud noises. Jonah had the best voice, drawling and affectionate and delicious. It was warm and insulating, and in his mind, Garrett stuck his hands into that honey-warm voice and let it ease their chills because they were so cold that his fingers were practically numb. In reality, his hands twitched a little but didn't move from his lap.

There were more words that followed, debate, but it wasn't trading blow for blow like Garrett had thought it might be. It was more like grav-ball, with players getting mowed down every so often but generally moving closer and closer to the enemy's goal until they scored. That was good; Garrett could get behind that. He watched his father and Kilroy gain a few meters, get struck back, gain a few more, and then suddenly, the goal was there, and something was being signed. When had that happened? Garrett hoped that he had at least managed to look like he was paying attention because. Not. Happening.

Kilroy looked over at Jonah once the deal was gone, and his voice was oddly sympathetic. "Jack's going to come at you hard for this."

"He already knows we're not playing his game," Jonah said, and when had that happened? "He and his lawyer are on their way here."

"Good luck with him. He's worse than a feral snipe over your boy."

What the hell was a feral snipe? Garrett immediately pictured a skinny, patchy little creature with oversized claws and fangs, hissing at him. Then he pictured himself blowing it away into a snipe-shaped cloud of bloody particles, and he felt better.

Kilroy and his daughter left, and the room seemed to take a breath as everyone sighed at once. “Good. That’s the hard part done,” Miles said. “I’ll get Gunny in here; he can go over what he’s prepared as far as a defense of your sole right to Cody. You’ve only got an hour before Jack arrives with his lawyer, who is unfortunately rather biased against me as a representative of the Alliance, so use your time wisely. This could get ugly.” He stood up and left the room.

Jonah lay back in his chair and kicked his legs out. “I can’t wait for this to be over.”

“Me neither,” Garrett agreed. “I was supposed to be tasting cakes with Claudia today.”

“Oh, hell. I’ve been so wrapped up in Jack and Kilroy that I almost forgot about the wedding.” Jonah smiled apologetically at Garrett and didn’t seem to notice when his words took root in Garrett’s lungs and turned them to ice.

The wedding was the whole reason they were here, wasn’t it? Really? They had come to get married, and everything else had just sort of gone to shit after that, but getting married was still the big goal. Not brokering living deals between two cultures—although Garrett supposed that was kind of, maybe, marginally important. But that sort of thing happened every day, while Garrett had never ever been married before. It was kind of momentous if he said so himself.

“You did divorce Jack, didn’t you?” he forced out through chilly lips. His lungs felt so icy it was amazing his breath didn’t steam in the air.

Jonah smiled crookedly. “We were never officially married. Couldn’t get my mama’s

approval. I didn't think it mattered, when things were good. And then it was too late to matter in the end."

"Oh." Too late to matter. Not good words. Not applicable to them but still not good. Garrett wanted nothing more than to drag Jonah to the nearest official and get their marriage license, then wrap his fingers around Jonah's hand as he signed the paper so he could feel the reality of the words.

Jonah sat up a little. "You look so tired, darlin'. Why don't you go catch a nap? I can handle things with the lawyer. Then you'll be fresh for when we've gotta deal with Jack."

Are you getting rid of me too? Why was he trying to get rid of Garrett? Had Jonah tired of him already? "You don't want me here?" Garrett asked, trying not to tremble.

"Course I want you here, but you look like you need sleep more."

Ah. A polite excuse. Jonah didn't want him here for this. Garrett wasn't being useful, he was distracting, he was stupid, he was useless. "I'll go." He stood up to leave. Jonah stood up too.

"Wait," he said. He took Garrett's shoulders in his hands and pulled him in close for a kiss. Garrett inhaled and felt the ice in his chest melt with the warmth of Jonah's breath. He could still breathe. His heart could still beat. It wasn't too late. "I love you."

"I love you more," Garrett told him honestly. "I'll try to sleep."

"I'll come and get you before things get started."

"Okay." Garrett left the room, passing Gunnery Sergeant Fred Bowman in the hall.

The gunny raised an eyebrow.

“You’re not staying for the briefing?” He sounded displeased. It was like a smothering blanket had been thrown over the tiny, happy flame that had just sprung up in Garrett’s mind.

Well, Garrett didn’t care about his displeasure. He shrugged the blanket off. “I’ve been told I need to sleep if I’m going to be useful this afternoon.”

Gunny eyed him. “You do look like you need it. But try to plan more responsibly in the future, won’t you? This isn’t the sort of thing that one half of a couple should go through alone.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” you arrogant son of a bitch. Garrett kind of wanted to smash his arrogant face into the wall, but this was their lawyer, they needed him. He just left and walked down the hall toward the kitchen because he was tired, but he knew he wouldn’t sleep, not now. He stopped a little way outside of it when he heard the noise coming from the room. He could hear Cody in there, and Wyl, and Claudia and the baby. They sounded, well, happy. Not at all worried like everyone else seemed to be. Garrett peeked around the corner and took a look inside.

They were all eating ... cake. Lots of tiny samples were spread across the kitchen counter, and they were eating them and laughing, and they looked perfectly happy, and wasn’t that something he was supposed to do today?

Jonah doesn’t want me in the briefing, and Claudia doesn’t need me for the wedding. Great. He could have gone in, but that would have felt like crashing a party. Instead, Garrett turned around and headed back to his suite, but even once he was on the bed, curled onto Jonah’s half, he couldn’t sleep. He’d known he wouldn’t, but he couldn’t even relax. Garrett felt superfluous to his own existence.

Superfluous ... a fluid word, thin and slippery, a word tossed off the top of a very high, very important building that oozed at great speed down the slick sides, dissipating more and more with every second until it was nothing but a glaze sliding into a foggy, bogged-down oblivion.

There was an uncomfortable starkness to the whole thing that Garrett couldn't tear his eyes away from. He didn't even move the first few times someone shook his shoulder. "Garrett?" Soft voice, sweet sounds. "Gare?" Her hand was too gentle. "Honey, it's time for the meeting."

"What?"

"Gare?" Claudia sat on the bed next to him and brushed his hair away from his forehead. "Jack Vendam and his lawyer are here. You need to come to the meeting. Jonah and Mr. Bowman are waiting for you."

"I'll be right there." He smiled for her, and it must have been convincing because she left. Garrett stopped in the bathroom and ran a freshening cloth over his face. He looked at himself critically, then added some foundation beneath his eyes. There. Now he looked like he had rested. He left his room and walked back into the belly of the beast and found Jonah there with the gunny, looking better than Garrett had expected.

"Hey, darlin'." Jonah took his hand and pulled him down next to him on the couch. "They're coming in."

"Showtime," Garrett said. The sergeant snorted. Garrett refrained from kicking him in the head, just barely, before Jack and his lawyer were shown in.

Jack was not what Garrett had expected. He was tall and broad, good-looking but in a simple, hearty way. His curly hair was a dark mirror of Cody's, but beyond that, the

boy could have been all Jonah.

He was also angry. He was seething, quietly, but Garrett could see it in the set of his shoulders and the shallowness of his breathing. He was probably furious at being turned on by Kilroy, and now this. His gaze fell on Garrett, dark and calculating, and it felt like two knives being driven through Garrett's eye sockets. Tiny, tiny, super-sharp knives. Monofilament blades, too thin to see but big enough to do damage.

Jack didn't speak. His lawyer, a thin, hatchet-faced woman, did. "We'll be suing for full custody of the child." Boy, she went on the offensive fast. Jonah stiffened in shock.

"There's no basis of law for that," Gunnery Sergeant Bowman said immediately. "Your client has willfully ignored his parental rights for the past four years, no child support given, no efforts to reach out to the child taken."

"My client was denied his parental rights when your client absconded with the boy."

"Your client knew full well the intention and destination of his former spouse and could have reached out to stop them or become a part of the process at any time. He didn't."

The words continued. This was no game, nothing cooperative about it like the last one. Each sentence was a salvo at the other side, and Jonah and Jack just stared at each other, neither of them willing to give an inch. Garrett sat still and absorbed the energy of the words if not the words themselves; they were too rapid and too spiky for him to latch onto.

A file was displayed on the table. "Medical records," Jack's lawyer said briskly. "Concerning Cody's health while in the sole custody of Jonah Helms. Three incidences of broken bones, two incidences of illness requiring hospitalization. These

are hardly indicative of a caring and competent father.”

“Cody Helms is a natural; he’s genetically prone to incidents like this,” Bowman fired back. “Most children can be treated for minor injuries in an hour; for Cody, recovery takes weeks, even months. His father took appropriate medical action for each incident.”

“But the circumstances surrounding the very incidents themselves are suspect,” she argued. “Letting a child with special needs run rampant on a Drifter ship? This is the definition of neglectful parenting.”

“I’ve never neglected my boy,” Jonah said, and his voice was hardly above a growl. “And anything you’re getting’ from that particular source isn’t reliable. My mother and I aren’t on the best of terms.”

“And yet you stayed on her ship and allowed her to watch your child?” The lawyer sniffed derogatorily. “Yet another example of poor decision-making.”

“Either she’s a credible witness or a useless sack of a person; you can’t have it both ways,” Bowman said irritably.

“We have other witness statements on their way in right now. This is just a preliminary meeting.”

“Good, then we’ll have plenty of time to compile our own statements concerning your client’s utter lack of parenting skills and inability to be a decent human being.”

“Mr. Vendam has never been convicted of a crime.”

“That hardly makes him a model citizen.”



The lawyers continued sparring for a while before things finally ran out of steam. Garrett was seeing a rainbow of colors in his head, all of them dripping down into his mouth and making it taste bitter, but then Jack spoke up for the first time, and Garrett refocused on him with needle-point scrutiny.

“I want to see Cody.”

“No,” Jonah said immediately.

“I want to see my son,” Jack repeated. “I’m entitled to take a look at the boy you’ve kept from me for so long. Does he even remember me?”

“Not fondly.”

“Because you’ve been lying to him about me,” Jack bit out. “I want to see him. Ain’t leavin’ here until I do, Jonah.”

Jonah glanced at his lawyer. The sergeant shrugged. “It’s your call. It won’t set any sort of precedent; you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Jonah. Please.”

The incongruity of the word coming out of Jack’s mouth was like a punch in the gut to Garrett, but it seemed to pacify Jonah. He sighed. “Fine. Wait here.” He left the room, and the lawyers began talking again, and Jack seemed to feel Garrett staring at him, and he stared back. After a moment, he sneered.

“You hardly even look like a man.”

“Mind your words, Mr. Vendam,” Bowman warned.

“He like you for your pretty face or for your money?”

“Be quiet,” Jack’s own lawyer warned. Garrett was hardly bothered by Jack lashing out at him; honestly, it made him feel better when the guy was being the enormous dick Garrett knew him to be, not someone worthy of Jonah’s consideration. He didn’t say anything, just kept staring, and Jack shifted uncomfortably and finally looked away.

Jonah and Cody came in a minute later. Cody was leaning into Jonah’s side, and he didn’t look happy to be there. Jack’s face immediately changed, though, becoming soft and smiling. “Hey, Cody,” he said.

“Hi,” Cody mumbled, glancing over at the lawyers, then at Garrett.

“Can you come over here for a minute? I just want to talk to you a little.”

“I don’t think so,” Cody said even though he moved with Jonah as Jonah came back to the couch. Jack reached out an entreating hand to him.

“Just for a minute? You don’t have to sit with me; we can just talk.”

Cody looked down at his feet and mumbled, “No.”

“Cody,” Jack said, sounding a little exasperated now. “I’m not gonna hurt you. I just want to get a better look at you. Come here.” His hand closed the last few inches between them and clasped around Cody’s wrist. Cody reflexively pulled back with a sound of discontent, and Garrett saw pure red.

That was wrong . Jack’s hand on Cody was wrong, and so Garrett had to remove his hand. He had to keep Jack from touching Cody.

In one smooth, fast move, Garrett reached over and grabbed Jack's ring and pinkie fingers, the ones that allowed him to make a fist and close his hand, and broke them. He didn't even hear Jack's howl or the gasps of surprise and dismay. He reset his leverage, then broke Jack's wrist, twisting it sharply to the right with a crack and bringing Jack down in a sprawling mess over the table. Then he broke Jack's elbow against his knee, just to be sure he couldn't use the arm. He thought about moving on to his shoulder, but then he heard the whimper. Not Jack's, he didn't care about that, but Cody's.

Garrett looked over at Cody and saw his eyes were wide with alarm, and his lips were trembling. He looked scared. Scared of Garrett, and that was wrong, that was even worse-than-Jack wrong. Garrett dropped Jack's arm just as Jonah's hands turned him around. They gripped him too tightly, bruising.

