



Proslo (Brides of the Mylos #5)

Author: *Loretta Johns*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Betty wants to use her scholarship to escape very, very far away.

Her ex now in prison for attacking both her and the officer who responded to the domestic violence call, Betty has a plan. She'll apply for the Mylos scholarship and use it to move far away from anyone she knows, using it to give herself a fresh start. At thirty-eight, she's sure her chances at being a mate match are so close to nil that it's negligible.

Her course of study of choice?

To become a nurse, to help others as she helps herself. Her plan goes awry when she's matched to Proslo, one of the doctors aboard the flagship. Can she overcome her past and let the good doctor heal her soul while she holds his heart in her hands?

Total Pages (Source): 27

1

BETTY

“A nd when you responded to the call, what happened next?” Amos asked.

Pitkiss, the patrolman who’d responded to the 911 call sweet old Mrs. Titchmarsh had made upon hearing the ruckus, frowned. “My partner and I rolled up in front of the house. We could hear screaming and there was a cat trying to hide under the bush in front of the garage where the apartment was located. The door to the apartment was wide open and I ran up the stairs, calling out to alert everyone present that we were the police and they were to come out.”

“And for the record, your partner is Officer Lisa Romansky, correct?” Amos prodded.

“Yes, sir.”

“And did the defendant come out?”

“He did not. I therefore entered the premises via the open door with Lisa, I mean, Officer Romansky right behind.”

“And what did you see?”

“The defendant had Ms. Lewis pinned against her refrigerator, his arm across her throat. He was shouting quite loudly, calling her ungrateful and referring to her using an epithet. The apartment is a studio, so it’s all one big room and we could see that at

some point during their altercation, her TV and lamp had ended up on the floor. She had a red mark on her face and a busted lip. I told him to let her go and to get onto the ground, hands on the back of his head.”

“And then what did he do?”

“He spun Ms. Lewis around and sort of pushed her at us. Lisa ran forward to catch her and that was when Mr. Dane charged at me.”

“And did he strike you?”

“Yes, sir. We both went down and my back hit the arm of the sofa. He jumped up and ran out the door, and Lisa and I ran after him. Lisa managed to tase him before he could open his car door.”

“I’d like to present Exhibit C, the body cam footage from Officer Pitkiss taken during the incident.” Amos pressed a remote and a TV screen began to play, showing everything Pitkiss had just described.

I glanced over at the members of the jury. Their expressions ranged from stony faced to outright angry.

“As the good members of the jury can see, both Officer Pitkiss’s testimony and Officer Romansky’s testimonies match, their body cams both showing that everything they have said is accurate. Moreover, we have had testimony from Mrs. Titchmarsh as to the problems she and her tenant have had with the defendant, with Ring camera footage showing several parts of the incident. We can see him pulling up, screaming, kicking the door in, and entering the property to assault Betty Lewis. We can see him kicking her cat out the door and down the stairs, and have the records from the veterinarian detailing the bruising that the cat was lucky enough to only escape with.

All this paints a terrible picture. Darryll Dane is a violent man who has no respect for property, no compassion towards animals or other human beings, and who shows a general contempt towards the law.”

“Objection, leading the jury,” Darryll’s defense attorney said.

“Sustained. Please confine those sort of remarks to your closing arguments,” Judge Reinholdt said.

“My apologies,” Amos replied to the judge. “This is such an emotionally impactful testimony and video, that I became carried away.”

“Try to contain yourself,” the judge advised wryly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Amos answered, ducking his head in apology. Then turning back to Officer Pitkiss, he said, “Thank you for your testimony. Is there anything else you feel we should know?”

Pitkiss threw Darryll a look of disgust. “Only that he kept kicking and screaming in the back of the squad car and it took six officers to take him inside the station. There’s footage available of that as well since cameras were rolling.”

Amos returned to his seat.

“I’m finished with this witness, Your Honor.”

“Do you wish to cross examine?” Judge Reinhold asked Darryll's defense.

He shook his head no.

“What!” Darryll shouted. “Aren’t you even gonna ask him why I was there! I told

them! And if they hadn't attacked me first with that Taser when all I was trying to do was leave -"

"That's enough!" Judge Reinhold barked. "One more outburst from you and I will find you in contempt of court! Do you understand me? Or did the last time I gave you fourteen days for disrupting my courtroom not teach you a damned thing?"

Darryll glared and if looks could kill, he would have murdered the judge right on the spot. I shivered, knowing that look. It was the reason I'd stopped seeing him after only six dates. It was the first and last date he'd picked me up from my apartment and after watching him lose his cool with a random guy in the parking lot who he decided had stolen the spot he wanted in the large, less than half full parking lot, I'd sneaked into the ladies' bathroom at the restaurant right after we'd been seated, called a Lyft, and got the hell out of there.

He'd blown my phone up and showed up at my apartment for the first time that night. Two weeks later, he'd showed up again and kicked in my door. That's when all of this then happened. I'd had terrible boyfriends before, but never like this. Patrick had been a cheapskate and Bill a serial cheater who'd try to gaslight me over it. Timothy had been a passive aggressive jerk who liked to make me feel bad about my weight, my clothes, and even my job, telling me that as a CNA, I wasn't even a real nurse. He knew I wanted to go on to become an RN but didn't want to burden myself with outrageous college loans any more than I already had. I was determined to never make myself vulnerable ever again. I was finished with men.

I listened numbly as the judge excused the witness and Amos let him know the prosecution rested. I stood up and left the room, unable to handle listening to anything else. I just wanted this to be over. I hurried outside, walking up and down the corridor, trying to catch my breath and slow down the thundering of my heart. When he'd kicked Pumpkin, my senior rescue kitty, I'd been certain that he'd killed him. When I discovered Pumpkin had landed on his feet halfway down the stairs,

hidden under a nearby bush after running away, and only had minor injuries, I'd felt so relieved. It was only afterward that I let what he'd done to me sink in, not to mention the officers who'd responded.

I wanted him to go to jail for every last thing he'd done. Amos had tracked down the guy from the parking lot incident and he'd been charged over the abuse he'd shouted at him and for pounding on the hood of the guy's car. He was charged with breaking and entering and criminal damage, and for assaulting me and Officer Pitkiss, as well as for animal abuse.

I went out the door, sitting on a bench just outside. Amos found me there a while after. "Jury's deliberating now," he told me. "I'm sure we have a slam dunk on all counts, and I don't think it will take them that long to decide it, either. We'll probably know before the end of today and sentencing will be scheduled shortly after." He gave me a conspiratorial grin. "He got another contempt charge though. All through closing, he was telling off his lawyer and then mouthing off at me, until he got a full ninety days just for that."

I shook my head. "He was so charming and sweet right until he knew where I lived and came to pick me up."

"Yes, well, he probably thought he had you hooked good and proper. He never expected you to kick him to the proverbial curb."

I nodded.

"What are you going to do after this?" he asked me. "Your landlady told me you've given her notice."

I picked at an imaginary piece of lint on my skirt. "I've decided to stop looking for a boyfriend for now and concentrate on me. I want to become an RN and I want to be a

mom, to a human kid and not just my cat.” I cracked a tense smile at him. “I don’t need a man to do either of those things. I spoke to a counselor at Humbledale, and they suggested I apply for the Mylos scholarship. Social Services said I can foster with a view to adopt as long as I have a stable income, even if I’m in school full time. The scholarship will see that I do and will increase to cover any child related expenses until I graduate and find a position using my degree. I’m almost forty, and if I don’t make my own dreams come true now, they won’t ever be.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “And if you end up being that one in a billion?”

I snorted. We both knew that wasn’t likely to happen. “Yeah, right.”

“Someone has to be that one,” he reminded me and I sighed. “Well, if that happens, I’m still golden. I get to have my studies paid for and the Mylos are big on kids so I’ll still get to be a mom. And since they are always perfect matches, I’ll never have to worry about dating an asshole ever again because I’ll have met my alien Prince Charming and gotten alien married just like that.” I snapped my fingers to demonstrate.

“All right. As long as you’ll be happy, it’s all good. You know that, right?”

I smiled at him fondly. Amos Findley had taken my case pro bono and quickly had become like a father to me.

“Yeah, I do. I’ll let you know when you become a grandpa.”

“A grandpa again,” he reminded me, eyes twinkling. “My grandkitty counts, you know. And I expect an invite to a proper wedding if you end up mated, you hear?”

I nodded, a lump in my throat. “Yeah, okay.”

A bailiff came out. “Mr. Findley, the jury’s returned with a verdict.”

Amos stood up, his eyes twinkling. “See? I told you they wouldn’t take long.”

As always, Amos proved to be right on all counts. Darryll was found guilty of all charges and his sentencing was scheduled for next week. I stopped and picked up a pizza on my way home. Pumpkin and I had something to celebrate. My last ever boyfriend was going away to prison and Pumpkin and I were moving to Jericho where I’d attend Humbledale and we’d get Pumpkin a human sibling or two, without us ever having to worry about our finances. Things were looking up at long last.

PROSLO

My protective gloves allowed my claws to punch through, which was just as well, since otherwise, I'd have no other way to provide enough grip to climb this tree. On either side of me, two other officers were doing the same thing, scaling a towering coconut palm tree at Kimo's behest.

We could, and did, do other things to build our strength and agility, but here in his hula class, we did things in the tradition of his people. Up the towering trees with only our hands and feet, nothing else to aid us. Only myself and a handful of others whose hands had to remain in as pristine condition as possible were permitted to use the claws borrowed from our battle forms. Then back down, followed by a swim in the simulated surf and a run down the sandy beach. After all that, we'd practice our actual dancing. It was grueling but exhilarating. I much preferred this period of thrice weekly training to the once a week combat training, especially if it was swordsmanship.

I got to use practice swords as did the rest of medical and the sciences, not that it prevented us from bruises and strained muscles. The rest of the crew, however, regularly came in with enough deep cuts and even the occasional broken bone that I had grown to loathe the sight of anyone sparring. I knew it was necessary, of course. We were warriors, and if we were to come under attack, we needed to be ready to defend ourselves within the walls of our ships. Unlike projectile and energy weapons, swords and daggers were incapable of punching through a ship's hull.

I reached the top of my tree and paused to catch my breath. It was unfortunate timing, as the mere thought of fighting and hull breeches unlocked a memory. I wrapped my arms tightly around the trunk, knowing I had to face it so I could think myself past it.

My father strapped his twin daggers and sword on, kissing my mother briefly before hurriedly pressing one against my brother's forehead, and then mine.

"Do not open the door for any reason, and if they try to get in, lock yourselves into the safe."

I glanced over at the hidden door inside my father's closet. It was designed to act as a weapons safe while doubling as a safe room in case of emergency. Locked inside, we'd not run out of air and Nigellos, our ship's AI system, would turn a part of the floor in the corner into an open hole we could eliminate in so he could whisk it away to waste processing. Each set of quarters had such a safe and each contained a signal booster coupled to the ship's distress beacon as well as each safe's beacon which would allow rescuers with security access to Nigellos to pinpoint those of us locked away. A small food cache and mini replicator were also inside.

"It will be fine," Marmar reassured us and I smiled trustingly up at her. Our mother was always right, and Dathir was a strong warrior. He participated in competitions and our walls were covered with many of the awards he'd won. He'd see whoever dared to try to board our ship off to the afterlife. He was so good he could have joined the Fleet instead of working for a salvage crew.

Our ship rocked violently and Marmar's face paled.

"Come, we will go into the safe, just in case," she said.