"What the hell?" Jonah demanded. His anxious eyes searched Garrett's face, and Garrett felt the judgmental weight of them. "What's wrong with you, Garrett?" That was a good question, an angry question. Everything was wrong with him, apparently.

"Clearly this is an unsafe environment for the child!" Jack's lawyer shouted as she helped Jack sit up. "We'll be filing criminal assault charges in addition to—"

"No." It was the hammer voice, Miles's voice. He was at the doorway, had probably come running when he heard Jack scream. He was staring straight at Garrett. "My son needs serious medical attention, and your client needs a doctor. One is already on the way. You are staying here because this discussion is far from over. Garrett." He moved in close, pushed Jonah's clenching, painful hands out of the way, and cupped Garrett's face with his own hands. "Son, when's the last time you took your medication?"

"What?" Garrett's mind was fuzzy with shock, the reality of what he'd just done slowly seeping in. Oh ... oh, no. "What?"

“Your medication.” Miles’ voice was soothing and cool, talking him down like he had during the Year of Togetherness, learning to live again after being institutionalized. “When did you last take it?”

“Weeks ago.”

“Oh, Gare.” His father pulled him close and brought their foreheads together. “We need to get you to the infirmary. We’re going to go now, all right?”

“What’s happenin’?” Jonah didn’t sound angry anymore, just confused, but Garrett still couldn’t bring himself to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Miles gently pulled Garrett through the crowd of people now in the room, away from Jonah and Cody, away from Jack and his pit bull, away from Wyl and Robbie and Claudia, who were looking at him with wide eyes. He kept his gaze on his father, the only one holding him together right then.

They moved slowly, Miles stepping backward the whole way to the infirmary, keeping Garrett’s eyes occupied. If he looked away, he would die, splintered into a thousand pieces. He was sure of it.

“Come on, son.” Garrett followed the eyes and the voice and the gentle hands until he was laid back on a spongy bed. Miles put restraints on his wrists and ankles, looking apologetic, but Garrett didn’t mind. You couldn’t let a crazy person just go running around unshackled. A hologram leapt into the air and said things and made Miles look like he was in pain. Garrett had to do something to make it better.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” His father kissed his forehead. “You have to sleep for a while now, son.”

“No, I can’t!” Garrett tried to sit up, suddenly remembering what he had to do, but the restraints were already in place. “No! I have to tell Jonah something, something important ...” But what was it? “There was something, please,” he pleaded with his father. “I have to tell him. He’s going to leave me, and he won’t even know what I did to deserve it.”

“He won’t leave you. He loves you. You can tell him when you wake up, baby boy.”

“No ...” Garrett felt drowsy, and he hated it. He knew it was the medication the autodoc had administered. “No, Dad. Please ...”

“It’s okay, Gare.” Through the stars flying across his vision, Garrett could make out Miles’s face, still comforting, still watching him. Watching him ... Miles was here, he would make it okay. He had never lied to Garrett before—he took care of him when it was bad. “Go to sleep. You’ll have a chance to make things better when you’re healthy again.”

“I’m not ... not right.”

“But you will be, son,” Miles promised him. Garrett let the heavy solemnity of that promise draw him down into the well of unconsciousness. There, at least, there was no more pain.

### Chapter nineteen

#### Cody

The room after Miles and Garrett left it was uncomfortably quiet. Cody sat still at the very end of the couch, pressing his lips together tight. He didn't want to look at anyone. Daddy was upset and confused, the way he almost never was, and even though no one was speaking, everyone was angry. Cody could tell. Their hands were twitching, mouths twisting like the words behind them were fighting to get out. Wyl had a hand on Robbie's arm and his chin pressed to his shoulder, trying to keep him still. Jack's lawyer was huffing tiny breaths through her nose like one of the dragons in the holobooks Garrett had been reading with Cody. He sort of expected puffs of smoke to come out.

Something was wrong with Garrett. Cody had known as soon as he saw him when he came into the room, but he hadn't said anything. And as soon as Jack touched his arm ... Cody shivered, and his daddy pulled him closer. Garrett had hurt Jack, and now Garrett was sick. Maybe he was dying. Cody knew that every time he got sick, his daddy was always worried that he was dying. Normal people were stronger, they didn't have to worry about that sort of thing, but maybe Garrett wasn't normal either. Maybe he was broken like Cody.

Not broken, his mind reminded him. Daddy and his teachers and all the therapists had told him that over and over after they left Grandma's ship. The first few years of his life, those that he remembered, Cody had known he was broken because so many people had said so. Then everyone had said he wasn't, but he didn't really know how to believe them. If he wasn't broken, why had they had to move away? Why had Jack

left them alone for so long? Why was Garrett sick now if Cody hadn't made him that way?

"I'm sorry."

Everyone looked over at Jack in surprise. He was cradling his broken arm close to his side, wincing, but he was looking straight at Cody. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I shouldn't have grabbed you like that."

"Damn straight, you shouldn't," Jonah said, but he didn't sound angry, just tired and sad.

"Don't apologize," his lawyer said crisply. "You did nothing wrong. It was that unbalanced man's fault."

Cody frowned at her. "He's going to be my daddy."

"I sincerely doubt that at this point," the lawyer said. She sounded like Grandma when she had talked to Daddy, like she was the biggest and bestest thing in the whole universe, and everyone else was just stupid. "He's clearly unhinged. A man who can't be trusted to self-medicate in order to keep those around him safe belongs in a closed facility, not taking care of little boys."

"He's going to be my daddy !" Cody yelled at her, knocking that superior look right off her face. He turned to his dad. "Promise he's going to be my other daddy," Cody demanded. "You can't put him in a 'cility. You said he'd be our family."

"Of course, he will be," Daddy said, and the speed with which he said it made Cody slump with relief. Daddy pulled him closer into a hug. "He'll get better, and everything will be fine." He glanced over at Robbie, like he was asking a question, but Robbie just shrugged, a little helplessly, like he didn't know the answer.

“I don’t like you,” Cody said to the lawyer. She looked unaffected, but Jack looked upset. Good. Cody stared straight at Jack. “And if you let her take me away, I won’t like you either.”

Jack looked curious. “You like me?”

Cody shrugged. “I don’t really know you.”

Jack looked at Jonah, who sighed. “Not like I’ve been poisonin’ his mind against you,” Daddy told Jack. “You didn’t come up a lot. He had his memories, and they were fine, and that was it. Reckon there’ll be a lot more to remember now.”

“Stop talking to them,” Jack’s lawyer advised. “You’re in a position of strength. Don’t compromise it for the sake of expediency.”

“We’ll see about that,” Robbie said from the door, his voice cold. A moment later, Miles came back in, followed by a doctor holding a med bag.

“Where’s Garrett?” Daddy asked immediately. The doctor came around the table to treat Jack, but Cody ignored both of them. Miles looked very serious. That wasn’t good.

“He’s in the infirmary. He’s in a medication-induced coma.”

Oh, that sounded bad. Comas were bad, weren’t they?

“As soon as my client is treated, we’ll be leaving to draw up the necessary papers and alert the local police to this incident,” Jack’s lawyer said.

“They have no jurisdiction here, as the altercation took place in the Governor’s Mansion, which is technically a part of the Alliance military presence in the capital,”



Daddy's lawyer told her. "Moreover, your client isn't a citizen of Paradise. His legal status here is in question at the moment. Any and all repercussions for this interaction fall within the purview of the military police, not the civilian forces."

"That is pure sophistry," the dragon lady huffed, her face so tightly screwed up Cody thought she was on the verge of sneezing.

"You'd know if it were; your whole case is based on it," their lawyer replied. Miles stepped in before anything else could be said.

"Now is not the time. We're in the middle of a family emergency. These discussions will continue tomorrow, at noon, here." He held up a hand before the dragon lady could even get out the first word. "This is the most neutral territory you're going to be offered. The incident that happened today was regrettable, and I apologize for it and for my son. However, it has no bearing on the issue at hand."

Miles's face, which was almost always smiling when Cody saw it, was so stern and dark that he looked like a thundercloud. "The issue at hand is Cody's legal placement, his future relationship with Mr. Vendam, and his happiness. Compile whatever documents you want but rest assured that we'll be doing the same." He looked hard at Jack. "I sincerely doubt your past is so pure that you're safe from it, son. Remember that when you're thinking about what you hope to get out of this." He stood up and walked out the door. After a moment, Robbie turned and went after him.

Claudia came into the room, without Renee this time. She smiled and held a hand out to Cody. "Do you want to come with me for a while, honey?" She glanced coolly at the lawyers and Jack. "We can leave the details to the grownups and watch a show."

Cody looked up at Daddy, who gave him a little smile. "It's okay with me, bucko."

Jack looked surprised. "I used to call him that."

“Well, I’d never hold a nickname against him,” Jonah said softly. He unwrapped his arm from Cody’s shoulders and smiled again. “Go on. I’ll come find you soon.”

“Okay.” Cody got off the couch and walked around the back of it, very conscious of every eye on him. He took Claudia’s hand, and they left the room, and it was like coming up for air after he’d dived really, really deep into a pool.

Part of him wanted to bury his face in Claudia’s side and cry, but he couldn’t. He needed to make sure Garrett was sleeping okay. Being in the infirmary sucked, and Cody sometimes got nightmares. He always felt better when Daddy and Garrett were there with him, and he would do the same thing for Garrett.

Claudia was leading him toward the living room, but when she saw Miles and Robbie talking so seriously there, she diverted to the kitchen instead. The remains of their cake party were still out on the counter, but just seeing it made Cody feel sick now.

“Do you want something to drink?” Claudia asked.

“No, thank you.” Cody sat on one of the stools and tucked his feet up so that his knees were right under his nose. He shut his eyes tight and tried not to remember anything at all, not the noise of Jack’s fingers breaking or the way Garrett had swayed, like he was just about to fall over.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Claudia’s arms came around him and held him close, and he gave in and held her back, hard. She smelled so good, and she was warm and soft. Cody had never had a mom, but if he could have picked one, he would have wanted someone like Claudia. “It’s going to be okay,” she promised him.

“How do you know?” Cody asked miserably. “Why is Garrett sick? I thought normals don’t get sick.”

“I don’t really understand it,” Claudia admitted. “I don’t know the details, but Miles does. He knows what to do for Garrett. He can explain it to you.”

“When?”

“Right now.” A new hand fell on Cody’s shoulder, and he turned and launched himself into Miles’s chest instantly. Miles picked him up like he was little again and put him on his hip, and even though Cody was really too old for that, he let him do it anyway. “Should we go and see him?”

“Can we?” Cody asked, wiping a stupid tear off with his palm. “He’s not in ...” What did Daddy call it? “Solitary?”

Miles smiled. “You mean isolation. No, he’s not. We can get right up close.” He turned his face and kissed Claudia, then started walking toward the infirmary.

“Where’d Robbie go?”

“He went to get something out of Garrett’s ship that he thought might help us with Jack.”

“Like what?” Cody sniffed.

“He’s not sure. He’ll have to listen to it, and then we’ll see.”

“Oh.” They went a little further before Cody confessed, “I don’t want to live with Jack.”

“You won’t have to.”

“But I’m sorry he got hurt.”

“Yeah, me too,” Miles said with a sigh. “I had no idea Garrett had let it get so bad. He’s supposed to take his medicine every day when he’s travelling, and he forgot this time.”

“He was very busy,” Cody defended. “He was always working or planning or helping me with my schoolwork. Daddy said he wasn’t sleeping enough.”

“I’m sure he wasn’t. The last time this happened, he’d been awake for twelve days straight before he went in for treatment.” The doors of the infirmary swooshed open for them, and Miles walked straight back to a private room.

“Why did he stay awake for so long?”

“Because his brain was sick,” Miles said. Then they were with Garrett. Miles put Cody down, and he ran over to the bed and stared.

The surface of the bed had retracted beneath Garrett’s body, submerging him in stasis gel. He wore a small respirator, and his eyes were closed. A thin film rested over the gel, white and opaque, so they couldn’t see any of his body except for his face and his hands, which were elevated out of the gel on little pads. Numbers kept popping up on the surface of the film over his chest, too fast for Cody to make out. BP? HR? He looked confusedly at Miles.

“They let the doctors know how Garrett’s doing,” Miles told him. “He’s mostly fine, but he’s going to have to sleep for a while.”

“So his brain gets better?”

“Exactly.” Miles sat in one of the chairs to the side of the bed and took one of Garrett’s hands. “You can touch him,” he told Cody. Cody nodded and took the other hand, which was warm, not cold like it had been the last time Garrett had touched

him.

“He feels better.”

“Good.” Miles smiled at him, and it was like Cody could finally recognize him again. “Then he’s improving already.”

Cody sat in the other chair and kept holding Garrett’s hand. “How did his brain get sick?”

“He was just born that way.”

Cody hadn’t known that. “Just like me.”

“Exactly,” Miles said.

“And you couldn’t fix it?”

“Oh, it used to be much worse. We fixed a lot of it, but we always knew that Garrett would have to be careful for the rest of his life,” Miles told him. “It was very hard for him for a while. Eventually, we got to the point where he was mostly better, and he stayed better after that for a long time.”

“Until he met me.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Miles said, so firmly that Cody couldn’t drop his eyes. “Not at all. Garrett’s been responsible for himself for a long time now, and he knew what he needed to do. He either forgot to do it, or he deliberately put it off and didn’t tell anyone, but that isn’t your fault or your daddy’s.”

“Is he gonna get in trouble?”

“No.” Miles looked down at Garrett now, and Cody recognized that expression. He’d seen his own daddy look like that when he was with Cody, and even Garrett had looked that way a few times. It was somewhere between love and stubborn. “He’s not going to get in trouble. Not the kind we can’t handle, at least. I’ve got plenty to say to him about taking proper care of himself, though.”

“Don’t yell at him, though,” Cody begged because he knew Garrett hated that.

“No yelling,” Miles swore. “I wouldn’t yell at my boy, not even when he’s being dumb.”

Cody looked down as he tapped his toes lightly against the rounded base of the bed. “Are you glad that he’s your boy? Even though he was born like this?”

Miles reached across the bed and tilted Cody’s chin up. His eyes were just like Garrett’s, bright and blue. “I wouldn’t trade him for anything.”

A little of the knot in Cody’s tummy dissolved. “Me neither.”

### Chapter twenty

#### Jonah

If he'd been asked afterward, Jonah wouldn't have been able to repeat back any of what was said for the rest of the meeting before their lawyers finally called it quits. His mind was spinning with too many possibilities and fears, and it didn't help that Jack just sat there silently, his arm fixed up in a sling once the doctor was done, and stared at him with a considering look on his face.

Jonah was very familiar with that look; it was the harbinger of big things, and not many of them had turned out well in the past. Jack had worn that look when he bought his first ship, a clunker called Beulah that he never was able to get into useable shape for spaceflight and eventually ended up selling to a small shipping company that only did planet-side traffic, getting only half what he had paid for it. He had worn that look when he'd agreed to them having Cody as well, and the best that Jonah could say about that decision was that it had ended with him having a beautiful child even while everything else fell apart.

And now ... Jonah wasn't quite sure what Jack was thinking about, but he didn't really have the energy to care as much as he probably should.

As soon as stiff handshakes were exchanged, and Jack and his lawyer left, Jonah bolted from the room and headed straight for the infirmary. God damn it all to hell, why did he end up spending so much of his time there? If it wasn't Cody getting shots, it was Garrett getting his eyes burned out of his head. Might as well rent space in the one back home if this was an indicator for the kind of trouble his guys could

get into.

There was a part of his brain, getting louder and louder by the minute, that was yelling at him about what an absolute idiot he'd been. Not because he was with Garrett; no one could have looked at what had happened today and not noticed how devoted Garrett was to Cody. The man was goin' out of his mind, and he'd still moved to defend Jonah's son, and even though it hadn't been necessary, had in fact been just about the definition of overkill, it wasn't anything Jonah felt he had to fear.

No, Jonah was shouting at himself because he'd let distractions get the better of him and hadn't noticed his lover, his fiancé, slowly goin' crazy. Or whatever was the matter with him.

Jonah asked the first doctor he saw where Garrett was and was directed to a private room on the west side of the facility. The walls were clear, the type that could be blacked out with a touch for privacy, but right now they were transparent, and Jonah could see the bed and Miles sitting beside it. He was holding one of Garrett's hands and looking down into the recessed bed, and it almost seemed like too private a moment to break. Then he reminded himself, I'm family, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Miles looked up and smiled slightly when he saw him. "You just missed Cody."

"Who's he with?"

"Wyl came by to get him. They're going to go repaint Garrett's bike as a surprise gift for him when he wakes up."

"Wyl's a good guy," Jonah said as he sat in the chair on the opposite side of the bed and looked down at Garrett. The blue-tinted gel covering him gave his face a strange, corpse-like cast, and Jonah unconsciously bit his lower lip.



“He is. We’re all happy he and Robbie found each other.”

“Kinda surprising, you gettin’ along so well with your son’s ex.”

“If I couldn’t get along with Garrett’s former paramours, I’d lose a large number of friends,” Miles said dryly. “And generally, my son’s partings have been amicable. He doesn’t take a lot personally.”

“Good to know,” Jonah muttered.

Miles stared at Jonah for a moment before he sighed. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Blaming yourself. Garrett has been dealing with his medical issues very successfully for most of his life; this little lapse isn’t your fault.”

“I should have paid him better attention,” Jonah said stiffly. This wasn’t exactly a conversation he wanted to have with his future father-in-law, but it didn’t look like he was going to have a choice. “I knew something was wrong, but I wasn’t sure what. I thought he was just anxious, you know. Worried about the wedding and then worried about Jack and Kilroy. I should’ve—”

Miles was already shaking his head. “There’s no amount of hindsight that’s going to help, son. There are plenty of things you could have done, or that any of us could’ve done, but Garrett’s an adult. He knows his responsibilities. He let this slip, and I’m not blaming him for everything that’s happened, but still. It’s clear there’s a lot you don’t know about his history, and he should have explained it to you long before things got to this point so that you would be able to help him.”

“I know he was sick as a kid,” Jonah offered, wondering—hoping—that Miles was

going to fill in some of the gaps Jonah knew were there.

“He tried to kill himself.”

“Oh.” Holy ... shit. Suicide wasn’t all that rare in a Drifter community, but on Alliance planets, where doctor visits were mandatory and regular, Jonah knew it almost never happened.

“I should have seen it coming,” Miles said pensively. “And don’t look at me like that; I’m allowed to take responsibility in this instance because Garrett was only thirteen. His mother killed herself when he was a small child, and I knew there was the potential for it in his genetics, but I was a rather-neglectful single father for a long time, and I didn’t make sure he was getting the care he needed.” He took a deep, slow breath. “Ten years to the day after his mother’s death, Garrett shot himself in the chest.”

“Holy shit .” Jonah had just thought it, but he figured it merited sayin’ aloud too.

“He missed his heart, and fortunately the kind of gun he used made a wound that cauterized around the edges, so he didn’t bleed out. My housekeeper found him and got him help. By the time I returned from deployment, he was already out of the hospital.

“We had such a fight about it.” Miles stroked the back of Garrett’s hand carefully, but the look on his face was almost fond. “He didn’t want to get treatment, especially not the rather-drastic kind that had been recommended by his surgeon. He shouted about how I should just go away, how he had always taken care of himself, and he could keep doing it, how I didn’t even care.” Miles snorted. “He was a very melodramatic teenager. He heaped all sorts of abuse on me, a lot of it well deserved, and I sat there and took it and then told him he didn’t have a choice, he was going to a specialist. He stayed in a private hospital for nearly three months while they worked out a solution

to his particular mental imbalance, and then he came home.”

“And you stayed with him.” Jonah knew this part of the story; it was one of the reasons Garrett loved his father so much.

“I did. And he hated me for the first, oh, six months. We got counseling, obviously, and eventually, Gare accused me of wanting him to be different. He said I had forced him to change. And I told him I loved him however he was, and that I always would.”

Miles smiled slightly. “It’s strange, but before Gare shot himself, I knew almost nothing about him. He was a perfect son whenever we saw each other, which was maybe twice in a standard year. Excellent scores in school, physically healthy, polite. Like a caricature of a child, and I didn’t even realize it. I’d made the same mistake with his mother, never digging deep enough to understand the real her. Do you know who his mother was?”

Jonah knew. “Larissa Child, the actress. She starred in the first holo I ever watched,” he added, remembering sneaking into the theater on Belamonte when he was a child and watching her float across the screen, a goddess in white and gold.

“Larissa. Garrett’s a lot like her. Beautiful, smart, captivating. She could make you believe anything and make you do almost anything as well. I was never sure why she agreed to marry me, honestly. My family has influence, but she didn’t need our help in that arena.” Miles shrugged. “But she did marry me, and we had Garrett, and then she killed herself. It took a long time for me to let go of the guilt I felt over that. I don’t think I actually managed it before I spent a year with Gare and got to know him, to really know him. He’s one of the most complex people I’ve ever met, and I don’t think anyone can really understand everything that goes on in his head. Or anyone’s, really.

“A parent is responsible for their children, but an adult can only truly be held

responsible for their own decisions, not the decisions of the people surrounding them. It was hard for me to accept, being career military and very accustomed to telling people what to do. I got it eventually, though, thanks to my son.” This time when Miles smiled it was easy. “We do love our children. They make us become better people than we thought we could be.”

“I get that,” Jonah agreed, and he really did. Before Cody, he had lived a very different life, a wild life, one where he was angry and insecure and often desperate. Cody had taken all of that chaos and focused it into a burning desire to do right by him.

“He’s going to feel awful when he wakes up,” Miles predicted. “He won’t blame you, he’ll blame himself. However you respond is up to you, but if I might make a suggestion?”

Jonah nodded.

“Be kind to both of you. Don’t let him wallow, but don’t try to take all the responsibility onto yourself either. He won’t accept that. I assume you’re still planning on going through with the marriage?”

“Course,” Jonah said, surprised Miles even bothered to ask.

“Good. Then with that in mind, and with the emotional health of all your family in mind, demand honesty from each other. Make a plan. Be prepared to forgive and to ask for forgiveness but follow it up with action. Intent only counts for so much in life.”

“Good advice,” Jonah murmured.

“I’ve been around the ’verse a time or two by this point,” Miles said. “I’ve got a

decent working knowledge of how to get results out of people, and promises are only worthwhile if they come true.” He patted Garrett’s hand, then got up and moved around the bed. “I need to go prep for tomorrow. I’ll make sure someone remembers to bring in a meal for you.”

“Thank you,” Jonah told him sincerely. Miles squeezed his shoulder on the way out. Jonah looked down at Garrett and tried, very briefly, to imagine a life without him. It was as painful and impossible as imagining life without Cody, and he shied away from it almost immediately.

“Okay, then,” he told himself firmly. “Definitely not an option. And if you even bring it up,” he said to Garrett, “we’re gonna have words, darlin’.”

Garrett’s hand twitched under his. Jonah just held it tighter. They would figure this out. Nothing else was acceptable.

### Chapter twenty-one

Jonah

A n hour before meeting with Jack and his lawyer the next afternoon, Robbie pulled Jonah aside and into his office. When Jonah asked why, Robbie was uncharacteristically solemn, not even a hint of humor or camaraderie in his demeanor. “Did Garrett get a chance to talk to you about the bug before he went under?”

Jonah was confused. “What bug?”

“That’s a no, then.” Robbie’s shoulders stiffened a little. “I’ve got something you need to listen to. Listen all the way through before you say anything and don’t leave before I can explain. Agreed?”

“What’s this about?” Jonah asked. Robbie just stared at him, hands folded on one knee where he sat on the edge of his desk. Jonah was in a regular chair, his head a couple feet lower down, and he had to stifle the urge to stand up so Robbie wouldn’t be able to look down at him. The man was a friend of Garrett’s, hell, of his whole family. He wasn’t being threatening. Jonah just wished he didn’t loom quite so competently. “Fine.”

“Good.” Robbie reached behind himself and fiddled with something on his desk for a moment, and then sound filled the air. It took Jonah a moment to realize that he was hearing his own voice.

“Kilroy.”

“Jonah! Sit, sit.” The sound of a chair scraping across a rough floor. “I’m glad you could spare some time away from your Alliance man to see me, lad.”

“My fiancé isn’t a soldier.”

“Sure he is, Jonah. Just because he’s not a part of the government machine doesn’t mean he isn’t an Alli.”

“Where’s Charlotte?”

“Oh, keepin’ an eye on things.” A faint voice asks what Jonah wants to drink. There’s a long pause. “I didn’t invite you here just to scowl at me while I drank alone, lad. Order something. My treat.”

Another pause. “Fine.”

Jonah looked up at Robbie. “How did you get this?”

“A slimdisc set in the hem of your shirt.” The voices keep going in the background, replaying a conversation that Jonah would be more than happy to forget.

“How the hell did it get there?”

Robbie didn’t pull any punches. “Garrett put it there just before you left.”