Minutes stretched into hours and hours into what had to have been days. At first, the ship shuddered and groaned while my younger brother and I clung to our mother. She

began to tell us stories until the ship fell quiet at last and her voice became a mere rasp.

My brother Lisos peered up at her hopefully. “The bad guys have gone. Now we can get out.”

She shook her head. “Nigellos has not given the all clear,” she reminded us. “We must remain here until he does or your father comes to release us.”

Time crawled by even slower, and we ate a few of the ration bars, sipping water to wash them down. Exhaustion finally took us one by one, and we fell asleep, dozing in fits and starts. Despite the floor facility opening and resealing itself shut, the small space began to stink from our unwashed bodies, and where myself and Lisos missed aiming our piss completely through the hole.

When the door to our haven slid open at last, it wasn’t Dathir that greeted us, but a member of the Fleet wearing a respirator. His face wore a grim expression as he held a bag out.

“Grab a respirator,” was all he said and Marmar hurried to obey. She quickly strapped them over our faces before doing the same with hers, and another Fleet officer standing behind him had us turn around so he could fasten three small cylinders onto our backs.

“How bad is the breach?” Marmar asked.

“The bulkheads kept this section and the bridge airtight, but the rest...” His voice trailed off as he shook his head.

We followed them through our quarters, the officers kindly giving us time to grab what precious things we could easily carry. My mother took a tablet which held all of

our family pictures, grabbing one of my father's shirts and some of his awards from the walls. My brother and I grabbed our favorite toys of course, but the way my mother took Dathir's shirt niggled at me, prompting me to return to their bedroom and grab the pillow he'd slept on every night.

The corridor outside was filled with the families of the rest of the crew, also clutching a few meager possessions and wearing respirators and air tanks. The need for this became apparent once the fleet officer in charge of the rescue party opened the emergency airlock in the hull and led us through the see-through umbilical tunnel which connected us to their warship.

"Close the children's eyes," one of the officers said but it was too late. I whimpered as a body floated past, missing an arm, eyes frozen open unseeing. It was my friend Glyop's father, in the battle form I'd seen so often while watching my father and the rest of them train. Somehow making things worse, his arm had not been cleaved off. Where it had been was a burned stump, his pants on that side also charred. He'd been shot with an energy weapon of some kind. I glanced back at our ship and saw the gaping hole close to the cargo area. We were part of a salvage company, collecting debris and taking it to recycling processing centers and occasionally to small shipyards, if we came across a small craft. Had the attackers mistaken us for a merchant vessel?

Sobs broke out as others took in the grim reality before us. I turned my head, looking resolutely ahead. I had to get my mother and brother to safety aboard the warship. I had to be brave and strong so when Dathir came, he'd know I was a strong warrior, just like him. Only he didn't come, and in the end, I too gave into tears.

I blinked my eyes to dislodge the moisture there. I was no longer that small boy of six. I was a fully mature male, a fully trained Mylos warrior in my own right who chose to heal rather than maim, and a proud member of the Fleet. I scrambled down and dusted myself off.

Kimo looked at me appraisingly but said nothing. He jerked his chin toward the water and I spun around to run headlong into the waves, happy to let them wash away the feelings those memories always left me.

BETTY

“T oday’s the day, huh?” Mrs. Titchmarsh said, coming outside with a glass of iced tea in her hand.

“Yep, I’m heading over to my appointment now. As soon as they know you’re not a match, they release the first of the monthly living allowance and give me proof of funds for Humbledale. I heard it takes around an hour, so as soon as I’m done at the center, I’m going straight over there to enroll. Then I’ll come back here and look at some apartments near campus online and start making appointments to go look at them,” I told her happily.

She took a sip of her tea. “I suppose that means you could be moving within the next few days then.”

I nodded. “I know you said I could stay as long as I needed to get all my ducks in a row, but I’m ready to just leave all this behind me. Not you, of course. You’ve been great.”

“I’ll miss you too,” she replied. “You’re a nice person. I’ll be sure to let your prospective landlord know what a great tenant you’ve been. I won’t mention the trouble as that wasn’t your fault, not one bit.”

“Thank you,” I told her, happy to hear that she genuinely didn’t blame me for any of what happened.

“Alright, now scat. You don’t want to miss your appointment.”

I climbed into my car and waved goodbye as I pulled out of the driveway. I turned on the radio, humming along as one of my favorite songs came on. This was my day, I just knew it. The day where all my dreams would start to come true. I knew just the sort of place I wanted to rent, too. A modest two bedroom apartment in a complex with a playground and maybe even a pool, so any child I fostered could enjoy playing with the other resident children in a safe environment. The next song was even better and as I began to sing along, I was already picturing the barbecue grill and small patio set I wanted to buy for us to enjoy during the warmest months. By the time I pulled into the parking lot of the Scholarship Center, I was picturing myself hanging out at the college cafeteria with my fellow classmates.

A young man came out the door as I approached, giving me a tiny smile as he made a phone call.

“Hi, Mom. I just arranged for my Uber. Everything’s fine.”

He placed a hand over his phone. “Good luck!” he told me and I gave him a nod and went inside.

A Mylos male wearing a rather nice looking suit and tie looked up.

“Hi, I’m Betty Lewis. I have an appointment.”

He smiled broadly and stood. “Welcome! I’m Lechand. Could I offer you a coffee? Or perhaps a tea?”

“A coffee would be lovely, thank you.”

“A flat white, Americano, a latte, or a cappuccino?” he asked.

I blinked. “A latte, please.”

“Would you like vanilla, mocha, or caramel? I’m afraid we’re out of the gingerbread and hazelnut syrups.”

“Vanilla’s good,” I replied.

He opened a drawer in his desk and handed me a tablet. “If you’ll have a seat over there,” he indicated a very comfortable looking sofa and chair grouping, “I’ll bring it right over. And please, help yourself to whatever you want from the side table.”

“Thank you.” A quick look showed me that the two large boxes on the side table held various donuts and other pastries. I picked up a bear claw with one of the paper napkins provided and settled myself into one of the pillowy armchairs. I began answering the questions, and wow, there were a lot. I’d expected them to be as long as those from the better dating sites but these were way beyond that. The first part included an in depth personality quiz. I’d only answered about five of those questions when Lechand returned with my coffee.

“Thank you,” I murmured once more.

I kept answering question after question, and it didn’t take me long to realize that the hour estimate’s time was probably entirely filled with answering this questionnaire. I had to stop to take a potty break and Lechand offered me a second coffee. I accepted a caramel latte this time and took a glazed ring doughnut to go with it. At long last I finished answering everything, feeling like I’d bared my soul. I took the now cold final sip of my coffee and picked up my napkins to throw them away before taking the mug and tablet back to the desk.

Lechand smiled at me. “All done?” he asked, standing to take the mug from me, which he placed inside what looked like a dishwasher drawer under the counter

holding the coffee maker and electric kettle before returning.

“Yes.”

“No problems? You managed to answer everything okay?”

I chuckled. “Some of the things you guys asked made me have to think, but yeah, I got there in the end.”

“Excellent!” He reached into another drawer, pulling out a sealed swab. “I just need to take a DNA sample and let Xeranos read it while he finishes analyzing the replies you’ve given.” He took the tablet from me, pressed the button to turn it off, and placed it back inside the drawer he’d taken it from. “If you’ll just open your mouth, I’ll take a cheek swab.” He uncapped the tube holding the swab and took it out. “Perfect!” He continued on cheerily as he collected the saliva sample and placed it back inside the tube. He walked back over to the coffee area and opened another drawer beside the first one, placing the swab inside. “Okay, Xero, have at it as they say.”

“Processing,” came a male disembodied voice.

“That’s your AI, isn’t it?” I asked him, glancing around as if I could spot him.

“It is indeed.

“I read he’s fully sentient.”

“That is correct,” Xeranos replied. “But don’t worry. I only ever use my powers for good.”

I laughed nervously. “That’s alright then.”

“It’ll be a few minutes at most for him to complete -” Lechand started to explain when bells began to ring.

“Congratulations!” Xeranos cried out, sounding way too happy.

Lechand looked as shocked as I felt.

“This location has never had a match before,” he told me. “You’re the first!”

I stared at him in incomprehension. Had they both just said... No. No way.

Lechand smiled at me. “What a happy surprise!” he continued. “Your mate has also been alerted and will be arriving shortly. He tapped at a device around his wrist. “Oh! You’re matched to Dr. Proslo, our chief medical officer. He’ll have to take a shuttle down, so I’m afraid you’ll have to bear my company for another hour or so.”

I shook my head in denial. “I can’t. I have to go feed my cat and, and let my landlady know things have changed and...” I made a dash for the front door but it didn’t budge.

“I’m afraid protocol locks all exits once a match occurs until their mate arrives,” Xeranos informed me.

“But that’s kidnapping!” I shouted.

“It’s for your own safety. Early on, one of our brides was seriously injured after panicking and running into a nearby busy road.” Lechand’s tone was gentle and he looked at me with concern. “I’m afraid your phone signal will likewise be blocked, as another previous incident saw a friend contacting Humans First and they attacked the center even though the bride and her mate had already gone.”

“You can’t do this,” I insisted. “You can’t force me to marry some guy I’ve never met.”

Lechand’s expression turned to one of dismay.

“You did understand that by applying and completing the match screening process, which you gave a thumbprint to indicate you were in agreement with by way of the first question, that if you were matched, you automatically became legally married?”

I licked my lips. It had said that, yes, and I had ticked the I understand and agree box and added my thumbprint. It had also been clear when I booked my appointment slot online and ticked yes to agreeing to those terms and provided them with a digital signature.

“One in a billion,” I whispered. “The odds were at least one in a billion.”

“And you’re that one! Trust me, toots, you’ve won the lottery,” Xeranos chirped cheerily.

I sank down to the floor and began counting my breaths.

“Perfect match, right?” I laughed weakly.

Lechand smiled at me approvingly. “Guaranteed,” he nodded, coming around the desk to offer me his hand to help pull me up. I took it, wincing as I stood. Getting down onto the floor had felt easy at the time. Getting up? Not so much, my body protesting in a way that reminded me that I was fast approaching the big four oh. “He’s really your chief medical officer?”

“He is. You’re quite lucky. He’ll be the one overseeing your education.”

“And if I don’t want him to? Can another doctor do it?”

“I suppose so.” He gave me a puzzled look.

“Good. I, ah, wouldn’t want any other students or anybody else thinking I was getting preferential treatment.”

“I see. Well, I’m sure after the two of you talk things through about it, following the completion of your mating and your human wedding ceremony and honeymoon, you’ll find what will work best.”

“I’d planned to apply to become a foster parent,” I blurted out.

His face brightened. “That’s wonderful! The process will be much easier now that you’re a Mylos.”

“Do you think he’ll mind? Maybe he’d rather just have a biological child.”

“I think it highly likely that he’d love to do both, but you’ll have to speak with him and discuss it. I’m afraid I only know him by reputation.”

“I can’t go up without Pumpkin,” I told him, changing the subject.

“He’ll arrive with a few males who will go pack your things up. You can both accompany them and retrieve your pet, assuming that’s the name of your cat.”

I nodded vigorously.

“Tell you what. You sit back over there and get comfortable and I’ll make you a calming cup of tea. You can drink it while watching the orientation vid Commander Gundar’s mate had made. It’ll tell you all about the community you’ll find yourself

in.”

I let him guide me over to the sofa and the wall behind the stuffed chairs changed to become a screen. This was good, I decided. It wasn't what I expected, but given my luck or rather lack thereof, I should have expected it, really. And finding out in advance about the place I was going wasn't a bad idea. Preparation and all that. He left and returned moments later with a cup of what tasted like chamomile tea. I took a sip and let the warmth seep into my bones.