Jonah was dumbfounded. “Why? Why would he do that?” A chill gripped his heart. “Did he think I was gonna side with Kilroy? What, he thought that I was gonna agree to help spy on his family?” The idea that Garrett didn’t trust Jonah to do the right thing was almost paralyzing.

“He was just worried. It wasn’t a rational fear, and I told him that, but there was

nothing I could say to change his mind. You know how he gets when he's determined."

"Wait, so you knew about this?" Jonah stood up, genuinely angry now. When he stood up straight, he had an inch on Robbie; it wasn't much, but it helped a little. Robbie just looked at him, cool and composed. "Before he even did it? Why the hell did you let him get away with it?"

"Because he asked me to. Because I thought we'd get incriminating information about an attempt to infiltrate our facilities, which we did. Garrett could have deleted the file at any time; he might have if he'd been thinking straight, but by that point, I think he was already getting sick." That reference stabbed Jonah with just enough pain that it kept him from yelling, and Robbie pushed his advantage. "The whole reason I'm letting you in on this now is because of the end of the recording." He worked the device again, and then Jonah heard—

"They could hang you for that, Kilroy."

"Not if we were already gone. I'm that desperate, Jonah. Figured I might not be enough to convince you, though. Soon as I heard you arrive here, I sent word to a mutual acquaintance of ours. Someone you might be more willin' to listen to than me. Someone with personal business with you." A stutter, the sound of breaking glass, then static.

Jonah's fingers curled in on themselves, biting into his palms. "That's the end?"

"The slimdisc got wet when the glass broke. It was ruined after that."

"You don't have anything there," Jonah protested. "You can't even hear Jack's voice—"



Robbie immediately shook his head. “We do have something. It’s circumstantial, true, but the timing is right to indicate Jack’s involvement, and moreover, Kilroy Dechiara is willing to testify to the fact that it was Jack who was joining you right then. We have copies of correspondence between the two of them setting up the meet and discussing what he was going to hold over you, and how.”

He smiled very slightly. “Mr. Dechiara is more than willing to work with us now that he has a vested interest in being on the right side of the government here. We could sink him with this recording, completely void the agreement he came to with Miles, and he knows it. He’s not going to protect Jack, and your ex won’t have a leg to stand on in his negotiations if he chooses to reveal this recording and the testimony that goes with it. Jonah.” Robbie set a hand on his shoulder. “This is the leverage you need to keep him from taking Cody. That’s why I’m telling you this. I don’t want to make trouble between you and Gare, and I know he feels bad about this.”

“I’m sure he does,” Jonah said, remembering how twitchy Garrett had been, kinda spooked, how he had tried to tell him something right before the first meeting and then didn’t have the time to. Jonah wasn’t sure how he felt about any of it, not Garrett’s deception or his remorse, but he did understand what Robbie was saying. “Thank you for tellin’ me.”

“It never hurts to have a Plan E,” Robbie said easily.

“What are plans A through D?”

“A involves Jack backing down gracefully. B is considerably more complicated but leaves Kilroy out of the mess by demonstrating Jack’s unfit character by digging further into his past, everything from his business deals to his personal relationships. Which we’ve done, but it might not be enough.” Robbie smiled, and it was a dangerous expression on him. “And you don’t want to know about C and D.”

“Not with you grinnin’ like a shark, I don’t,” Jonah mumbled, taken aback.

“Precisely. Now.” He checked the desk chrono. “You might want to go and get smartened up, then get Cody. The meeting starts in half an hour, and you look like you slept in a chair all night.”

“I did sleep in a chair,” Jonah confessed. He hadn’t been able to pry himself away from Garrett, and those chairs were almost as good as a bed when you reclined them.

Robbie nodded approvingly. “Good man.”

Jonah left and headed to the suite, more than ready for a shower and some time alone. His mind was spinning with the implications of what Robbie had just told him. Garrett hadn’t trusted him. Garrett, his goddamn fiancé, hadn’t trusted him to do the right thing. Hadn’t trusted Jonah to be honest with him, and then he had gone right ahead and lied to him in turn.

Jonah ripped his clothes off and stepped into the shower, making the water hot, hot enough to turn his skin red in seconds. He let the anger he felt at Garrett take hold in his mind, hotter than the water that poured over his body. “Fuckin’ damn it!” he snarled into the emptiness. Two-faced, self-righteous little bastard, lookin’ at him all lovin’ and sweetness while he was fuckin’ lying to Jonah, for no good goddamn reason—

Jonah slammed his hand into the shower’s mister, making it stutter, then shut down completely. The gentle spray was replaced by a single hard stream that hit him squarely on top of the head, almost scalding him. “Shit!” Jonah shut off the water and pushed his hair out of his eyes.

He’d broken the shower. Brilliant.

He had the potential to break a lot more than that. Jonah stood there in the remnants of steam and shut his eyes. This was the reason Garrett hadn't told him, obviously; he'd been worried Jonah would fly off the handle and start yelling at him, which was exactly what he wanted to do. Which would lead to nothing but pain for both of them.

Jonah remembered the morning Cody had gotten stung. Garrett had been affectionate but somehow wary, chilly in Jonah's arms when he leaned in for a kiss. He had already been gettin' sick. Jonah hadn't noticed; hell, no one had, but Jonah still hadn't forgiven himself for it. He replayed some of his conversation with Miles in his head. He tried to kill himself. He was only thirteen. I knew he had the potential for it in his genetics. A smile and then, We love our children. It wasn't just kids you had to love even when they weren't perfect.

You're still planning on going through with the marriage?

Of course , he'd said. Had learning this changed anything about how Jonah felt for Garrett? Really changed it?

No.

That thought came so quickly, and with such a sense of relief, that Jonah had to lean against the damp wall of the shower to keep himself upright. No, it didn't change things. He and Garrett needed to have a serious talk, there was no doubt of that, but he wasn't gonna leave the man over this. Hell, Garrett could have done a lot worse, and Jonah would still forgive him because that was how Jonah loved once you broke through his guard: without reservation. It would take a lot more than this to break that bond. Jack had managed it, but Cody was Jonah's weak point, and Garrett had already proven he would go to absolutely stupid lengths to put Cody first.

They were good together. That didn't mean they didn't have to work at it. But Jonah never shied away from hard work. He straightened up, dried off, then went searching

for some decent clothes. He had a meeting to get through, then a lover to get back to.

He really, really hoped he didn't have to learn about Plans C and D.

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In the end, the recording wasn't needed. They went with Plan A, with a twist, and it wasn't even Jonah's call. When he and Cody entered the office, Jack and his lawyer were waiting for them along with Miles and Gunnery Sergeant Bowman. Jack's lawyer looked like she'd been chewing on persimmons.

"What's goin' on?" Jonah asked, keeping his hands on his son's shoulders. Jack tore his eyes away from the boy and looked up at Jonah.

"My client is withdrawing his claim to Cody Helms," the lawyer said, hissing the last "s" through the very front of her teeth like she wanted to bite the word off.

"It ain't the right thing, for me to force something on him that he doesn't want," Jack said, and he looked resigned. "That doesn't mean I don't want to get to know him. I do, more than anything." He sounded absolutely sincere. "But not if that means takin' him away from you. You and your man, you two love him. You've got a home for him. A kid needs that."

"We're interested in the possibility of visitation rights," his lawyer said. She knew Jack had just thrown away their advantage, and she didn't look happy to be on the defensive side of the bargaining table, but she was doing her best. "In the interests of giving Cody the most well-rounded experience possible, Mr. Vendam would like to be able to see him for two standard weeks a year, said visitation taking place either here on Paradise or on Pandora, not to leave either location with Cody without prior knowledge and assent from you, Mr. Helms."

Jonah was shocked silent. Jack stared at him, more open than he'd ever seen him before, and Jonah knew he had the man's hope in his hands. He could break it and break Jack while he did, or he could save him. It was dizzying, having that kind of power, and honestly, it made him feel a little sick. He swallowed and looked down at Cody.

"What do you say, bucko?" he asked gently. "How do you feel about seeing Jack every now and then?"

Cody looked thoughtful. "But I'd still get to live with you."

"Yes."

"And with Garrett."

"Yes." Absolutely yes.

Cody shrugged, taking it in stride the way only a kid could. "Okay."

Just like that, the whole mood of the place changed. Jack was smiling, Miles looked pleased, and Cody wasn't unhappy, which was probably the best Jonah could hope for under the circumstances. There were holes to be plugged and details to be arranged, but the crisis had been avoided. Thank fuck , as Garrett would say.

Speaking of that ... Jonah still had to deal with Garrett. But at least the wait would be easier to tolerate now.

### Chapter twenty-two

Garrett

In the early days of its development, Regen was something of a mixed blessing. It could heal horrific wounds and bring people back from the brink of death, but if someone was wholly submerged in it, instead of given the small injections that staved off aging, the process did more than heal their physical wounds. It went in and completely rewrote genomes, perfected imperfections, and made the body in its liquid embrace the equivalent of a blank slate. Soldiers would go into it dying and come out of it like flesh dolls of themselves, with no memories and no physical abilities beyond the most basic of functions. It turned back the clock, literally, and turned the grown back into children.

After being sued almost into oblivion, TerraPharm, the company responsible for the technology, had gone back to the drawing board and come up with ways to protect the brain and preserve memories and motor functions. A skilled-enough doctor could design a Regen treatment that dulled the psychological pain of a traumatic event while keeping the memory of the event itself. In the Mansion's infirmary, a place designed to treat any trauma a soldier might have to contend with, the doctors were artists with Regen.

So Garrett was allowed to retain his memory of the traumatic event that precipitated his landing on his back in a pool of gel while not really feeling the emotions that had gone with it. The process had been extra tricky, given that he was in for a biochemical treatment in the first place, but the doctors managed. That was what gave Garrett the ability to wake up slowly and calmly, quietly assessing his surroundings,

instead of bolting off the bed he was on and running around in a panic, which had definitely been a possibility a little while ago.

The bed was familiar. Comfortable. The infirmary did its best, but there were too many technological worries in a medical bed to make it truly comfortable to lie on. This one was nice, and it smelled like warmth and Jonah. Jonah ... wasn't there something Garrett was supposed to tell him?

He let his mind mull it over as he gradually took stock of his senses. Warm, soft bed although his cheek was pressed against something that felt a little harder. There was a heavy weight across his middle, and something was rhythmically fluffing his hair. The weight moved, and Garrett finally identified it. Arm .

He smiled and snuggled closer to the owner of the arm because it had to be Jonah, and that was good. He loved being held by Jonah. It was kind of a surprise, but ... wait ... why should his fiancé holding him ever be surprising?

Because you freaked out and broke his ex's arm in two places after spying on him and going off your meds, the asshole part of his consciousness said. Nice going, genius.

Shut up, bitch, Garrett retorted, but he had made a good point. Or two.

"I can tell you're awake now," Jonah murmured. He sounded drowsy.

"Shh, I'm not ready to wake up," Garrett replied. He had the beginnings of butterflies in his stomach, so he figured he should take advantage of his medically induced calm while he could.

"Can't be sleepy. You've been out for almost three days."

“I can be sleepy if I want to,” Garrett told him. “That way I can avoid facing the music for a little longer.”

“Where’d that sayin’ even come from?” Jonah asked. “Doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t know. We should look it up.”

“Later.” Jonah kissed his bare forehead, and Garrett sighed and turned his face further into Jonah’s shoulder.

“I probably don’t deserve that.”

“Oh, you probably do,” Jonah mused. “I think you probably deserve a lot more, but you’re not gonna get any of it until we talk this out.”

“You sound tired. We can wait until you’re awake and alert.”

Jonah chuckled. “I don’t think so, darlin’. The more time you lie there and stew, the worse it’s gonna get. And I don’t fancy chasin’ your ass all over this compound in order to have words with you, so. Let’s talk.”

Oh, glorious. “Where do you want to start?” Garrett asked, starting to pull away, but Jonah put his head right back where it had been.

“Let’s start with why you let your meds slip. It’s not that hard to get ’em, right? You just use the gauntlet.”

“Right.” Garrett smiled, but it felt a little brittle. “Here’s the thing. Back on Pandora, I use the gauntlet about once a week. When I’m in a stable situation that I’m accustomed to, my symptoms are far less acute. I’ve actually been using less and less medication since moving in with you and Cody.”



“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“It’s good,” Garrett agreed, “but then our situation changed. We came here, and the protocol is for me to check every day while away from home, but once we landed, my regular routine went to hell, and as the stresses built, so did my need for the stabilizers. When I missed a day and got a double dose the next day, the enhanced effect sent my confidence level skyrocketing, which made it easier to allow myself to miss the next day and the next.

“I had so much work to do, and I was worried about you and Cody fitting in, and, well, all sorts of things. It just got worse after you met with Kilroy. When I finally realized how far I was from all right, I knew I’d have to go under to get things set straight, but I still needed to be there for you.” Garrett swallowed hard. “So I put it off again.”

“And was this before or after you bugged me?”

Oh, so he knows about that. Shit. “After,” Garrett admitted. “I was having some problems by the time I bugged you, but mostly I was just ... worried. And a little jealous. I made Robbie help me.”

“Oh, I’ve already had a long talk with that guy,” Jonah said sarcastically. “He doesn’t apologize easy, does he? And jealous? What in the world did I do to make you jealous?”

Garrett shrugged awkwardly. “Nothing. Jealousy is an irrational emotion, or haven’t you heard? I thought maybe you would reconsider, maybe you missed aspects from your old life that I couldn’t give to you.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Jonah sighed. “Darlin’. If anyone in this relationship has reason to be insecure, it’s me. I’m the one that’s an uneducated former smuggler with a natural

kid and emotional baggage a goddamn mile long. You're smart, you've got more degrees than I can count, and a pedigree that goes back to the founding of the Alliance. You've given up almost all the benefits of that to live on a Fringe colony makin' a fifth of what you could on other planets, with none of the entertainment I know you love, for me and Cody. I know we've had this talk before, but I don't think it's sunk in yet." He tilted Garrett's chin up and looked him in the eyes. "I'm crazy as hell in love with you, and I'm so goddamn grateful that you're mine that I barely know how to face it."

"Oh," Garrett said, feeling his body start to respond to Jonah's tone and close proximity and not minding that one bit. "Good. Me too."

"That bein' said," Jonah continued, "if you ever put a slimdisc on me again, you and I are gonna have a hell of a lot more words to say than a simple apology." He was dead serious. "You need to trust me for this to work. We have to trust each other. Otherwise, it'll all fall apart. I'm not gonna do wrong by you, but you have to be up front with me. I want to know when you're worried or sick or jealous or goin' to pieces because when you hide it from me, it makes me think you don't trust me to help you or explain. I know you were already off the meds when you made the call, but you still knew it wasn't right."

Garrett didn't look away even though he really wanted to. "I knew it," he said. "I'm sorry for doing it. I was going to tell you."

"I know."

"What happened with Jack?"

Jonah smiled, suddenly so easy and bright that it was a little shocking. "He's not goin' after Cody anymore. We've agreed to consider visitations, though. Cody wasn't against it, and Jack seems to really want it."

Well, at least the first half of all that information was welcome. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Garrett asked doubtfully.

“No, but there’s time to figure it out. I’m not gonna let the man screw up Cody, and neither will you.”

“Exactly, we can screw him up far more efficiently all by ourselves.”

“Cynic,” Jonah accused, nuzzling into the soft hair of Garrett’s temple. His erection surged to life at the simple touch, and Garrett groaned. Coming out of a major Regen treatment temporarily gave him the libido of a teenage boy. “Ah, the doc warned me about that,” Jonah said, and he sounded like he was trying not to laugh. “Said I should be gentle with you for a while ’cause you’re bound to be sensitive.”

“I’m not sensitive, I’m horny,” Garrett informed him loftily while trying to rub against his hip. “There’s a difference.”

“Yeah?” Jonah reached down between them and palmed Garrett’s cock, and even through the lightweight scrubs he was wearing, it was enough to make Garrett hiss and clench his teeth. “Seems like both to me.”

“Lucky me,” Garrett snarked. “Or really, lucky you because while I might be on a hair trigger, I can come and come and come, and everything should be nice and”—he squirmed a little—“tight.”

“Thought you were sleepy,” Jonah teased, but his expression was getting hungry.

“That was before. This is now. Try to keep up, sweetheart.”

“How long,” Jonah asked, rubbing Garrett’s throbbing cock, “do you think it would take me to get you off?”

“The first time? Maybe five seconds.” Garrett gasped. “Let’s find out.”

“Let’s.” Jonah moved in for a kiss as he pulled Garrett’s pants down his thighs, then gripped his length and stroked him. Jonah had big hands, calloused in just the right places, and even though his palm was dry, Garrett was leaking enough to compensate, to make what should have been too much friction a delicious pull and glide, and then Jonah brought his palm up to the head and rolled it around in a circle, and that—

Fuuuuck . Garrett moaned into his lover’s mouth and brought one leg up to rock Jonah’s body against his as he came. Well. So that might not have even been five seconds, but it was so good he’d had to let it happen. Jonah pulled back from the kiss with a grin and rubbed his tacky, wet hand off on the sheets. “You’re a quick shot, baby.”

“I warned you,” Garrett replied loftily, still riding the endorphins. “But I think I could last for longer if you want to go again.”

“You think you can?”

Garrett smiled. “I’ve been through this before. I’m probably going to stay hard for hours.”

Jonah pushed Garrett over onto his back and shimmied down his body. Jonah was in a pair of sleep shorts and nothing else, and Garrett enjoyed having so much naked skin pressed so close to him. He kicked his pants the rest of the way off and made space for Jonah between his legs. “You have someone to help you through it last time?” Jonah asked, his voice a little throaty as he leaned in and licked the head of Garrett’s cock. Garrett shivered.

“Just me and my toys,” Garrett replied. “It was a quarantine situation.”

“Have to tell me about it sometime.” Jonah licked again, and Garrett lost track of what he was going to reply as his fiancé started to use his mouth on him, licking a slow line up the length of his cock before dipping down over the head and swirling his tongue around in a circle.

“Gaah—ungh.”

Jonah hummed approvingly at Garrett’s incoherence, and Garrett shut his eyes and tried to ride out the first, sharpest sensations. He was doing okay, he really was, he could handle the swirly thing and the way Jonah’s throat relaxed to let him in so deep, and he could hold out against the warm, wet pressure and the way the strands of Jonah’s hair tickled when they fell across his abdomen and thighs, but then Jonah pushed a slick finger into Garrett’s incredibly tight ass and touched his prostate, and it happened so fast that he had no time to react, no time to give any warning at all, he just thrust his hips forward and came into Jonah’s mouth. Jonah drank it all down and then waited patiently for Garrett to get his voice back.

“You—uhm—you should fuck me,” Garrett panted. The finger was still inside of him, moving gently. “It’ll feel amazing, I swear.”

“I want to, but I think you’re still too tight for that, darlin’. Gonna need some prep first.”

Garrett was mostly blissed-out during the manhandling, and by the time he was really aware that he was on his stomach with the bed adjusted to lift his hips, his legs spread obscenely wide, Jonah’s tongue was already tracing a circle around his hole. “Yesss,” he hissed, and his fingers clutched the sheets convulsively when Jonah started to press his tongue inside.

Despite having come twice, Garrett was still hard. It actually ached a little, in a good way, and his ass was gradually opening up to Jonah’s patient attention. He moaned

and pressed back against that thick, flexible muscle, trying to relax and let Jonah inside.

Garrett loved this, he loved being touched so intimately. It was one of the few things that he'd never found a toy to be able to adequately replicate. Simple fucking was easy enough to mimic, but having his lover's mouth so close to him, having his tongue going someplace so utterly personal, that was special. He let Jonah work him open, sometimes substituting his fingers for his tongue, and reveled in it.

"I love it when you're in me," Garrett said as he began to get close again. "I don't care what part you use, I want all of them, I want your tongue and your fingers and your dick, I want your whole hand in me." Jonah's fingers jerked against his prostate, and Garrett groaned. "You've never done that, have you?" he breathed.

"No," Jonah said, and his voice was gravelly with need.

"It's so good. There's nothing like it, and you'd love it, you'd be looking at it and wondering how I could possibly take you like that, and your hand would be so warm and everything so soft, and I'd be going crazy, and you'd feel it, every movement I made, inside and out." Garrett was warming to the idea. "I want you to do that. I want it now."

"No time right now," Jonah ground out, and then he was stretched out against Garrett's back, holding his hips at the right angle as he quickly slid inside of Garrett. He'd lubed himself up at some point, clever man, so it was an easy enough glide after all the preparation, and Garrett sighed with satisfaction and reached down for his cock.

"No, baby." Jonah caught his hands and pressed them flat to the bed. "No touching. You don't need it, you're just gonna come from my cock inside of you." He rolled his hips, and any objections Garrett might have had melted away with the pleasure of the

motion. Pleasure ... it seemed like a pallid word for something that felt so fucking good.

Jonah leaned on him heavily, working in and out of Garrett's tight channel in a slow, deep rhythm. Garrett tried to rub against the bed, but Jonah's weight was too much, he had almost no room to shift, and so after a few minutes, he stopped trying and just relaxed into the fuck.

"That's it, baby." Jonah started to speed up, his breath coming unevenly. "Hell, you're so fuckin' tight, even with ... Garrett, god ..."

His thrusts grew shorter and sharper, bumping against Garrett's prostate with every new penetration, and Garrett felt it start, felt the base of his spine start to tighten as his ass began to clench, felt his back arch and his fingers dig into the pillow as his third orgasm, slower and more deliberate than the other two, took control of his body. He didn't know what kinds of sounds he was making, he just knew they were loud and filled his head. His dick felt unbearably hard, and with the very next thrust, with the tiny rubbing movement it gave him against the sheets, he was done. He came, and it felt like a wave of fire rushing over his body, fast to flicker to life and slow to burn out. Garrett pumped his load onto the bed, slicking up his stomach, and just as he started to come down, Jonah thrust in one more time and stayed in, as deep as he could go, groaning loudly, almost mournfully, as he orgasmed. "Fuckfuck fuck ... Garrett, darlin' ..."

Jonah stayed inside of him for as long as he could before slipping free. "That was amazin'," he said, rolling Garrett over into his arms. "How did you—oh, baby." The look of astonishment on his face was quite frankly amusing. "You've gotta be kiddin' me."

"Nope," Garrett purred smugly, rubbing his erection against Jonah's belly. "What can I say, it's good to be me right now!"

“Well, give me a minute, and I’ll help you out with that.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you relax. Enjoy the show,” Garrett said as he reached down and finally took himself in hand. If he took his time, Jonah would probably be ready to go again if he needed more. Garrett rather hoped that he did.



### Chapter twenty-three

Cody

The first thing Cody did when he saw Garrett at breakfast was give him a huge hug. Garrett was warm again, not cold, and that was reassuring.

The second thing Cody did was push Garrett away from himself as hard as he could. Garrett bent a little at the waist with a grunt as he stepped back, but he didn't say anything. Cody's dad was far more surprised and was immediately upset with him.

"Cody—"

"You aren't supposed to get sick!" Cody yelled at Garrett, interrupting his dad. He knew he was going to get into trouble for this, but he needed to say it. It wasn't right. He had been worried for days and days, practically for ever, and it hurt. "Nobody's supposed to get sick except for me! You're supposed to be okay!"

"Cody —"

"No, it's okay." Garrett waved Jonah off. "You're right," he said. He knelt down on the ground in front of Cody, still a few feet away. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't take care of myself the way I should have. It wasn't very responsible of me, and I hate that I made you and your dad worry so much." He smiled a little, not an "I think this is funny" smile but an "I get it" kind of smile, special for just the two of them. He held out a hand toward Cody, and Cody wavered a little, wanting to go to Garrett but not wanting to give up his upset quite so fast.

“I can’t promise never to get sick again, just like you can’t promise never to get sick. But we don’t do it on purpose either. Neither of us wants to hurt anyone who loves us, right?” Cody nodded slowly. “And I promise to do everything I can to stay healthy. I promise , sweetheart.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Well, fine then. That had to be enough for Cody, and he didn’t really want to be apart from Garrett any longer. Cody took his hand and let Garrett pull him into another hug, this one a little gentler. His daddy’s hand came down to rest on his hair, and this was right , this was the way it was supposed to be. They were supposed to be together, and fine, and now they actually were. It was perfect.

“What did we say about expressin’ our emotions with violence?” Daddy asked dryly. Darn it. Moment over.

“That it isn’t the right way to solve things,” Cody muttered into Garrett’s shoulder. He pulled back just far enough to check his daddy’s posture out of the corner of his eye. “But sometimes it is.”

Daddy didn’t look convinced. “You really gonna try to argue with me about this, bucko?”

“No, Daddy.”

“But maybe it can wait until after breakfast?” Garrett offered, letting go of the hug and standing up but keeping a hand on Cody’s shoulder. “In fact, there’s a lot to do after breakfast. Like schoolwork, for one.”

“Oh, right. Good thinking.”

“What?” Cody watched a look pass between his fathers and felt his happiness sink a little. Were they going to work together like this all the time? “But I’ve already done it all,” Cody said.