4

PROSLO

“ You seemed to have a moment up there,” Kimo said, pulling me aside as everyone began to leave.

I swallowed thickly. “I did,” I admitted. “For some reason, I suddenly remembered the day my father died.”

He studied my face intently. “Okay. But if you keep zoning out like that, please go see someone. You’re a doctor, and I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how mental health can have a physical impact and I’m not talking about you simply falling out of a tree.”

“I will,” I praised him. “I haven’t had a moment like that for many years. I think it was simply that the anniversary of the incident that took his life is today and I was foolishly ruminating on just why I had to stay in fighting shape. I’ll remember to stay focused, sorry. That was pretty dangerous of me.”

Kimo clapped me on the shoulder. “As long as you know, but today of all days, you could have given yourself a break and taken the day off. If you don’t mind me asking, how long ago was it?”

“I was a small child. My parents were crew on a salvage vessel which was attacked by pirates.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The look in his brown eyes told me this was more than a mere platitude. “That sounds pretty traumatic.”

“It was,” I admitted. “But not because they hurt me physically. My mother locked us in a safe room while my father went to help defend the ship.”

Kimo blew out a breath. “That would scare the shit out of me, being locked inside a confined space while the tin can it’s in is involved in a battle. Then to find out I lost one of the most important people to me? I don’t think traumatic is a strong enough word.”

“My grandparents made sure we all went to therapy. If I find my memories are pulling me back in again, I promise I’ll make an appointment with a ship’s counselor.”

“Good man. Now, go shower, brah. You stink,” he grinned, wrinkling his nose before striding away.

“Says the man who made us all sweat,” I managed to joke back, hiding my chagrin. I knew he’d seen me stop. I must have been poised there at the top for longer than I’d thought. Kimo was a keen observer, too, so he’d definitely notice if anything was amiss in the future and would be looking for it. I hadn’t lied to him, though. I hadn’t had an instance like that in years - not since mid-adolescence anyway. So why now? Then I remembered the recent hijacking. That had to have stirred things up a bit.

I made my way to where the simulation hid the door to the outside. It was cleverly done, as usual. In this scenario, it looked like the beachside entrance to a hotel, complete with a sea life themed bar and grill which somehow, was always due to open later. You could even see hotel staff and guests moving about the lobby inside, all part of the illusion which was broken once you placed your palm on the glass and the door slid open to reveal the corridor beyond.

That hijacking had been nothing like the one we'd endured when I was a child. In fact, it was nothing like I'd ever heard of happening either. A goods shuttle, not even a freighter but a star's damned goods shuttle, was attacked by a larger vessel and forced to allow boarding. They roughed up the two pilots a bit before tying them up and making off with a bunch of toys and food delicacies meant for the human Space Force contingent at one of our space stations. Then they simply flew off. Most bizarre, and even stranger yet was the fact that it was deep enough into Allied space that no one knew how they got in and out without being detected, nor how they even knew the shuttle was in transit. The Security Forces certainly had their work cut out figuring all that out and hopefully apprehending the culprits.

My kunnarskyn buzzed and I sighed. On training days, I had the day off except for being on call. I lifted my arm, wondering what emergency cropped up to bring me in today. My eyes widened when I saw the message was not from my staff, but from Xeranos, regarding the mate matching service.

They'd found my mate. I sucked in a lungful of air as if I'd just been gut punched. This was huge. I'd waited and dreamed for so many years that I'd all but given up. And yet, here she was. Or rather, here she would be very shortly. I tapped open the message to find out all about her, oblivious to the people walking around me as I stood still in the corridor.

She was stunning. Like me, she was older. Not yet quite middle-aged but, as my human staff liked to say, no spring chicken. Her hair was a lovely shade of brown as were her eyes. She was five foot three inches tall, which meant the top of her head would nestle just below my pecs when standing. To be honest, most humans did, very few tall enough to reach my collarbone. Her figure was a pleasing rounded shape, with plenty of her to grip and kiss while I worshipped every inch of her body.

"Everything alright, Doc?"

I jerked in surprise, my eyes meeting the concerned ones of the maintenance crew.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, sorry. I was just stunned. I’ve been matched!”

His eyes flew wide. “That’s wonderful! Congratulations. You found out just now?”

I nodded, showing him my kunnarskyn.

“Come, we need to get you to a shuttle bay so you can bring her home.”

I sniffed my arm. Kimo was right. I absolutely reeked. “I should shower first.”

“Oh, yeah. I wasn’t going to say anything, but, yeah, probably for the best.”

“I just left hula class.”

He nodded sagely.

“Xeranos,” he called out.

“Yes, Junrig?”

“Doctor Proslo needs a shuttle.”

“Already scheduled. His pilot and ship will be awaiting him. I’m sending him the information now and arranging for his new quarters. They will be ready for them both upon their return.”

“I need to shower first,” I repeated, this time for Xeranos’ benefit.

“Expected, thanks to your schedule. Your pilot and the moving crew know to allow

you thirty minutes.”

Junrig smiled at me. “There you go. Best hurry.”

I nodded, smiling back at him. He was quite right. It would take me at least ten minutes to get to my bachelor quarters here aboard the ship, plus I needed to stop somewhere and get her some flowers. That was what human male suitors did according to the vids I watched, and I was not about to let my mate down.

BETTY

T here were shops, cafes, restaurants, and parks with real plants and even the Star Trekkiest of food replicators and holo suites aboard the ships of the Fleet. It looked practically utopian, which probably should have alarmed me, but didn't. Instead, it looked like a wonderful dream, very close to what I'd wanted.

“Well, I wanted to get far away from where I lived and made all those two legged mistakes. I was going to go to school, become an RN, get a job in another state, and foster and later adopt a kid or two,” I reminded myself. “And here it is - a place so far ain't none of those assholes or anyone they know likely to ever cross my path, free tuition, a personalized degree to become their equivalent of an RN, and getting to use their advanced tech we don't have access to on earth because of rules, and wow, neighborhoods that I still only would be able to dream about.”

And the kid thing was definitely going to become a reality, no doubt about it. Only now it might involve biological children. Admittedly, that concerned me a bit, given my age. Still, mega advanced science and healthcare, so that was probably me worrying about nothing.

The vid ended and Lechand approached me with a tablet once more.

“I've been informed that he's going to be a little late as he was in hula class and wishes to clean up after his exertion first,” he said, tapping the screen to show me a very attractive Mylos. Unlike most of the ones I saw in the ads for the Bride Program,

he was older. His hair had started to gray a bit at his temples and his face had lost the softness of youth. He was a damn fine looking man, alright. Much better looking than any of the losers I'd dated so far.

"That's fine," I said, drinking him in. I mean, I was going to have to do this, right? We were already alien married according to the contract and treaty, so I might as well get to enjoy myself along the way. And sometimes people in arranged marriages fall in love. Maybe I'd be one of those lucky ones. Maybe what I'd thought of as my bad luck striking again was actually me winning the man and happy life lottery.

"In light of that, I contacted your landlady, who is on her way to bring you your cat and his supplies. She said she would accompany the movers back and take care of everything so you could bring your furbaby straight on up. Her words exactly."

"Oh. She didn't have to do that."

His smile grew wider. "She also said to stand like this," he placed his hands on his hips and stared me straight in the eyes, "and tell you that you better make good on your promise and invite her to the wedding, which she reckons should be in Guam as Hawaii has too many tourists who will wander into all the pictures."

I giggled. That did sound just like Mrs. Titschmarch. "I'll have to see what the wedding budget is."

"Oh, it'll be covered. You just need to select a place and choose a reasonably sized guest list of no more than a hundred and Xeranos will be happy to help make the arrangements. It's all paid for by the Fleet, including the guests's travel and accommodation expenses."

I'd known that but had no idea they'd do that much. I certainly would have never imagined going to Guam, but if we were traveling down by one of their saucers, why

not? Might be anyplace on the globe, since it would be just as easy for them to fly us wherever and no pesky airport layovers and connections. This really was starting to look like a fairy tale.

As if reading my mind, Lechand leaned over and tapped an icon on the side of the screen. “Here, you can read up on Guam and anything else you might like. And if you want to read more about Dr. Proslo, simply tap here,” he demonstrated without actually touching the screen, “and his profile will reappear.”

I decided to read up on my new husband first. I’d just finished reading his short biography and began looking at tourist information for Guam when the building shook a bit.

“Sounds like he’s here,” Lechand said cheerfully, standing up to face a door in the rear. True enough, moments later the door opened and my new mate strode in. His eyes flicked across the room and met mine and I stood up, clutching the tablet to my chest. It was as if time stood still, our gazes locked onto one another. His picture had not done him justice. He wasn’t merely tall - he was imposing and his very presence seemed to fill the room. His long legs ate up the distance between us and he was halfway to me before I realized he was clutching a bouquet of red roses and what looked to be a box of Whitman’s chocolates in his hands.

“You brought me candy and flowers,” I said, a real smile found its way onto my face.

He nodded, thrusting them out at me. “All the vids showing middle American courtships showed this was proper.”

I tried to think of what he possibly could have watched for this to be true, especially with the Whitman’s candy sampler. This was seriously old school. It was also incredibly thoughtful and sweet. None of my previous so-called men had ever thought to buy me so much as a pack of gum or a candy bar and had certainly never

purchased me flowers. Guess that should have been a big red flag, huh?

“These are perfect,” I murmured, burying my face into the roses. To my surprise, these actually had a scent. I took a deep appreciative sniff. “Absolutely perfect.” And damn it, now my eyes were welling up with tears again.

“Then why are you crying, mi-shida’a?”

“Because it’s so, so...thoughtful,” I sniffled.

He reached a thumb out and swiped my tears away. “Then you shall always have flowers and candy. Perhaps not so large a box, though, as the ingredients show them to be -”

“Quite fattening and tooth rotting,” I finished, smiling through my tears. “I like peanut M and M’s, maybe we can get a bag of those on occasion, to share.”

His eyes smoldered. I’d read about such a thing in the many romance novels I’d borrowed from the library but certainly had never seen such a look myself, until now.

“You would share your candy with me?” he rumbled in a low voice which practically melted my panties right there on the spot. Holy moly, this man was affecting me. If he looked and spoke to me like this all the time, I’d share everything that was mine with him. Maybe their AI knew what he was doing after all.

A rap on the glass entrance door had us turn our attention towards it.

“That’s Mrs. Titchmarsh!” I exclaimed. “And she’s got Pumpkin!” I couldn’t help the squeal that came out with those words. My furbaby was here, peering out of the backpack carrier I used to take him on walks with me and to the vet.

Lechand called out, "I've got the door," and sailed past us, throwing it open.

"Thank you so much," he told her.

"Yep, sure thing. Oh, my, aren't you two tall drinks of water for a thirsty woman?"

Lechand laughed. "I see the moving crew are here as well," he said, pointing to another Mylos who had just appeared in the parking lot.

She whirled around. "Where'd he come from?"

"The roof," Proslo replied. "They came with me on the shuttle."

Lechand reached into his pocket and fished out a set of keys before calling out the door to the man. "Do you know how to operate one of their motor vehicles?" he pointed towards an SUV parked in the far corner of the lot.

"I do," the man replied, inclining his head.

"Here, catch!" Lechand tossed the keys at him and the man deftly plucked them out of the air.

"Xeranos will instruct you on where to pick up a truck rental."

The man inclined his head. "Blethis also knows how to operate these, and we are both cleared for larger sized commercial vehicles."