“Everything except for the biology project, kiddo.”

Cody frowned. “I thought I didn’t have to do that because I got stung.”

“That’s the awful thing about personal responsibility,” Garrett said, and he didn’t look all that happy either, so that made Cody feel a little bit better. “Just because we get taken out of the game for a while doesn’t mean we don’t have to do the work. I’ve got a lot to make up too.”

“No, you don’t.” The three of them looked over at Miles, who stood in the kitchen door. Cody liked Miles, but he liked him even better now that he was on Cody’s side. “Most of the point of this visit was to get the two of you married, and that hasn’t happened yet. Frankly, I think it’s in the best interests of everyone that we make it happen as quickly as possible, given our record of success so far.”

Garrett frowned. “I thought there was still a lot to do to get ready. Colors and linens—”

“All done. You’ll look wonderful in blue.”

“The cake, the food—”

“There’s going to be a small one of every flavor Cody approved of, and I remember that you enjoy lemon chiffon, so that will be in there even though Cody didn’t care for it. The meal is poached tramblefish with an herb-infused ...” He turned around

and looked at Claudia, who walked in holding Renee and poured herself a cup of bissap juice. “What is it?”

“Herb-infused vegetable parfait,” Claudia said. “With a careole remoulade. You’re going to love it!”

“The guest list, then ...”

“Just us, plus Robbie and Wyl. It was always going to be a small family affair,” Claudia smiled. “And Jezria’s marrying you over the com. She already okayed the additional time off, too, so no one has to worry about lost work or school projects. Just this once.”

“Wow.” Garrett sounded a little dazed. “And when are we doing this?”

“Tomorrow morning. That will give you all of today to enjoy each other’s company before the ceremony tomorrow, and then you two can leave for your honeymoon while Cody spends some quality time with us.”

Cody held Garrett’s hand tighter. “I don’t want them to go away,” he said.

“They aren’t going far.” Claudia bent over and kissed Cody’s forehead. Renee giggled in Cody’s ear. “And Wyl might have said something about going on a tank ride ...”

“Really?” Cody had been asking to ride in a tank for ever , and Robbie kept saying he couldn’t approve it, but apparently he had anyway. “A real tank?”

“We don’t have any fake tanks,” Miles assured him.

“That’s so ... that’s so cool!”

“Yeah, yeah, tell it to Wyl and Robbie,” Garrett said mildly. “But just once, so it doesn’t go to their heads. So. Everything is all ready to go.”

“Sure is.” Claudia kissed Garrett too, also on the forehead. “You’re welcome, dear.”

“Yeah.”

“How are you guys going to spend the day?” Claudia asked, handing Renee over to Miles. The baby bumped a wide, open-mouthed smooch to her daddy’s cheek, leaving a thin line of drool behind. Cody made a yuck face, but Miles just smiled. “Because if you’re going to be around here, you could help me tie up the whimsy flowers that I’m going to weave through the decorative arch for tomorrow—”

“Actually, you know what, we haven’t seen the zoo yet,” Garrett said quickly. Cody pumped his free fist with triumph and jumped up and down, but just once, because he knew how to be discreet. “I think maybe we’ll go after breakfast ... guys?”

“Definitely,” Daddy agreed.

Cody had never been to a zoo before. “What kind of animals do they have there?”

“Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” Garrett told him with a grin. Cody frowned.

“What does that even mean?”

“It’s a very, very old movie quote; I’ll explain it on the way to the zoo.”

“You guys eat first,” Miles said. “I’ll let Thérèse know she’s going with you.”

Garrett’s face fell. “Oh, come on, do we have to take Thérèse? What about Corporal Kelly?”

“He’s on patrol. I’ll get her; you guys get ready to go.”

“I like Thérèse,” Cody offered, looking up at his dads. “She’s nice.”

“Nice! She’s nice, he says.” Garrett rolled his eyes. Jonah shepherded the two of them to the table, where Claudia was laying out the breakfast she’d held back for them. It was Cody’s favorite, pancakes in the shape of fish. “Of course, you think she’s nice.”

“She is,” Cody insisted, grabbing up a fish. It was puffy and flaky, and as soon as he bit down, creamy red filling squished out into his mouth. He looked up at his dads and grinned wide. They both grimaced at him.

Awesome.

### Chapter twenty-four

Jonah

Jonah thought it was kind of unfair that Garrett slept like a baby the night before their wedding.

Not that there was anything to be nervous about. Jonah reckoned that the big issues had all been dealt with—he hoped to hell they had all been dealt with—and the slate was about as clean as it could get. Claudia took care of all the details like she promised, Miles made sure he and Robbie and Wyl wouldn't be called away unless something blew up (his words, not Jonah's; Jonah didn't think this family's history with explosions was funny), and all they had to do was keep Cody occupied while it all got set up. A trip to the zoo had taken care of most of that time. The place wasn't too big but still had far more animals than Cody was used to seeing and some interesting hybrids.

"I thought those were plants," Cody said, watching with interest as a tigerlily pranced around a transparent greenhouse.

"It was, originally," Garrett told him, still holding Cody's hand. The kid hadn't let go of him the whole trip, and Jonah couldn't blame him. He kind of wanted to keep a hold on Garrett too, but he didn't want to make his fiancé feel too claustrophobic, so he hung back and contented himself with bumping shoulders as they made their way from habitat to habitat.

"There was a span of a few centuries where cloning and genetic manipulation was a

popular pastime,” Garrett continued, “and it was pretty easy for amateurs to fool around with whatever genomes they wanted to. Most of them did things that were pretty harmless, just one-offs as pets or something, but some of them got a little out of control. One of those people was a botanist, who pioneered what he called ‘mutobotany.’ He decided to take different plants and merge them with animal DNA to make brand-new species.”

Cody frowned. “But we do that all the time, right? Scientists change plants and animals so they can help them survive better on new planets. And they do it for places like that other zoo, Chibi World. Right?”

“True, but those scientists have a lot of special training that lets them figure out what the best combination is for each new place, so they won’t all just die or overwhelm the local flora and fauna. And Chibi World is a closed circuit; those animals don’t get the chance to live in the wild,” Garrett explained. “This guy didn’t care about that; he just wanted to make new things. It took him a while, but eventually he crossed all sorts of animals and plants successfully. He was going to take them around in a big ship as a kind of travelling show, but the police found out what he was doing and raided his home.

“The botanist, who was a very wealthy man, had enough time to put samples of his experiments, all cryogenically frozen, into capsules and shoot them into space before he was stopped. He said his work would thrive even if he was locked away. And it did. Some of the capsules were found, but most of them made it to their destinations, and they hit the ground, and the new creatures woke up and headed out into their brand-new environments. And some of them did really well, like this one.”

The three of them watched the tigerlily silently for a moment, taking in the grace of its long central stalk, the leaves that were edged with hard green claw-like nubs and even, as its primary blossom opened as though it were yawning, the long red stamens that drooped out like three lazy tongues. “There are tigerlilies on ten different planets



now, and they've eaten a lot of native species into extinction."

"That's not good," Cody said with a frown. "He wasn't very responsible, was he?"

"No, he wasn't."

"What was his name?"

"George Harmony Caractacus-Ledger."

Cody looked up in surprise. "He was related to you?"

"A distance cousin, yes. He died about five hundred years ago, but he did accomplish his life's goal. His hybrids have thrived."

"Wow. Your family is so weird."

"They're your family now too, kiddo, keep that in mind," Garrett teased him as they headed for another exhibit.

By the time they returned to the Mansion, Cody was exhausted, and Jonah wasn't far behind. They put him to bed, cleaned up, and lay down together, and Garrett snuggled close instantly. "Did you have a nice afternoon?" he asked quietly as the bed's temperature adjusted to their preferences.

"Real nice," Jonah replied. "You've got family everywhere, don't you, darlin'?"

"Oh, you've no idea," Garrett said, rolling his eyes. "We've got our claws into nearly every major disaster or triumph since the Alliance began. The Caractacus clan is infamous. But no letting it get to you." He poked Jonah's chest. "It's not important. There are so many of us that no one really cares what most of us do as long as the

central line stays intact, which means I never hear from my grandmother, which is a wonderful thing.”

“Still, it’s a hell of a family legacy,” Jonah couldn’t help but point out. “You really sure you want to take my name?” It was something they’d argued about, a little, but Garrett had been adamant.

“Technically we’re hyphenating,” he said carelessly. “The ‘Caractacus’ will still be on all the legal documents, but it’s going to be silent. Besides, Garrett Caractacus-Helms is such a terrible mouthful, and I’d never do that to Cody. Garrett Helms is better.”

“And you’re sure Miles doesn’t mind?”

Garrett laughed. “Are you kidding? He would have changed his name years ago if he thought he could get away with it. Dad was the bane of every poor private in the marines—they spent hours practicing how to say his last name in case he happened to walk by. Everyone who fucked it up thought for sure he was going to have them cleaning out antique latrines or digging ditches by hand just for the hell of it, but he ignored it all for the most part. The smart ones just called him ‘sir.’” Garrett kissed Jonah’s chest. “Stop worrying, everything will be fine. Go to sleep, baby.”

Garrett had followed his own advice easily enough, and Jonah had tried to do the same, but it was no use. He was getting married tomorrow. Married. Married .

Marriage was a lot more common among naturals, whose shorter life spans gave their actions a sense of gravity that most folk didn’t have, but here he was. Getting married. Blending everything about their lives. All of the crazy Caractacuses, all the brilliant ones, all the leaders and the outlaws, Jonah was forging a connection to them through Garrett, his own crazy, brilliant man. And who was he? There was no registry that held his name, no lineage he could point to with pride. Drifters were

almost entirely their own folk and not much for recordkeeping.

Jonah slept fitfully, his mind spinning from place to person, from the past to the future. Not out of nervousness, just out of ... consideration. And when morning finally came around, he was exhausted while Garrett jumped out of bed like he was Cody's age, all smiles. "Come on, we have to get ready!"

"Mmph."

"When you're coherent enough to articulate an actual argument, I'll listen to you. Until then, up!" Garrett whipped all the covers off the bed, leaving Jonah bare to the crisp morning air. "Up up up!"

It was going to be one of those mornings.

His mind wandered all through breakfast, just fruit and coffee for himself as he listened to Cody playing with Renee and Miles joking with Garrett while Claudia organized things in the background. This was his new normal. Not just for the duration of this trip either; they'd be back regularly, thanks in part to Jack. This was a real family, doing things together. This was his life now.

"Hey." Jonah looked up from his coffee into Garrett's slightly concerned face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Jonah smiled. "I'm good, darlin'."

"Good." Garrett kissed him sweetly, then stood up. "I'm going to go get dressed."

"Can I watch?"

"You can help if you want," Garrett offered with a grin, but in the end, Jonah left him

alone for it. He wanted it to be a surprise.

His own clothes were elegant but comfortable, a dark-navy three-piece suit that made him feel like he was stepping out of an earlier time but with all the amenities of modern fabrics. It adjusted automatically to his size, and the tie blended its own color to match the suit and his shirt. He shaved, tied his hair back—he'd offered to have it cut, and Garrett had very firmly declined—and figured he was about as ready as he was going to get. He went to grab Cody, who had his own new suit that he was trying very hard not to fuss with, and the two of them headed outside.

The wedding ceremony was held in the Mansion's small garden, a tidy maze of flagstone walkways and flower beds, dotted with occasional trees and bushes and, because this was Claudia's house, a tiny vineyard. A natural grotto formed between some of the vines and a stone archway, and the vines were laces with pale-blue flowers, their buds just beginning to bloom. Squarely underneath the arch was a holographic projector, where Jezria would be broadcast to officiate. There was even a lectern to go in front of her, a real one so that they could lay the paperwork out.

When Claudia had said simple, she had meant it. There was no formal entrance, no additional ceremony. Robbie and Wyl met Jonah and Cody on the veranda just above the garden and walked with them down to the grotto. Jezria was already there, in holograph form, wavering slightly in the dappled afternoon light.

"Excellent, we're halfway there," she said as he approached. She was wearing a long blue dress with gold trim that looked simultaneously official and fashionable. "Naturally, Garrett is late. He would be late to his own funeral."

Cody instantly frowned, and Jonah spoke up fast to ease the moment. "Thanks for doing this. I know you're a busy woman."

"And a sleepy one," she added. "It's still dark out over here. You're lucky the last

tsunami passed us by, or the connection might not have gone through. Ah, there he is!”

Jonah turned around and saw Garrett, flanked by Miles and Claudia, and his brain promptly went offline. When Garrett wanted to get dolled up he went all the way, and clearly, he thought this was an occasion for it. His suit was a single long piece, strategically split and lifted along the hips and shoulders to give the appearance of formal lines. It was the color of the ocean on Pandora, dark-green foam at the high collar drifting into blues and grays as it drained down to his feet. He had dusted subtle hints of silver along the sharp lines of his face, and his hair pulled forward to frame his face with soft, perfectly sculpted curls. He didn’t even look real until he smiled.

“Holy shit.”

“Daddy!” Cody bapped him on the arm. “That’s a bad word.”

“That good? Really?” Garrett preened theatrically. “How gratifying.”

“Now that the bride is here,” Jezria said dryly, “let’s commence. Miles, you have the documents?”

“Here.” Miles put a thin piece of digitized paper and a pen down on the lectern.

“Perfect.” Jezria folded her hands together and looked at them. “Gentlemen, on the surface this is very simple. Once you sign this piece of paper, you will be joined in the eyes of Alliance law. That’s the easy part. A marriage, however, is a partnership. It’s a committed bond between two people, a symbol of their relationship that cleaves them together when the trials of their lives would cleave them apart. It is a demonstration of the strength of your love for each other and a reminder that you have chosen a more serious path than most. Marriage, in the end, is about two people

becoming one. Do you have anything to say to each other on the subject?"

Ah, right, the vows section . Jonah looked at Garrett. He had said everything he needed to say over these last few days, but he had to make sure Garrett knew. "No matter what happens to us, or how we change, you're the one I want. Nothin' about life is easy, but you make my life so much better just by being in it." He reached out and took Garrett's hands in his. "I love you. I always will."

Garrett's grip on him tightened. "I didn't even know I was looking for you when I found you—both of you," he added, smiling at Cody. "And now I can't imagine life without you. I'm sometimes reckless and often stubborn, and I know I'll make mistakes, but I also know you'll never hold them against me. I can only strive to be as good to you as you always are to me, and I will. I love you. You make my family complete."

"Well said." Jezria applauded. "Have you decided to exchange tokens, or should we get down to the signing?"

Rings were incredibly old-fashioned; tattoos had been far more popular for centuries, but this was a Drifter tradition that Jonah didn't mind carrying with him. He held out his hand to Cody, who looked momentarily nervous. "Um ..." He glanced back at Wyl. "I think I ..."

"Here." Wyl passed him the ring, and Cody passed it to Jonah, who turned back to Garrett. It was a simple band of heavy white gold, with their initials engraved on the inside. He took Garrett's left hand and slid the ring onto his third finger, like Drifters did when they got serious, and then kissed his knuckles.

Garrett's casual aplomb had vanished. His eyes were shining, and he looked like he was on the verge of a sniffle, but he held it back long enough to take the ring his father was holding out to him, this one of red gold, and put it on Jonah's hand. One

tear finally escaped, and Jonah heard Wyl snicker.

“I knew it! I win.”

“Try to be gracious,” Robbie muttered. Garrett glared at both of them.

“You were betting on whether I’d cry?”

“More like when,” Miles said, looking more than a little smug.

“I hate you all.”

“Before this devolves further into name-calling,” Jezria interjected, “why don’t we finish things up? Both of you need to sign the marriage license.” She stepped back as far as the projector would allow her image to go.

Garrett stepped around the lectern, took up the pen, and signed his name with a flourish. He passed the pen on to Jonah, and he put his name on the line just below Garrett’s. Their new, combined last name sprung up below that, and Garrett grinned.

“Just call me Garrett Helms.”

Oh hell, it was real. It was all real, it had really happened, Garrett was his. They shared a name. They shared everything now. It was ...

Jonah reached out and pulled Garrett into a crushing embrace, kissing him too hard, too possessively, but Garrett just melted into it, letting Jonah lead. People were speaking, laughing, Jezria was trying to direct, but none of it mattered. It was done. Garrett was his.

He felt Cody tug on the back of his jacket and broke the kiss to let their son into their

hug but ignored the rest of them for now. In a minute, Jonah would make room in his heart for everyone else, but right now, it was completely full of the two people he held in his arms. He had what he wanted. He had everything he wanted.



### Chapter twenty-five

Garrett

Garrett and Jonah were only taking a three-day honeymoon. Originally, it was scheduled to be longer, but between medical problems, minor freakouts, and work piling up back on Pandora, they had decided to take it from eight days to three. Honestly, even that was almost longer than Jonah was really comfortable being away from Cody, so it worked out all right.

Honeymoons were an entirely new concept for both of them. Garrett was used to having the time he wanted to do whatever he wanted, no special name for it needed, and Drifters never took a break, so between the two of them, a honeymoon ended up as a compromise between utter indolence and a rapid return to the rhythm of their normal lives.

The newlyweds ended up in a private chalet on Paradise's tallest mountain, completely alone except for the robotic staff. The chalet had been built by a longtime friend of Miles's named Vernon Cage, a Central System aristocrat and technophile who wanted it for a getaway home but didn't want to bother with hiring actual people to work there. Cage was a genius with integrative artificial intelligences and owned one of the only companies still manufacturing androids in the universe.

The backlash against completely human-seeming machines had made the business an uncertain one for a long time, but the androids he made, like those who staffed his mansion, were humanoid but also very clearly machines. The butler who met them at the door had appendages that changed shape depending on the task it was engaged in,

shifting from seemingly white-gloved hands when it ushered them inside to a keypad that it encouraged Garrett to use to set the password for the house's alarm system while they were there.

Jonah watched the keypad shift back into hands, breaking off into tiny blocks and reforming, changing from black keys to white fingers in the space of a few seconds, unexpectedly versipellis. "How the hell does he do that?"

"Uncle Vernon wrote a special algorithm that allows for a certain amount of mutability in his androids," Garrett said, handing over their bag to the butler. "It's pretty advanced math, and the work is completely proprietary. It's made the man a huge amount of money in the mining industry, among others. His machines are incredibly versatile, no matter what task they're set to. Thank you, Michael," he told the butler, who inclined his head gently.

"How do you know his name?"

"Uncle Vernon always calls his butlers Michael."

They followed the android into the mansion, Jonah glancing around with wide eyes while Garrett kept a hand pressed to the small of his back. It was an effort not to let it slide lower, but Jonah deserved the tour of the place before Garrett pulled him off to bed. This house, like all of Vernon's homes, was a spectacular salute to imagination and indulgence. "He's nothing if not consistent."

"How many butlers does one man need?"

"The last I knew, Uncle Vernon had thirteen houses on ten different planets, and all of them were staffed exactly the same. Is that still accurate, Michael?"

"Entirely accurate with regards to staff, Master Garrett," the android replied, his

voice a smooth tenor. "I do believe that Mr. Cage now has seventeen residences on fourteen planets, however."

Jonah, who had gotten used to a fair amount of luxury since entering Garrett's life, seemed thunderstruck. "Why's one man got so many houses?"

Michael answered the question as though it had been addressed to him. "Sir is rightfully protective of his privacy and finds it advantageous to have numerous options on hand for his personal comfort."

"He's paranoid," Garrett paraphrased. "With reason because he's a very wealthy man with a very lucrative business that a lot of people would like to get a piece of. He's never married, never had kids as far as I know. He's not my actual uncle, but when my father and I were reconciling when I was young, Vernon was around a lot. He's a brilliant guy, but he's got his own way of doing things. He lets Dad use this house at his discretion."

"I shall put your luggage in the third bedroom, Master Garrett," Michael said, interrupting delicately. "The evening repast will be ready in three hours, to be served in the informal dining lounge. Sunita is at your service to guide you to wherever you wish to go."

The seemingly solid metal floor rose up in the center, forming a small dome shape that blinked up at them like an eye. Garrett watched Jonah start back with surprise and laughed a little. "Sunita is the house," he said. "Almost all the surfaces are versatile."

"That means the house is gonna be watchin' us the whole time we're here?" Jonah asked, one eyebrow raised.

"In the moment, yes, but I can instruct it not to keep any records once Sunita has

verified that we aren't a security risk. Or," Garrett added, stepping in closer and placing a hot kiss on the side of his new husband's neck, "we could let the house watch, with our blessing. Do you have any latent exhibitionistic tendencies, darling?"

"No," Jonah said firmly, and Garrett felt a little let down. "But," he continued, "I do know that you like puttin' on a show. And I don't mind so much if our only audience is the house."

"Excellent!" Garrett grinned. "I like that you're entering into marriage with an open mind, sweetheart. I think we're getting off to a good start."

Jonah put his arms around Garrett's waist and pulled their bodies flush together. Garrett wiggled his hips against the hard line of his husband's erection and felt his own body rapidly respond. "There'll definitely be some getting off," Jonah husked. He kissed Garrett's mouth hard and possessively, then dropped down to his knees. Garrett's knees tried to wilt, and the nearest wall swayed out toward him, available to lean against if he needed it. A little reminder that the house AI was present: silent but watching.

Oh, yes. This honeymoon was definitely getting off to a good start.

### Chapter twenty-six

#### Jonah

Jonah wasn't an exhibitionist, but he appreciated the fact that Garrett could be. Garrett was gorgeous, flirtatious, and unabashedly hedonistic, and all of that energy and passion was Jonah's now. Their marriage was a commitment to each other, but it also meant that they were going to have to go deep to figure out how to make each other happy, over and over and over, for the rest of their lives.

When it came to sex, Jonah had never done much more than, well, fucking. Making love, depending on who he was with and what they were doing, but hands and mouths and cocks and ... just the body. Just the other person's body and his own.

Jonah knew that Garrett was a lot more used to using technology in the bedroom, or the living room, or the zero-grav room, or wherever he happened to be having sex, but this house went beyond a novel location or a new toy. This house could plunge you right into the realm of different temperatures and electricity and altered states and extravisual stimulation and elastimaterial surfaces and toys ... honestly, it was way too much, but Garrett was good at introducing it little by little.

Like in the pool. Jonah didn't even know that there was something other than regular water that you could swim in, but apparently there was, and it existed in this house.

"Check this out." Garrett grinned, positioning Jonah in one corner of the pool. He reached out to the edges and pressed a button on either side, and all of a sudden, Jonah was almost completely immobile. The water felt thick, like he was trapped in

clay.

“Okay?” Garrett asked him. “Not too claustrophobic?”

“No,” Jonah said, giving up straining after a moment. His skin tingled a little, but apart from that, the water was still the same temperature and clung to him just as intimately; it just wasn’t the same viscosity. “How does this stuff even exist?”

“Nanotechnology.” Garrett grinned. “Gotta love it. And the best thing is, it holds you down because it’s attuned to this part of the pool, but it doesn’t have any effect on me. Stay here for a second.” He pulled himself out of the pool and walked out of Jonah’s line of sight.

“Yeah, ha-ha, like I can go anywhere,” Jonah groused.

“Aw, baby, don’t be like that.” Garrett slipped back into the pool, wearing a thin pair of gloves and something over his nose that Jonah actually recognized.

“Rebreather?”

“The nasal version because I want to be able to use my mouth,” Garrett told him.

“And the gloves?”

“They have a very particular pulse effect in this kind of water. Let me show you,” Garrett said with a smile. He dipped his left hand under the water and made a slight pushing motion toward Jonah. And the water rippled ... and it felt like Jonah’s whole midsection was being gently bombarded by a thousand tiny waves, just barely sharp edged before they dissipated against his flesh.

“Oh ... fuck.”

“I know.” Garrett changed the angle of his hand and slowly snapped his fingers, and a tighter, squeezing sensation crawled up Jonah’s chest and over his nipples before ending at the waterline.

“ Fuck .”

“And that would be so much fun, but I want to suck you. If you don’t like anything, just say ‘stop’ loudly, and I’ll hear you.” Before Jonah could say anything else, Garrett sank into the water and leaned forward, moving effortlessly through the liquid until his lips wrapped around Jonah’s cock.

Jonah hadn’t been hard when the water had locked him into place, and he’d wondered how he’d be able to get that way when his entire body was in stasis, but inside of Garrett’s mouth he could swell and expand. He groaned at the feel of Garrett’s tongue caressing him, rubbing ruthlessly along his shaft, and he tried to spread his legs wider, then cursed.

Garrett moved his hands, and frissons of shivering water cascaded up Jonah’s legs and hips, and god, he just wanted to twitch away from it, but he couldn’t move. It wasn’t his favorite, but he wasn’t about to tell Garrett to stop it either.

But Garrett knew what Jonah liked better than he could articulate for himself, and the next waves that washed up his body were like slow, rolling embraces, feathering off at the top into a light, pattering touch, and Jonah had no idea how his husband was doing that, but he loved it.