"Excellent. One of you can drive the truck back here and the other one my car. Then you can all follow the lovely Mrs. Titchmarsh to Betty's apartment."

She nodded vigorously. "I'll do you one better. Follow me to the Ryder truck place,

boys. I'll show you the right size to get and we can get going from there."

"How will they get my stuff up if we're taking the shuttle first? Will it come back for them?"

"One of the cargo transports will meet them at the local landing field in your town," Lechand replied. "There's one currently loading at a grocery warehouse and it will have enough space for your things."

"Oh, okay then."

Proslo brushed his lips gently across my forehead before stepping back and taking my chocolates from me. My face burned as I realized I'd stood there this whole time just clutching these things in my hand while she still had my cat. She cackled, coming inside and holding out the straps to Pumpkin's backpack.

"Before we go, someone needs to get the stuff for him out of my car."

"I'll help with that," yet another Mylos said, appearing from the side of the building.

"There's a ladder or something to the roof, isn't there?" I murmured and Proslo laughed, showing a dimple in his chin that had me coming simply undone once more.

"Yes," he replied, leading me towards the door in the back. "But we shall take the stairs."

PROSLO

She was even lovelier in person and none more so than when she took her lower lip between her teeth, a gentle blush upon her cheeks, her eyes shining as she took in the sight of me holding the roses and chocolates. My heart soared at her reaction. The delay I took before going to the waiting shuttle had been worth it. At first, I was only going to stop at the florist's, but when I explained what they were for, Tina, the proprietress, explained about the language of flowers. She then proceeded to gather a bouquet of the fragrant red blooms she called roses, warning me against the thorns as she wrapped them up.

"And since you're kicking it old school," she'd said, "you best pop over to Candy's Sweets on the other side of the park, just opposite. Tell her to give you a sampler."

I'd hurried there and the eponymous Candy had squealed, selling me the box of Whitman's which came with a red bow to show it was a precious gift.

"If it was good enough for Elizabeth Taylor," she said with a wink as she pointed to a framed advertisement behind her on the wall, "it's definitely good enough for your lady." Seeing my expression, she added, "She was a huge film star and was considered one of the most beautiful women in the world in her heyday."

My mate was definitely a female who stole my breath away, so these were indeed appropriate. I paid for them and hurried towards the shuttle bay. Yes, definitely a wise move – just look at how she'd reacted! She'd understood immediately that I was

wooing her and that she was valued.

“I’ll never get used to seeing these,” she said as we reached the rooftop and I opened the door.

I smiled at her gently. “I feel the same way whenever I see one of your aircraft or road vehicles,” I confessed.

She laughed, the sound endearingly harsh. Hearing herself, she clamped her lips shut tightly and blushed. “Sorry. I sound like a donkey when I laugh out loud like that.”

‘It’s wonderful,’ I reassured her and she looked at me as if I’d suddenly sprouted a second head.

“Um, no it’s not.”

“It is,” I insisted. “It is a sound of joy and it’s your joy, which makes me feel happy.”

She stared at me, eyes widened, her expression turning to one of awe. “How are you even real?” she whispered.

I placed a hand on the small of her back, guiding her to the shuttle’s open ramp. “Well, you see, my father met my mother, and they mated. One day their mating impregnated her -”

She bumped me with her hip, her lips pressed together as she tried to hold in another laugh. “Stop it. I know how babies are made.”

I smirked down at her. “Good. Seeing as you’re a medical professional who wishes to train in a second field, I’d hoped they’d covered basic biology, even if it was for humans and not Mylos.”

She glanced around the interior. “Looks so futuristic.” She giggle-snorted adorably and said, “Though I suppose really the future is now.”

“Well, we are here, standing in the middle of it and it’s reality,” our pilot, Zaneb said.

“Right.” she agreed.

“Take any seat except the one in front of the control panel,” he told her, and she went for the nearest one.

“Oh, um,” she glanced at her full hands.

“Let me fasten your harness, mi-shida’a.” I leaned over and grasped the straps, working them around her torso and lap.

“Thanks,” she said, biting her lower lip again. “I am being rather slow, I’m afraid. I’m usually better than this, I swear. I just realized I could have put Pumpkin down and laid the flowers on the floor.”

“Let me take those and put them in the chilled compartment,” Zaneb said. “It will stop them from drooping until you can get them into a suitable container with water.”

“Tina was sending someone with a vase and appropriate food for cut flowers,” I proudly told her.

She arched an eyebrow at me, her face now an indifferent mask as she wordlessly allowed Zaneb to take the roses from her.

“Tina is the florist who sold me the flowers and directed me to the candy shop,” I hastily added.

“So, not your girlfriend,” she replied flatly.

I cocked my head to one side. Ah, yes. Humans dated around until they found a mate they wished to remain with. “Mylos do not have such persons. Females who are platonic friends, yes. Romantic interests, no.”

“We don’t do boyfriends either,” Zaneb chimed in. “Oh, boy, did I have to let my mate know that. I’m best friends with a guy here who works in hydroponics as part of the veteran employment and training program and he totally got the wrong idea when we got off the shuttle, Benji ran up and hugged me tight to congratulate me. We’re as close as brothers so he thought nothing about it. First Chet burst into tears, then Benji did because he suddenly realized what he made Chet think.”

“Oh,” she replied quietly, a look of stark relief upon her face. “Did you guys manage to explain it right away?”

Zaneb hummed as he put on his harness and began doing the preflight console checks. “Sure did. Now they’re like brothers too. We’re both working on getting Benji to apply to the program so he can see if he’s got a match, too. A wonderful guy like him is sure to be someone’s soulmate and seeing as the stars brought him to us, we both figure his has to be a Mylos.”

“Soulmates,” she whispered.

“What else would you call a perfect match?” he asked as I sat down next to my mate and strapped myself in. “Okay, starting engines. Xeranos, plot our course home.”

“Course plotted. Estimated time of arrival one hour, thirteen minutes, and forty-two seconds.”

“I always thought these flights took several hours,” Betty said.

“They do in the regular shuttles. This is one of our express models, capable of faster speeds this close to a major gravity well.”

“Oh.”

The ship began to hum and vibrate almost imperceptibly.

“And we have lift-off,” Zaneb announced. “Would you like me to activate the view screens?”

“Yes, please,” she replied, her eyes shining in excitement.

I reached over and squeezed her hand, happy to see her like this. Hopefully, this upbeat version of her would last and help her adjust. I knew this was a huge upheaval, as I was also experiencing it. Sure, we’d both enrolled in the mate matching program, but the odds were so slim unless you paid a galaxy- wide service that it was always a cause for celebration when one was found. Even then, you might not find your mate until a new world joined, just as Earth had, and its participation was limited by treaty to the Fleet and occasionally to the council’s extended service. So it was no surprise that we each had thought today would be the same as every day, only with her gaining scholarship funds a little differently than most of her classmates would. A huge change, yes, but I hoped she looked forward to living with me as much as I did her.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:17 am

7

BETTY

When the shuttle arrived, two human males who had to be Chet and Benji greeted Zaneb.

“We thought an early dinner followed by a movie sounded good,” one of them said.

Zaneb gave him a blistering kiss. “Sure does,” he agreed once they broke apart. “I’m off now, so when were you thinking?”

The three of them walked off, discussing their plans as they strolled away, leaving the shuttle to the flight line workers to deal with.

“So, Chet and Benji,” I said, shaking my head.

“Had to be,” Proslo agreed just as a group of Mylos approached us.

“Doctor Proslo, we just heard your good news,” one of them said. “Congratulations to you both.”

“You have been truly star blessed,” a second one said.

“Thank you. This is my mate, Betty.”

A small round of hellos greeted me and I replied back with my own greeting, shifting

my weight to my other foot.

“Let me carry Pumpkin,” Proslo said, and I hesitated.

“Are you sure?”

He gave a low, rumbling chuckle. “I am. He is one small feline in an enclosed carrier, not much trouble at all. You’ve been holding him the entire journey, however, so your arms must be tired.”

I held my hand out wordlessly and he grasped the backpack’s straps, adjusting them so they fit over his shoulders. “I believe this is how it is meant to be worn?”

“Yeah,” was all I could say, loving how cute he looked. This broad shouldered alien male, a sexy silvering fox of a man, peering down as if trying to see my orange cat over his shoulder as he presented his back to me for inspection was a sight I committed to memory.

“Excellent,” he beamed. “Now Pumpkin can get more used to my presence while having a better look around.”

“Uh huh.” I clutched my roses to my chest.

“I love your cat!” the second man exclaimed. “He looks a lot like my Felix!”

“You have a cat?” I asked him, only then hearing how stupid that sounded because hello, he’d just told me that he did.

“Three,” he replied proudly. “And a house rabbit. My mate Jim said he thought we should adopt a dachshund who’s looking for his final home in his old age, so I think we might have a dog soon too, because he’s right. We’re waiting to hear back

though.”

Fuck me. The Mylos were certainly proving their reputation to be true thus far. Advanced tech - check. Kind to animals - check. Faithful romantics - check. I could go on and on, but there was no point. I knew every box would have a green check mark.

Proslo was checking that thing he had on his wrist. At first, I’d thought it was a watch but upon closer inspection, I could see it was some sort of embedded device. He looked at me and smiled again. “I was just checking to see where we should go. Our new quarters are as ready as they’ll be until your furniture arrives. It’s quite a convenient location. We are only two decks away from the main recreational deck and one away from our Med Bay.”

“How far to the shops, and is there a library?”

“You can borrow absolutely any human book in print through the Fleet library,” he responded, “and read it on your tablet. When you go into library mode to read a book or periodical, the nanites adjust so it is the same to your eyes as reading print. If you wish to have a bound paper copy, you will have to order it through the Fleet Shop app unless one of the independent bookshops within the Fleet happens to carry it. If they do, it will show up in your search ahead of the listing in the app.”

“Indie bookstores?” Now I knew I was in heaven.

“Yes, there are a few, run by various mates. The Fleet’s online library is overseen by Xeranos with the help of several other mates, as is the rest of the Fleet Shop.” He palmed open an elevator door and spoke aloud, telling Xeranos where we wanted to go. The doors slid shut and the elevator began to move up.

“That all sounds great, and I can imagine we’d run out of space quickly if all my

books were paperbacks and hardbacks. I tend to read mostly on the e-reader I got myself for Christmas last year. It's not a big name brand or anything and reads epub's and pdf's."

"Whatever those are, I'm sure Xeranos can link it up if you prefer it over a tablet."

"I don't have a Mylos tablet," I pointed out.

"You'll be issued one. Odds are that there's one waiting for you already in our quarters."

I was beginning to wonder if maybe they were a little too efficient. Then I gasped, throwing out a hand to steady myself as the elevator paused before suddenly moving sideways, startling me. I grabbed his arm, causing him to glance down in concern.

"I was not expecting that. The, um, going sideways thing. Elevators on Earth don't do that."

"Ah," he simply replied.

I kept my hand where it was, liking the way his quiet strength helped me feel grounded. The elevator stopped again, this time the door opening to reveal what looked like a really nice apartment or hotel corridor. Polished floors that looked like terrazzo, hanging plants, quality ambient lighting, and absolutely gorgeous wood-look front doors. He brought us to a stop in front of one and pressed his palm onto a polished glass plate with what could be his name or a string of numbers for all I knew, seeing as it was in their alien alphabet. Something I needed to learn, that was for sure, or I'd never figure out which door was ours. It slid open, revealing a well appointed open plan L-shaped living and dining room area plus the kitchen. A small hallway led off of the living room and a quick look showed two bedrooms and a shared bathroom were there. Another door on the far wall of the dining room led to

another bedroom, this one with an en suite jack and jill bathroom shared with another room that looked to be a study judging by the desk and what looked like a computer terminal in there.

I gave a shaky laugh. “Three bedrooms, huh? Guess they really are expecting us to pop out a couple of kids.”

He sat Pumpkin’s carrier down on the desk, opening it to let him out to explore. Pumpkin immediately ran under the desk hissing.

“I feel you are wanting to have a conversation about the possibility of young. Your profile said you’d planned to foster a child, maybe two, and hopefully adopt.”

I swallowed. “Yes. There are so many needy children out there. My best friend in elementary school and junior high was a foster kid who got adopted. It made a big impact on me.” He looked thoughtful, his mouth turning into the tiniest of frowns. “I don’t mind having a child with you as well, though, if that’s what you want,” I hurried to reassure him.

“But is that what you want?” he countered. “This is something we should both want, not something you should do to please me.”

I knew that. I really did, intellectually anyway. It was something that I’d have vehemently told someone else, in fact. But emotionally, when it came to wanting to ensure a happy ever after, even if I had to compromise on something like this? Yeah, that was a different matter, until it suddenly wasn’t. That the change for me was because he said so was something I needed to unpack later, but right now? All I felt was vindication. I hadn’t been wrong all those times.

“It’s your body, so really, in the end, how we have the young we both seem to desire is down to you.

And the lottery wins just kept coming. Damn, I should have bought a roll of scratch off cards this morning when I stopped for gas.

“Can I think about it, maybe consider us making a baby together once I graduate and settle into work? Even if everything went perfectly, pregnancy is a lot on the body and then there’s daycare and night feedings and I think it would be better to not also try to do school or start a new job at the same time.” I bit my lip. “That’ll put me past forty though.”

He made a dismissive gesture. “With our medicine, that’s not going to be an issue. And yes, you make very valid points. So, fostering first?”

I nodded. “I thought an older child maybe, possibly with a younger sibling.”

He beamed. “That sounds wonderful. Your profile also mentioned that you’d planned to apply as soon as you had your apartment set up.”

I swallowed. “Yes. I’ve wanted to be a mom for so long.”

He nodded slowly. “Once we have finished setting up our home, do you still wish to apply immediately? We could take the foster parent classes as soon as you’d like and after that, be matched with a needy child once a home visit is completed.”

“Really? You’d do that? Even though we just got together?”

“Yes. You seem to identify strongly with a need to nurture at least one child. I, too, have dreamed of parenting young. If this is what you wish, then I am all for it, as long as we also make time for ourselves.” He pursed his lips. “Perhaps after the wedding would be best? That can be as soon as you’d like as well.”

I snorted. “Well, I might have Googled Guam and elopement weddings,” I drawled.

“Mrs. Titchmarsh had been quite keen on that location and I have to admit, it looks great.”

“An elopement?” he looked puzzled.

“It’s when a couple run off to get married without a big fancy thing. Just them, the justice of the peace, and a witness, who might be a friend or might be employed by the Justice of the Peace. According to the websites I found, you can pick a day, any day from as soon as the day after tomorrow, depending on the wedding package. Just some flowers and the Justice of the Peace on a public beach, fine. If we wanted a videographer and someone to play a guitar and a cake, then we might have to wait three weeks.”

“I could take a stand and have Xeranos take a vid using a tablet,” he said, looking thoughtful.

“And Mrs. Titchmarsh could be our witness,” I added.

“Do you wish a cake?”

I shook my head. “I say we find a local pastry place and hit it up, and go find some good street food.”

“Then pick your date.”

I stared at him open mouthed. “You’d really go the day after tomorrow?”

“I’d go right now if that’s what you wished.”

I thought about it for all of five seconds. After all, we were literally already married and only needed to consummate it for reasons of their biology. “I’d say we should

skip the wedding since we're already legal and all that, but then I think Mrs. Titchmarsh would find a way to come up here and give me a good what for, seeing as I promised I'd invite her to one. So, I kinda owe her that, even if it was at her own insistence."

He chuckled and Pumpkin peered out from under the desk, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"We might be 'legal' as you put it, but do you feel married right now?"

I blinked. Guess I was a ceremony of some kind as well as a piece of paper kinda gal after all. "No. Let's do it then."

"Xeranos!" he called out.

"Hi, Dr. Proslo!" came the cheery response.

"My mate would like your assistance booking us an elopement package."

"Oh, that sounds fun. Where to and when?"

"Guam, as soon as you can get us there, and by us, I also mean Mrs. Titchmarsh. Just a basic package, Proslo says you can make us a video if he brings a tablet and a stand."

"Cake? Music? Flowers?"

"Just some flowers."

"Soonest available, with a hotel stay of a week is four days from now and it includes wedding photos. That's if a beach wedding is okay. If you want a chapel or a forest,

you're looking at two to four weeks. ”

“Beach, definitely. Do we have to stay a week starting the day of the wedding or can we go earlier?” I asked.

“You could go tomorrow if that’s your wish,” the AI quipped.

I looked at my new mate imploringly. He shrugged.

“Yes, do that,” I told him. Have us check in tomorrow, except for Mrs. Titchmarsh. She can arrive the day before and leave the day after.”

“I’ll contact Lechand and have him give her instructions on how to contact you via your tablet, so she can confirm.”

“So I do have a tablet?”

“Pinging your tablet now, so you can find it,” Xeranos said.

I followed the chiming sounds to the kitchen where I found the tablet sitting on the breakfast bar that divided it from the dining room.

I tapped the flashing icon, thinking that was how to silence it. Apparently it was. “Thanks, Xeranos!” I called out.

“Please, call me Xero. All my friends do. And I’ll send the wedding arrangement confirmations to your kunnarskyn and tablet.”

“Kunnarskyn?”

Proslo held up his arm, showing me his implant. “Ah. That’s like a mini tablet in your

arm huh?”

“Among other things,” he said, nodding.

I blew out an excited breath. This was happening! I was getting married and going to Guam, which was exciting all by itself. I’d never been outside of my home state and look at me now. My life truly had changed on a dime.

PROSLO

Was I pushing for too much, too fast? Perhaps, but then if we had not been a match, she'd already have set into motion these very same things, apart from our wedding and honeymoon. All I'd done was help set her on a path alongside me that put us six weeks or so ahead. Thanks to the treaty and our program's in-depth screening process, anyone applying jumped the line. Of course, there were those who didn't get a match and had a flag placed on their file but those were exceedingly few and far between. In fact, when someone went to book an appointment, they immediately had a thorough background check run by Xeranos for criminal history and such. Depending on what their troubled history revealed, they might not even get as far as getting said appointment.

"I need to find a dress!" she suddenly said, her eyes wide with worry. "Do I even want a white poofy dress? Or, since it's on the beach, wear a sarong?"

She turned beseeching eyes towards me.

"Whatever you choose, you will be radiant."

She snorted and pointed a finger at me. "Nice try, mister, but you aren't side-stepping me like that."

"Perhaps if you come up with a few ideas and show them to me?" I suggested helpfully.

“You have no idea about fashion, do you?”

I shook my head mutely. “I’m usually in uniform,” I reminded her.

She shook her head in dismay. “That’s a cop out, but valid so I’ll give it to you.”

“You are giving me something for my response?” I replied, wrinkling my brow.

“Um, no. That means I’ll concede your point.”

Ah. An idiom, rather like the Commander’s ‘doohickey’, ‘dumaflache’, and ‘thing gummy’. I’d thought he was making a huge joke until I heard Barney Fife use ‘doohickey’ in an episode of Andy Griffith at the suggestion of one of my junior medics. The show was full of useful tips, such as bringing chocolates and candy for your mate.

“I’m going to go sit down on the sofa and see what’s available in that Fleet store place.”

Thank the stars. I really had zero ideas as to what would be appropriate for the occasion. I hoped she found me something suitable as well.

I left Pumpkin to his explorations of my study and our bedroom to go take stock of what we were lacking. The aforementioned sofa was a standard bachelor’s quarters issue which we could return if she had something more suitable, unless she wanted two. A quick look in the kitchen revealed no dishes or cookware, but that was fine. The replicator served the food on individual plates and provided appropriate cutlery if you asked it to when choosing your meal. We could also dine out or order food delivery and again, everything we needed would be included. We’d never have to cook if we didn’t want to.

A chiming sound broke the silence and I held a hand up to let her know that I'd get it. As I'd expected, a crew of casual workers stood there with Pumpkin's supplies. I ushered them in and they made quick work putting it where Betty told them to.

"Your household goods are en-route and will be here in three hours," one of them said before saluting me and ducking back out the door.

"Guess it's not an express," she said wryly.

I shook my head. "It'll be a cargo transport, so not as slow as a regular mixed transport but not as fast as an express."

"Ah, well, I guess tomorrow we'll be unpacking stuff," she sighed.

"They do that for us," I told her. "We just have to tell them where to put it."

Her cheeks pinkened. "I'll unpack my own clothes, thank you!"

"I'm sure that won't be a problem."

"Good. I hope Mrs. Titchmarsh was the one who packed my undies."

I growled, thinking about another male touching something so intimate belonging to my mate. My vision blurred for a split second before resolving into even greater clarity than before and my skin began to itch.

"Whoa, your eyes! They turned black, but are slit like Pumpkin's! Well, not completely black, you still have whites," she babbled.

I rubbed the side of my neck where the itching was currently worse. "My mating display. Parts of my battle form will appear and remain until we complete the bond."

She licked her lips. “Yeah, I’ve heard about that. You’ll get scales too, huh?”

I nodded. “It’s nothing to fear unless we don’t complete the bond before my full form emerges. We’ll have plenty of notice before that happens though, as I’ll go into a fever.”

Her eyes widened almost impossibly wider. “And what does that form look like?” she asked. Then she gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “Oh gawd, that video! The one with the guy everyone called Godzilla Man. That wasn’t a stunt, was it? That was one of you!”

“It was,” I confirmed, “but please keep that to yourself.”

She bobbed her head in agreement. “Was he okay? Did he and his mate manage to ah...complete things?”

I smiled at her reassuringly. “They did indeed.”

She heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, good. And he looks regular now? No battle form, I mean?”

“Mostly. Light scaling and shifted eyes are all that remains.”

She looked immensely relieved.

“And you guys can normally change in and out of that, anyways, like for fighting.”

“Yes. We can do a full or partial shift.”

“Oh, wow. I just realized! I’m mated not only to an alien but a shifter! That’s like two different romance tropes.” She beamed with happiness.

I laughed. "I'm glad you're pleased about that."

"Hell yeah! I love me some monster smut." Her hand flew to her mouth once more. "Shit! Not that I think you guys are monsters for real. That's um, okay, rude now that I think about it, even though that's what it's called a lot of the time in the book reader world. Um, non-human romances sound better. I'll use that from now on, sorry."

"It's fine," I chuckled. "I gathered that's what you meant, but yes, please use non-human instead. We're definitely not monsters, and neither are the other species I've met. There are those individuals with the souls of monsters, but that's as far as it goes."

"Yeah, we have people like that too," she replied glumly.

I bent down and kissed the top of her head, knowing she was thinking about one male in particular. The last unworthy one who tried to claim her as his own and now was facing a lengthy incarceration. "And they can all stay far, far away or face our justice."

She wrapped her arms around me, leaning into me, and I closed my eyes, relishing the press of her body against mine.

"I like the sound of that," she said softly, and I wrapped my arms around her, letting her know that she was here now and she had me and the rest of the Fleet to help keep her safe.