Garrett kept Jonah’s cock in his mouth until the head touched the back of his throat, and even then, he just hummed and swallowed and made Jonah see stars. When he did finally pull back to the head with his lips, swirling his tongue in greedy circles, the stillness he was trapped in reminded Jonah that he wasn’t going to be able to move his hips, no matter how hard he tried to. No thrusting, no reaching down and

grabbing, just Garrett having him however he wanted him. It was a relaxing realization, actually, and Jonah let his head tilt back against the pillow of water behind him and let his husband do what he wanted.

What Garrett wanted, apparently, was to up the ante. His palms settled between Jonah's thighs, and then gentle pulses of water started to push upward, pressing rhythmically against his perineum. It was like a massage, and coupled with the rolling sensation that Garrett was somehow keeping up and the warmth and eager pressure against his cock, it was just about as much sensory overload as Jonah could handle. He was so hard and ready, but he couldn't give himself any relief; Jonah knew he was going to be coming on Garrett's schedule and no one else's.

Fortunately, Garrett didn't like to keep him hanging when he couldn't hear Jonah begging for release. He moved his hand again, and this time a gloved finger actually pressed against Jonah's hole, slowly circling, swirling the water around it, and his other hand wrapped around the base of Jonah's cock and jacked him fast, the first fast thing he'd experienced since being locked in place. Jonah groaned a hard exhalation and came slowly, aching, his balls held in place by the static water, no tight rush to speed things along.

By the time the stars had faded from his vision, Garrett was standing again, the rebreather was gone, and he was kissing Jonah hard. "You're so good to me," he said, the words tripping over themselves to get out as they kissed again and again. "You'll do anything I want, won't you? You'll do anything I ask of you."

"Seems that way," Jonah managed, kissing him back a few times. "Though I'd kinda like to stretch my shoulders out, darling."

"Right." Garrett hit the buttons again, and the hold suddenly released, and Jonah slumped into Garrett's arms. "Are you okay?"



“I feel great,” Jonah told him, “but you feel like you could use somethin’, sweetheart.”

“Mmm, yeah.” Garrett kissed him again, then peeled the gloves off and set them next to the rebreather on the side of the pool. “I could really go for fucking you right now.”

Jonah stretched lazily, then wrapped his legs around Garrett’s waist. “Then maybe you should.”

“Oh, I think I absolutely should,” Garrett agreed. “Did you know I can change the viscosity of this water to be more like a lubricant?”

And then he did. It was a little hard to hold but completely worth it.

Sometimes it was like that, strange and new and novel, and other times all Jonah wanted was to be wrapped up under the blankets with his husband, holding onto each other and only each other, no eyes on them, no house watching them, nothing but them. They got plenty of both of those things over the first two days, a marathon of exhausting, satiating, mind-blowing sex.

The last night they were in the house, they went for a compromise—something novel but needing nothing more than the two of them. For the last night of their honeymoon, Garrett decided he wanted to be fisted. Tonight there was nothing beyond Jonah’s hand, Garrett’s ass, and a hell of a lot of slick, no vibrating gloves or pressure-point work. Nothing but Garrett on his back, and Jonah completely transfixed as his fourth finger slid into his lover’s body.

“Yesss ...” Garrett hissed, arching his back a little. He wasn’t pulling away, but he wasn’t pushing down either, not like he had with the first three, and Jonah waited, patient but trembling with a need he hadn’t even realized existed before now. He

wanted to see it, see all of his hand inside of his husband. He still couldn't quite believe that it would all fit in there.

"You're sure," he began, his voice dwindling as he slowly punched his fingers deeper. Garrett groaned.

"I'm—yes," he gasped. "Yes. More."

"Not yet." He was still so tight. Jonah moved his hand gingerly, pressed a kiss to Garrett's abdomen, and was almost surprised that he couldn't see the outline of his own fingers beneath him, they felt so deep now. And they had more to go. He added more lube, then gently brought his thumb into position and pushed in again. Garrett shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut. "God ..."

"Tell me," Garrett urged him. "Tell me what it looks like."

Garrett was, unsurprisingly, very good at dirty talk. Jonah didn't have nearly the sort of practice his lover had, viewing talking as more of a distraction than anything else, but he could see how hot it got Garrett, and that made him appreciate it more and more. "Looks so stretched, darlin' ... your skin's so tight around me." He pulled his thumb back and rubbed the edge of the tight ring, and Garrett moaned appreciatively. "Can't believe you can do this, sweetheart, you're amazing."

"I can take more," Garrett said. "I can take all of it. I want all of you."

"You sure, darlin'?" Jonah asked, always playing it safe despite his desire to be all the way in.

"Yes," Garrett insisted, and that was all Jonah needed. He tucked his thumb in close, pushed slowly but didn't stop, not until his knuckles slipped past the ring, and his hand, his whole hand, was inside of his husband. Garrett gasped and clenched tight

around his wrist, and it was all Jonah could do not to come, untouched, right there. It looked ridiculously hot, and he couldn't tear his eyes away. He couldn't even consider it.

"You're so good, darlin'," Jonah said, leaning in and kissing his stomach, watching avidly as Garrett's cock responded to the pressure of his whole hand inside of him, the faint twists and turns rubbing constantly over his prostate. Garrett had gotten a little soft for a minute, but he was coming back now.

"Just good for you," Garrett groaned, smiling a little. "I'm a bitch to everyone else, just ask them."

"No, you're not, you're always perfect."

"Love must mean—oh, mmm —a short memory."

Jonah acknowledged that with an absent nod, but he didn't stop moving, he couldn't stop watching Garrett writhe on his hand. "How d'you feel?"

"So full," Garrett said breathlessly, "and I know it's already enough, but I want more, I wish you could put your dick in me and fuck me with that at the same time. I want to feel you inside of me all the time, I never want you to go. I want you to fuck me until I'm loose and empty and helpless, and then I want you to do it again, I want you to use me for everything you need."

"Yeah?" Very slowly, Jonah curled his fingers together into a fist, and then he rubbed the knobs of his knuckles right across Garrett's prostate. His husband's eyes widened, and his mouth opened, and the sound that came out was so low and pitiful, someone might have thought he was dying if he hadn't been coming all over his chest. That view, Garrett wide-eyed and helpless, was enough to send Jonah over the edge, and with just one stroke of his hand over his cock, he came as well, across the foot of the

bed.

Getting out was another slow and careful affair, but after a few minutes they were both clean, tired, and Garrett was using Jonah as a body pillow. “So,” Garrett said sleepily, “are you ready to go back to reality?”

“Don’t suppose we have much of a choice,” Jonah replied. “And I’m ready to see Cody.” Holocalls weren’t enough. “Think he missed us?”

“What, in between the bouts of outrageous spoiling that everyone is lavishing on him? Maybe,” Garrett said. “But I’m betting he didn’t miss us while he was riding around in a tank.”

“You think he’s gonna do okay, adapting back to a normal life?”

“He’ll do fine. Cody is pretty happy wherever he ends up.” Garrett tilted his head up and caught Jonah’s gaze. “Will you?”

“I’ll be fine.” Jonah grinned. “I like our new normal.”

### Chapter twenty-seven

Cody

“J ust two bags, bucko.”

“But I can’t fit it all into two bags, Daddy!”

“Cody, you have some of these same toys back at home,” his daddy pointed out. “I’ve seen at least five of these Space Rangers before.”

“But I didn’t have their flyers before,” Cody pointed out. “Daddy, they hover! I have to get them home too.”

“You don’t need ten flying cars, Cody.”

“But, Daddy ...”

“We’re coming back in less than a year,” he said, and he was using his “this is my final word” voice, so Cody knew not to push it. “Pare it down, bucko.” He picked up one of Cody’s bags and hoisted it a little. “This one done?”

Cody looked at it, wondering if he could possibly fit anything else into it. Probably not; the seams were bulging. “Yeah, it’s done,” he said reluctantly.

“I’m gonna take it out to the ship, then. We’re taking off in fifteen minutes, so hustle, okay?” He walked out the door, and Cody looked back down at the half-filled bag in

front of him.

There was no way he could get everything he needed into it. The helmet that Wyl had gotten special for him was too big, and the geofinder from Robbie wasn't going to work on Pandora; they didn't have the right satellites for it. The book of fairy tales from Miles was too nice to just shove into a bag; it was old, it was actually real paper. He'd already packed the stuffed tiger from Claudia, but without the stuffed lion that came with it, it might get lonely ... but he just didn't have room. He huffed and leaned against his bed, rubbing at his hot, stinging eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Cody said quickly, turning around so he wasn't facing the door. But Garrett came over anyway and touched his shoulder as he sat down next to him.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

"I don't have space for everything," Cody said, keeping his eyes down. He didn't want Garrett to say anything, he didn't want him to see him crying. "There isn't room for everything I need to take with me."

"Oh."

"And I know we're coming back," Cody went on because he did, everyone kept saying it, "but not for a long time." Because a year was a very long time, no matter what Daddy said. "And ..." His throat was feeling hot now too, scratchy and full, and he stopped talking.

"And you'll miss it," Garrett said. Cody nodded, eyes still on the floor. "I understand. It's hard to leave things behind, even when you know it's not forever."

"It feels like forever," Cody whispered. "And I already miss them."

“Yeah, that’s what I thought we were talking about.” Garrett tugged him a little closer, and Cody went, burying his face in Garrett’s side. “You’ve never really left anyone behind before, have you?”

“Just Grandma, and I don’t really miss her,” Cody confessed. “And before, when you left, it was you going away, not me. I did miss you, though.”

“And I came back in the end,” Garrett said, rubbing a hand over Cody’s shoulders. “And so will you. No one’s going to forget you, and you won’t forget them either. You’ve got the holos of everyone?”

“Yeah.” Cody and Garrett had spent most of yesterday running around and getting videos of everything and everyone he liked here. He even got a short clip of Thérèse and Garrett arguing, which was just like normal.

“Then you’ll have plenty of things to help you remember everyone, and you can show them to your friends back home. You do want to see Lacey and Tamara again, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Cody did , kind of, but ... “This would be a lot better if we were all in the same place all the time.”

“It would be nice, but ... there’s something to be said for the healing power of absentia,” Garrett said.

“What’s that?”

He could tell Garrett was smiling from the way his voice changed. “I’ll tell you later. First we have to finish packing.” He took his hand away, and Cody straightened up, then looked at his bag.

“I guess I should put some clothes in too, huh?”

Garrett blinked once, then laughed. “You haven’t packed any of your clothes yet?”

“I needed the room for other stuff!”

“Yeah, I know. C’mon. Clothes.” They went through Cody’s wardrobe and packed his favorites up, along with some dumb stuff that Cody was sure he wouldn’t need, but Garrett grabbed anyway, like socks. He looked over all the other things he was going to have to leave there and sighed morosely.

“I guess that’s it.”

“Sounds good.”

“Cody! We’ve gotta go! Is Garrett—” Daddy came into the room and looked at the two of them, then smiled. “I shoulda figured. Are you guys done?”

“We’re done,” Garrett told him. They met in the middle of the room and kissed, and Cody rolled his eyes. They had been doing that more and more since they got back from their honeymoon. It was kind of nice but kind of gross too.

“We need to go say goodbye now,” Cody announced. “Don’t we have to go?”

“Mmmyeah,” his dad said, pulling slowly back from the kiss. He looked a little dazed. Cody nudged his hip to get him moving. “Yeah, we have to go.”

“Come on, then.” He hoisted his bag over his shoulder and led the way out of the room.

Everyone was waiting for them on the landing pad. Well, everyone except for Jack; Cody had said goodbye to him yesterday, with the lawyers and his dad’s present. It was kind of weird, but he guessed he’d have to get used to it.



Cody passed his bag to Daddy and made sure to give everyone a hug. His throat was tight again, and he couldn't say anything, but at least he was able to keep from crying. He kissed baby Renee on the cheek, and he managed to nod when Wyl whispered that next time maybe he could try driving the tank instead of just riding in it (Robbie smacked the back of his head and made Wyl grin). By the time his dads got through with their goodbyes and they were all on the ship, Cody felt exhausted. He let his daddy strap him into his seat and shut his eyes as they were cleared to take off.

Garrett strapped in next to Cody instead of in the copilot's seat. He didn't say anything, but he took Cody's hand and held it all the way through the takeoff and until they were cleared to move around again. Daddy set the autopilot, and then they all stood together at the viewport and watched Paradise get smaller and smaller.

"Are you okay, bucko?" his daddy asked.

Cody took a shuddery breath. "Yeah." He grabbed both of his dads' hands and pulled them in closer, so they kind of surrounded him. It was sad to say goodbye, but at least he still had the most important people with him.

And they were staying with him. "I'm okay."

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