BETTY

Having done the two dollar tour of our apartment, there was nothing else to do but wait. Proslo showed me how to use the tablet to access the Fleet library and I quickly found several books to read. I added them to my reading app, which to my delight I found would sync to my Kindle once I paired it to the Fleet's network. I now could go from one device to another, just like I had with my phone, so now I had three things to read my books with. I'd never be caught without something to read as long as everything remained charged and that pleased me to an almost ridiculous degree. The books from the Fleet library were purchases too, so they did not count against my Kindle Unlimited. Though, seeing as I now had free access to absolutely every book from Earth, I no longer needed that subscription.

That thought led me down another rabbit hole. "Are we able to order from Amazon?" I asked. "And can we access Prime, Hulu, and Netflix?"

He glanced up from where he was sitting on the other end of the long sofa, reading something on his tablet which he'd taken from the desk in his home office.

"Sort of," he confirmed. "The Fleet audiovisual library has free access to your planet's audio and vid catalogues. Though the latest holiday vid releases are now shown for three weeks in pop up viewing centers for something they call 'the cinematic experience'."

"So, I can just use my tablet to watch a movie or a TV show?"

He hummed in affirmation. “Yes, though it is more usual to simply ask Xeranos to play what you wish to watch and have him show it on a wall screen.”

“Like a TV? I have one.”

He grinned. “Similar to one of your portable vid screens, yes.” He turned to look at the wall directly across from us. “Xeranos, please play the next episode of Andy Griffith.”

I don’t know what surprised me the most, the way the wall sort of rippled and the intro to that old show began to play on as if there was an enormous big screen TV there, or the fact that he knew about and apparently enjoyed watching such an old TV show.

“This okay?” he asked me, putting his tablet down on the coffee table.

“Um, yeah, sure.” I knew about this show, yeah, but I had never actually watched it. I glanced down at my tablet longingly for a second, thinking of the Why Choose Romance series I’d always wanted to read but had kept waiting to buy as something else always came up needing my spare cash instead. I hadn’t read a book that wasn’t either free or in Kindle Unlimited in three years thanks to living expenses versus income. Thanks to the Fleet giving me an unlimited book budget, the entire series was now sitting there waiting for me. It would still be there after we watched a couple of episodes, I reminded myself. Plus, if I waited until after the movers left, I could take a soak in that gorgeous tub in the master bedroom’s en suite and relax with my book uninterrupted. I placed my tablet on the table and settled back.

It turned out poor Aunt Bea was a hell of a cook but couldn’t make pickles to save her life. Not and have them be edible, anyway. I’d thought being in black and white, it would be annoying to watch, but again, I found myself pleasantly surprised. After a few moments, my brain stopped fussing over the lack of bright colors and I became

invested in what was happening. It was old fashioned, sure, but charming. We watched two more episodes after that, and when we both laughed at the same time when the deputy lost his mind over something ridiculously trivial and Andy had to calm him down while trying to not roll his eyes at him, we both glanced at the other and exchanged small smiles.

This was nice. It was frightening how comfortable it already felt, sitting in a shared apartment with him, watching TV. It was all too easy to imagine us sitting closer, my head leaning against his shoulder. Or that after he was back to work it wasn't likely to happen all that often. I knew doctors got called all the time. In fact, we'd be lucky if he didn't get called for at least a phone consult while we were on our honeymoon.

"What's that frown for?" he asked me, poking the lines between my eyes playfully.

"I was just thinking how nice this feels, doing this here with you right now. Just the two of us, kicking back and watching TV. Then it occurred to me that you probably don't get time to relax like this too often, being the chief medical officer and all. I know doctors get called a lot about patients."

He hummed thoughtfully. "I do get called if it's a patient who requires my special attention, but since we're in a non combat posting, that does not happen very often. The other medics under my command are exceedingly capable and do not need me to butt into their cases. I do remain on call during my off hours, but that is only in case one of my own patients takes a turn for the worse or one of our top ranking officers or a visiting dignitary needs medical attention."

"So if, say, the Fleet Commander's kid gets, I don't know, appendicitis, they'd call you in on your day off?" That sounded like something that definitely would have a hospital's chief of surgery called in under similar circumstances.

"I'd be notified and might go in to reassure Commander Gundar and his mate, if I

was easily available, yes. I definitely would go in if the Commander was in need of emergency care after a fire on the bridge or something like that. The Fleet medical staff are all highly skilled. I can take time off and be assured that, bar something extreme or politically sensitive, I will not actually have to go in or be disturbed with endless comms.”

“Oh. So, unless there is a huge super duper emergency, you won’t get so much as an email from work then.”

He gave me that hundred megawatt smile of his, showing me his oh so white teeth that were just a little too sharp to be human.

“I will not,” he confirmed. “Instead, I will receive a briefing upon my return about what happened while I was away and our student medics progress reports.”

A doctor with time for family life. Talk about another fantasy ideal being fulfilled.

“I look forward to spending my off duty hours with you and our young when we are granted some.”

Damn, he knew how to hit me right in the feels.

“When I’m home,” I reminded him. “I will have school.”

“You will have assigned course material to complete interactively with Xeranos some days which you will do at home, followed by scheduled days at sickbay for hands-on learning under either myself or one of the chief medics aboard another vessel. Mates are paired with coordinating work schedules to allow for family life.”

“But someone will always need to work the night shift,” I pointed out.

“Those without young or unmated work that rotation.”

“So, if mated, their wife also works that shift.”

“Or husband, yes. Quality of life is of the utmost importance.”

I couldn't imagine how this would work on a planetary scale, but within a closed community such as the Fleet, I supposed it was doable with a lot of juggling things about. It sounded idyllic, for sure. In fact, I was now wondering if this whole deal was a little too perfect. There had to be imperfections somewhere, surely.

He laughed and I realized to my chagrin that I must have said at least the last part out loud. “Of course there are. While Fleet life is structured for optimum life quality and enjoyment, we are all flawed living beings. Squabbles happen, some find themselves getting into mischief and needing to visit the brig for a while, that sort of thing.”

Oddly enough, that did make me feel better. Though hopefully none of the squabbles were of the same nature as what I'd just left behind. I licked my lips. “What happens if it's domestic violence?”

His expression immediately became grave. “There is a zero tolerance policy. I won't deceive you, we do get the occasional case, but thanks to our screening and matching process, I have never heard of any such thing happening between mated Mylos pairs. Such has been confined to the human families living here as part of one of our education and employment programs.”

I nodded, my mouth dry. “Okay.”

He studied my face, searching for signs that I was indeed alright. He didn't look entirely convinced.

“Shall we eat?” he asked, standing. “That way we can face the moving crew with full stomachs.”

“I could eat. I don’t remember seeing any food in the fridge though or anything to cook it with.”

“There’s the replicator or we could go out.”

We’d watched three half hour episodes and the guy had said the movers would be here in three hours. That meant half our time was gone and by the time we decided on a place to eat, got there, ordered, and then ate, we’d be pushing it.

“How about we go out for breakfast and eat replicated space food tonight?” I suggested.

He gave a nod. “We can stop by the food market after and choose items to be delivered afterward.”

“Yeah, sure. Grocery shopping after sounds good,” I replied, following him into the kitchen.

“What would you like to eat?” he asked me, standing in front of the open cabinet looking thing that was the replicator.

“I can order anything at all?”

“You can. If Xeranos doesn’t have the recipe, he can get it for the next time. He’s only had to do that a handful of times as far as I know.”

“So if I asked for Brunswick stew, I could get it?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” I replied decisively. “With saltines on the side to crumble in.”

“Xeranos, a portion of Brunswick stew, please, with a side order of saltines and eating utensils provided.”

“Georgia or Virginia style?” came the Ai’s response.

I had not known there were two kinds. “Um, like what comes in the cans I get from the grocery store, I guess.”

“So less chunky vegetables?” Xeranos asked.

“Oh. I don’t mind it if the veggies aren’t mushy.” I’d always thought they were mushy because the stew came in a discount brand’s can.

“Georgia style it is then,” Xeranos announced and I watched in amazement as light played within the open cabinet and a bowl of steaming stew appeared, along with a soup spoon wrapped in a napkin and a side plate of saltine crackers.

“Wow,” I said, taking my food. “It’s one thing to see that on TV in a sci fi show and another to see it for real in person.”

“What would you like to drink?”

My mom had grown up in Alabama, so I was a sweet tea girl all the way. “A glass of Luzianne sweet tea, decaf,” I replied. I was very particular about my iced tea and I didn’t care who knew it.

The replicator worked its magic again and a glass of iced tea appeared. Proslo

grabbed my drink and led me back into the living room where we could sit down and eat. I pushed the coffee table forward and placed my food onto it before sitting down on the floor so I wouldn't have to bend over awkwardly everytime I wanted a bite. He sat my iced tea down and I took a taste. It was perfectly chilled and I could taste that it was definitely my requested brand of tea.

Proslo left and I heard him ask for the same thing I'd just ordered and he returned to place his food down before disappearing to get his drink. I smiled, seeing he'd copied me in this too.

"Trying new things, huh?"

"I would like to try the things you enjoy," he agreed.

It was sweet, I decided, and made total sense. After all, we'd be cooking meals together soon, and making only one meal would be easier. In fact, everything about him was easier than any of the jerks I'd gone out with before. If I'd met a human guy who'd been this easy going and thoughtful, I'd have kept him, putting a ring on his finger, let me tell you. But I hadn't, and to be honest, except for the whole nasty last date I'd had with Daryll, I didn't regret anything. It had all led me to getting off my ass and going for my RN, and if I was being completely truthful with myself, I might have settled for less than this level of thoughtfulness and caring. Not that I'd have stayed with anyone who was a huge asshole, my track record already proved that. But I'd have compromised while believing that my perfect man was a mere fantasy, and it would have been my great loss.

PROSLO

The movers were right on time. Since my office was the only room we knew for certain wouldn't have anything added to it from her former apartment, we shut Pumpkin inside it to allow free movement in and out. The first things brought in turned out to be three boxes labeled kitchen, which we decided to simply have them leave on the breakfast bar. A chiller box was next, filled with the items found in her refrigerator; those I placed in our own chiller unit so Betty could direct them to where she wanted everything. I wanted her to make this her home and felt that she would feel more as if she had claimed this space as hers if she did so.

"I can't believe they brought half empty mustard and mayonnaise jars," she said, shaking her head as she watched me empty the chiller box. Then she whirled around at a query from one of the casual workers.

"Oh! Um, could someone move the couch already here so it's in front of that side wall over there? Great! Then pop this one right where that was." She wandered off to oversee more placement of furniture being carried in.

I unboxed her clothes, placing them carefully on the bed that was brought in. The bed itself was large enough for two people, even if one was a Mylos such as myself. A pang of jealousy roiled in my gut as I imagined previous lovers she might have shared it with. I squashed that right down, as I knew it was unreasonable. Humans were not like Mylos - they took lovers before settling on a single mate or even two or three in a poly pairing. If they settled into a relationship, that is. Many humans did

not. I also knew my irrational emotions were the result of us not having completed our mating, as evidenced by the accompanying itching as more scales slowly emerged. I knew she was it for me and I for her and that was all that mattered. I got to be her forever and no one except Pumpkin or a young would ever join us in that bed.

She poked her head inside the bedroom, “Is it okay if I claim part of the dining room for my desk and a bookcase?”

“If you wish, you could share my office. I only use it to catch up on paperwork or compose progress reports for my students and minor things like that.” I flashed her a smile. “A lot of the time I actually do most of that using my tablet while relaxing on the sofa. The office was a fancy of mine from my becoming the Fleet Chief Medical Officer.”

She laughed. “I was just thinking that if it was in the dining room, I could be on hand to keep tabs on the kid when it gets here, even if I’m studying.”

I gave her a nod. “If that is your preference, then by all means. Just know if you need a quiet space to study, the office is there to use.”

“Okay, great. Plus, with the desk in the main living area, if they have homework, we can make sure they do it.”

She made an excellent point, so I copied what I’d seen my human medics do from time to time to signal approval - I lifted my hand and curled my fingers inward, thrusting my thumb into the air.

She laughed. “Did you just give me a thumbs up? I didn’t know Mylos did that.”

I grinned back at her, pleased that the gesture made her so happy. “I learned it from humans on my staff.”

“Giving thumbs up, watching retro TV, giving a girl flowers and chocolate, just look at you go,” she beamed before turning around to let the males know where to place the desk.

Two and half hours later, the movers were gone, the cat freed, and everything was in place, including the kitchenware and her clothes. Pumpkin jumped onto the bed, staring at us angrily after his temporary captivity.

“Oof, I’m bushed,” she muttered, flopping backward onto the bed after hanging up the last blouse. “I could just sleep right here.”

I smiled down at her. “Then you should take a nap. I can prepare dinner after.”

“If we were back on Earth, I’d suggest we get a pizza delivered or maybe some Chinese.”

“I saw a pack of frozen pizza when I put the food away.”

Her face brightened. “Did you? Cool! We can have that, then, unless you want to replicate something else.”

“The pizza is fine.”

She yawned. “Maybe we can have some salad with it. We can replicate one, right? And some brownies with ice cream for dessert.”

I nodded as her eyes slid shut and she began to gently snore. I went into the living room where I’d seen a soft fuzzy blanket draped over the back of her deeply upholstered sofa. I carried that back into the bedroom and covered her with it as Pumpkin stood and stretched, looking at me with consideration.

“Mreowww,” he complained, following me out of the bedroom.

I checked his dishes. He had both food and water still from earlier. Then I remembered seeing a packet of cat treats amongst the shelf stable food items. Perhaps he wished one of those, to cheer himself up from missing out on seeing everything unfold. I quickly located the package, shook some into the palm of my hand, and crouched down, offering it to him. He moved swifter than I’d expected, making a loud rumbling noise as he greedily scarfed down the small biscuits. He began to plaintively beg for more and I decided that perhaps this was a good way to make friends with him as he was openly approaching me now. I poured some more out and he made short work of those as well. He began to head butt with apparent affection, so I took the packet with me and settled into the soft cushions of the new to me sofa. I’d closed the bedroom door behind me, so I could safely watch a documentary on the care of cats, I decided. Pumpkin was important to her, so he was to me as well. Betty referred to him as her fur baby, meaning that he was like a young to her, and so, I knew I already had a son of sorts. I rather liked the idea and looked forward to parenting him. I just needed to make certain I knew what to do to keep him safe and healthy.

Pumpkin chirped, looking up at the screen as various felines appeared. I shook out a few more treats and he settled into my lap, making that sound I now knew was called a purr. He began kneading my trousers, which for some inexplicable reason the documentary referred to as ‘making biscuits’. I looked down at him, stroking his little orange striped head, and froze. Why were his pupils dilated like that?

I paused the documentary. “Xeranos,” I asked nervously. “What common item that can be found in our quarters would cause a pet cat’s eyes to dilate? It looks almost as if he’s been drugged.”

“Treats filled with catnip or valerian are common culprits,” came the swift reply.

I glanced down at the now empty packet of cat treats. “With tuna, cheese, and catnip,” I read aloud, swallowing. “Thanks, Xeranos. It’s the treats I gave him.”

“You’re only supposed to offer a very small amount to them, even if they don’t contain catnip or valerian,” Xeranos informed me. “They are quite high in calories.”

I felt dreadful. I’d already been a bad cat dad. I’d gotten our fur baby high as a kite and I hoped my bride would forgive me.

“How do I detox him safely?”

“No need. He’ll either sleep it off and get the munchies or will zoomie it off, or a combo of both. Just don’t give him any more treats for today.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “So it’s safe to wait out the effects?”

“Yes,” came the affirmative reply.

“How long?”

“A few hours at most.”

Thank the stars. With any luck, Pumpkin would be sober when Betty woke up. I carefully moved him off of my lap, so I could dispose of the empty packet. I would confess to her later, of course. Once I was certain Pumpkin was all right, I amended to myself mentally. Hopefully, she would see a funny side to it. Despite my best effort, Pumpkin woke as I stood up. His eyes flew open and he got a crazed look on his face. And then I discovered precisely why they called it the zoomies.

BETTY

Our hands brushed as we walked from the elevator into the entertainment deck where an honest to God public park filled with grass, trees, bushes, and a children's play park stood, surrounded on all sides by restaurants and cafes and shops, Proslo informed me. It felt natural to slip my hand into his, and I was determined to not overthink why that was. We'd been determined a perfect psychological and genetic match, after all, by a really advanced and sophisticated set of algorithms. It was probably just us really gelling and something to do with pheromones. Yeah, we were medical professionals, but we were both into building our relationship, not treating it like a science project.

"Oh!" I said, stopping to point at a cafe with a sign proudly proclaiming it to be 'Quarter Bites'. "Are those beignets?" A quick glance at the menu board informed us that yes, they were indeed and also that Cafe du Monde chicory coffee was served there. "Can we eat here?"

He smiled, nodding even as his eyes looked around for an empty table. The ones outside facing the park were all full, but he quickly spotted one inside being vacated. We made a beeline for it and a waitress hurriedly came to take our order.

She left only to shortly rematerialise with our pastries and coffees and I took a sip, closing my eyes as the glorious caffeine hit my system.

"I have a confession to make," he said.

I opened my eyes. “You don’t like the coffee?” I asked, wondering if this was the first time he’d ever had coffee of any sort.

“No, that’s fine.” He looked decidedly nervous. “There was, ah, an incident with Pumpkin last night.”

“An incident?” What was he even talking about? Pumpkin had seemed fine when I got up, a little zoomie but that was to be expected with all the upheaval.

He swallowed. “I gave him too many cat treats,” he confessed, looking crestfallen and staring down at his beignet.

“You gave him too many - oh.” Suddenly the zoomies made even more sense. I laughed. “I bet that’s made you his new best friend.”

“I am sorry for drugging our fur young.”

Wow. He was taking this hard.

“Hey,” I said, reaching a hand across the table to cover his. “It’s okay. Thank you for telling me and I know you’ll be more careful next time. But honestly, he’s eaten all the catnip out of a stuffed mouse toy and gotten high from it more than once. It’s not dangerous or anything.”

He took a deep breath. “You are not angry?”

I shook my head. “Nah. Shit happens. You two have bonded and he got over being stressed about the move. Win-win, am I right?”

He looked thoughtful. “He did seem to recover well and was confidently moving about our quarters this morning. He seems to have staked out the sofa from my old

quarters as his own.”

“Exactly.”

Damn, he was so cute. I took a bite of my beignet, falling for him a little bit harder. How could I not, after seeing how invested he was in Pumpkin? I just knew the child we’d get would be lucky to have him in their life. I certainly knew that Pumpkin and I certainly had hit the jackpot.

“So,” I said, changing the subject, “We don’t need to buy much food-wise, huh? Seeing as we’re leaving so soon for the wedding and all.”

“We should stick to shelf stable foods and those that remain in the cold stasis compartment,” he agreed. “We can replicate anything else as needed.”

My mind took a split second to translate that into canned and frozen food only.

“Any preferences?”

“I’d like to get some sporka from my homeworld,” he replied. “It is typically slow roasted in broth and I believe the thing you called a Crockpot would work wonderfully.”

“Sporka? What kind of critter is that?”

He tapped his kunnarskyn before proffering his arm for me to take a look. If the world’s ugliest chicken had a turkey fertilize an egg and the baby grew up and mated a pig, this feathered and pig snouted thing would be their offspring.

“I bet it tastes like chicken,” I joked.

“I am told it reminds humans of duck, but without being as oily.”

Okay, I could deal with that. “Sure, let’s get one. I’ll try it.” After all, he’d taken one look at the sparse amount of toppings on the frozen pizza and replicated more to add to it, then apparently asked Xeranos what kind of salad one usually ate with pizza and presented me with a gorgeous bowl filled with romaine, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, grated mozzarella, cheddar, and gouda cheeses, along with an entire set of tiny bowls filled with different salad dressings. As if that wasn’t enough, when dessert time arrived, there were blonde and fudge brownies as well as peanut butter and chocolate ones, all of them warm and with French vanilla ice cream to scoop out onto the top. The least I could do was try this thing that tasted like duck.

He beamed and we finished our breakfast before taking a leisurely stroll through the park. His scales were more in evidence this morning, something I’d not noticed until now as he’d slept on the sofa and showered and changed in the other bathroom this morning in order to give me my space.

Tonight, I decided. Tonight, I’d make us a candlelit dinner and take him to bed. Heat pooled deep in my belly at the thought of his strong arms around me, those plush lips licking and sucking my skin, us kissing. My panties grew damp and his nostrils flared. He let out a low growl and I gave his hand a squeeze.

“Is that the supermarket?” I asked, pointing.

“If we weren’t already here and so far from our quarters, I’d take care of your need,” he rumbled.

I gave him a saucy look. “Oh, you’re on, big guy. Tonight.”

Heat flared in his eyes and he heard the promise in my voice.

12

PROSLO

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to read for a bit while we wait for the groceries to arrive,” my bride said, picking up her Kindle.

I felt relieved that she wished to amuse herself for a short while, actually. Not that I didn’t want to spend time in her company, but I really needed to get with Michik and get him up to speed so he could ensure my duties were covered. As Assistant Chief Medical Officer, he was, of course, a very competent male and our medical staff were among the best in all the Fleet, so I knew I was leaving things in very competent hands. That didn’t mean that he didn’t need to be given details to allow him and the others to do the very best job possible.

“That sounds great, actually,” I admitted. “I need to go to Sickbay and meet with my second and do a handover.”

“Oh! Right, because you were on your day off and came straight to get me and all that.” She smiled. “Will you be back in time for lunch?”

I gusted out a sigh. “A late one, yes.”

She patted her stomach. “After eating two beignets and having three cups of coffee, I’m good for quite a while, so I’ll wait for you then.”

I pressed a kiss to her temple. “I’m sorry. You’ll have to put the shopping away by

yourself.”

“Well, I gotta tell you, I am pretty darn good at putting groceries away. Been doing it for years, yup, sure have.”

I chuckled. “I’ll make it as brief as I can and hurry back to your side.”

She shoved at my arm playfully. “Go on, away with you. The faster you get there, the sooner you can get back. And I gotta figure out how to sync this to the Fleet Library system without losing what I’ve borrowed this month already.”

“You could read using your tablet,” I pointed out, straightening up and smoothing down my trousers. I hadn’t bothered wearing a shirt today, as I wasn’t going planetside nor was I treating any patients today.

“That’s cool and all, but this feels more familiar.”

I nodded in understanding, palming the door sensor to go out. “If you need anything, just ask Xeranos. Simply say his name aloud first to get his attention.”

“Maybe he can make sure I’m syncing this correctly,” I heard her mutter as the door closed behind me.

Several minutes later, I entered Sickbay.

“Chief Proslo!” Lillian gasped, seeing me. “I thought you’d gotten matched? And wasn’t today your day off anyway?”

I smiled at her. “I’m here to see Michik and hand off my cases for the next two weeks.”

“Oh! Yes, that makes sense. He should be right out. He was just giving Darla a check up.”

As if on cue, one of the exam room doors opened and Commander Gundar’s very pregnant mate waddled out.

“We’ll see you again in two weeks,” Michik told her and she nodded. “We’ll send the appointment time to your tablet before the end of today.”

“Thank you, Michik. I’ll try to get Gundar to come along since you’ll be doing the 4-D scan.” Darla caught sight of me and smiled widely. “Chief Proslo, how is newly mated life treating you?”

I grinned back at her. “Very well. We’re off tomorrow for an elopement followed by our honeymoon, so I thought it best if I came to do handover with this male here sooner rather than later.”

“Likthir,” Michik called out to one of our senior medics, “go check on our post surgical patient in Alpha wing, please.”

“On it.” Likthir hurried off. “There, everything else can be handled by Lillian and the rest of the team while we speak in the conference room.”

We adjourned to the indicated room and I quickly apprised him of my upcoming appointments and existing active cases who’d been admitted.

“Well, I was already up to date on most of these, seeing as I’ve been covering your two regular days off. Don’t concern yourself with a thing. Sickbay will be in good order when you return.”

I clapped him on the shoulder as I stood up to leave. “I never had a moment’s doubt.”

“Have one of those fruity umbrella drinks for me,” he replied. “They’re sweet but satisfying.”

“I will,” I promised him. Any particular one I should try?”

“Whatever they say their signature one is. You can’t go wrong then,” he advised. “Especially if it has rum in it.” He licked his lips and I decided to bring him back a bottle of local rum if possible as a thank you.

“I’m going to quickly go round and say good-bye to my patients,” I told him. I wanted them to hear about my taking leave from me and not find out when I simply never showed back up. That would have been unprofessional.

I was done a lot sooner than expected and decided to stop and pick up a fresh bouquet of flowers for my own blossom of humanity. I also stopped by Taco Taco and picked up some lunch as a sort of apology for leaving her alone the rest of the morning and part of the early afternoon. Okay, a very small part, but still. It was only our second full day of mating and I’d gone into work. I felt like a terrible mate.

Reaching our front door, I steeled myself, determined to show her how much I treasure her and regretted having to leave her for even such a short time. Remembering how I’d seen it done in the vids, I went over the mental checklist, eager to not miss a thing. Flowers, check. Food so she didn’t feel as if she had to cook or replicate anything or feel bad that I came home from work and did so, check. That left only one thing left to do - go inside and greet her. I opened the door and stepped inside.

“Honey, I’m home!”

BETTY

I 'd let my anxiety about techy stuff get the better of me, as usual. Xeranos, who'd told me to call him Xero from now on, had been kindly patient as he walked me through the ridiculously easy process of syncing my Kindle to the Fleet's Library. I'd even replaced my KU borrowed books with editions from the Library. I felt pretty silly afterwards, seeing as the entire process had been so simple.

That done, I'd replicated myself a blueberry and vanilla frappe and settled back down into my Papasan chair to start reading the first in the Fire and Stone romantasy trilogy. I was so deeply engrossed in the story, that I didn't notice the door open and Proslo come in until he I heard his deep voice call out, "Honey, I'm home!"

I stared at him over the top of my Kindle, a grin teasing the corners of my mouth. He'd gone all sixties sitcom on me again, with that greeting and a bouquet of flowers. Then my nose twitched and my stomach grumbled. "Do I smell Mexican food?" I demanded, my eyes falling straight to the bag he held in his other hand.

He smiled proudly. "I got us lunch from Taco Taco."

"Tacos! You absolute angel!"

I put down my ereader and jumped up, making grabby hands. "Give me the precious!"

He looked baffled, holding out both hands to me. I took the bag of food and started for the kitchen. “I’ll grab us some plates,” I called out. “Grab a pitcher from the cupboard and put those in some water. I don’t think either of us owned a vase.”

“I can replicate one,” he replied, following me into the kitchen. I pulled out two plates and watched as he ordered a vase full of water with food for the flowers already in it. One appeared and he carefully unwrapped the flowers and placed them inside it.

“Stick them on the table,” I suggested, going to put the plates on the dinette table I’d indicated.

“You have a seat,” he murmured, placing the vase of flowers in the center. “I’ll bring us something to drink.”

He left, returning quickly with two sweet teas. I was touched at him remembering what I’d said the day before.

“Thanks. I’ve put two on each plate and figured we could just split the rest between us if we’re still hungry.”

He nodded. “I’d hoped you would like tacos. I understand from the humans I know that tacos are supposedly life.”

“Yep, especially if it’s a Tuesday,” I quipped. And then I found myself having to explain the whole Taco Tuesday thing.

“I see. So it started off as a restaurant promotion and became a whole general thing about the eating of tacos,” he said, adding sour cream and guacamole onto his second one before taking a bite.

“Yup,” I replied cheerfully, “And , um, I put that sporka into the freezer. I knew we wouldn’t have time to cook it in the crockpot for today and we fly down tomorrow.” To be honest, I wasn’t even sure why I even owned a crockpot. I was not the domestic goddess sort and this was a large, family sized crockpot, far too big for a single person. Though I guess Proslo made two and when we got a foster kid or two, it would come in handy for days we didn’t want to eat replicated food. Which, for the record, I was not against eating. Nope. Less prep and clean up, which suited me down to a t.

“That’s perfect, thank you. Did you decide what we will wear?”

“I decided to see what they sold in the fancy hotel shop,” I told him. “I figure since it’s a rich people kind of resort, they’ll be bound to have something nice enough. I mean, it’s a beach wedding that’s an elopement. We could go in bathing suits and it’d be fine.”

He arched an eyebrow at me.

“Okay, yes. I want us in something a bit nicer than just swimsuits, but you feel me.”

His gaze grew predatory and I felt my face heat as I realized what I’d just said. “Oh. You’d like to do that, wouldn’t you?” I purred. “Feel me, I mean.” I threw caution to the wind. Forget a candlelit dinner. He looked pretty onboard now. I’d taken my shoes off earlier, which made what I was about to do next so much easier.

His pupils dilated and he set down his taco, nostrils flaring, as he felt me nudge his balls with my toes.

“Betty,” he rumbled in warning.

I took a sip of my tea, fluttering my eyelashes at him. “Yes?”

“Unless you wish me to pick you up and take you to our room to consummate our-”

“Yes, please,” I purred, abandoning the rest of my meal. Hopefully Pumpkin would leave the food alone so it would be there later. If not, there was always the replicator. I was sure it could make us some more if asked.

His hands balled into fists as he tried to control his motions.

“You need to be certain,” he rasped. “I have been trying to give you time to get to know me better, in the way of your people.”

“Uh huh. And that’s really sweet. But I’m a put out on the third date kind of gal and not ashamed of it. Besides, we’re already Mylos married.”

“Th-third date?”

“Mmhmm. First one was watching TV last night. Second one was breakfast. Now, this is our third. You brought me flowers and everything.” I stood up, pushing my chair back. I sashayed towards the door to our room, glancing back over my shoulder to crook my finger at him. “You coming, big guy, or what?”

He scrambled up so fast, the chair hit the floor, startling us both as well as Pumpkin, who got up from the cat tree and streaked away towards one of the back bedrooms.

“Oh, I’m going to come alright,” he promised. “But not until after you do.”

PROSLO

I 'd known from her profile that my Bride was a strong woman. Her last male had dared to lay hands on her and Pumpkin, kicking the poor cat and slapping her. He'd broken the vid viewer - no, they called it a television - that she'd had and damaged her coffee table. Yet both she and the feline had emerged victorious against him, and she had made sure he faced justice. She was brave - determined to not live in fear after what he had done, going to the scholarship center to secure the future she wanted, even while knowing she might be matched and have to alter her plans. Now she was here, with me, and both she and Pumpin kept showing me how much they trusted me. It was a gift, one I was going to ensure I never lost.

Right this second, that trust had her acting like a goddess, calling me after her to seal a pact with our bodies, an act that would finish entwining our souls together until the very stars became nothing but dust drifting through the vastness of space.

I followed her, my mouth feeling suddenly too crowded as my fangs elongated in anticipation of placing the mating bite upon her fair skin.

She gave a throaty laugh before reaching for the hem of her shirt, grasping it tightly in order to pull it right over her head. I growled and she flicked open the button of her pants, quickly shoving them off before climbing up onto the bed. Turning around, she gave me a wink.

“Whatcha waiting for, hmm?”

I stalked forward, my claws poking through my fingertips. That was fine. It made taking off that annoying scrap of fabric hiding her luscious breasts from my gaze all the easier. I reached out with a forefinger, hooking the bit of cloth between the two cups, and sliced through it as if it was butter.

She gasped.

“Ohh, you animal,” she breathed, licking her lips. “That was seriously hot.” She shrugged a strap off one shoulder, then the other. “But if you keep doing that, I will have to buy more bras.”

“Or go without,” I rasped, leaning down to take one rosy nipple into my mouth. She groaned, her hands cupping the back of my head as if to hold me in place, arching into me. I tongued her now rigid nipple before kissing it and fighting her hold just enough to turn my attention to her other one. I reached down with my hands, slicing her panties off of her hip.

“Yes, have me. All of me,” she gasped.

I reared my head back so I could free myself enough to take a half step back in order to remove my boots and trousers. She watched my every move, setting back onto the pillows and toying with a nipple using one hand, the other circling her clit.

My cock sprang free, already hard and leaking at the tip.

She groaned. “Oh, those scales look like they will feel real good.”

I stepped free of my trousers and began to stroke my erection, spreading the precum from the tip down along my length.

“That’s the idea,” I rasped.

“You’re so beautiful,” she told me.

I shook my head. Did she not know what a goddess she was? Those bountiful breasts, that soft rounded belly, thick thighs, and a plush ass to grab onto while I pounded into her? She was a divine being and I was blessed by the stars to have been made to be hers.

I climbed onto the bed, arranging myself between her knees.

“What are you - Mmmnnn,” she moaned as I nosed her fingers out of my way in order to suck her clit into my mouth. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph on a pogo stick!” she shouted. “Keep doing that!”

I had no idea who any of those people were nor what a pogo stick was, nor why they’d be on one, and certainly was clueless how it related to me eating her pussy. I did understand that she didn’t wish me to stop, so I sucked harder.

Her hands returned to the top of my head, grasping the strands of my hair tight enough to pull. The small bite of pain fed into the pleasure of tasting her salty yet sweet juices, and I began to lap at her wet cunt, heightening it.

“Yes, yes, like that,” she chanted breathily. I willed my claws back, sliding a finger in alongside my tongue. “Hah....”

Another finger joined the first, and I began to gently stretch her, needing to make sure she was loose enough to take my girth without pain.

“I need you. Just fuck me already,” she demanded.

I lifted my face to look at her.

“Not yet. I’m bigger than a human male.”

“If a vagina can pass a whole baby’s head, I’ll be fine! I’m no virgin!”

“And it’ll feel even better,” I said, adding a third finger and began pumping them all in and out, “if I loosen you up a bit first.”

She whined in desperate want, glaring at me. I pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, slipping in my pinky. I gave my hand a few more pumps, then pulled it free, licking it clean of her juices. “Okay, now,” I said, slicking myself up by placing my cock between her folds and rutting against her for a few moments before placing my cockhead at her entrance.

I had meant to push in slowly. I should have known she was not going to have any of that. I no sooner was notched against her entrance and just starting to push in, when she clamped her heels against my lower back and used them to leverage herself so she could impale herself.

“Move!” she demanded, her tone imperious and eyes narrowed.

Yes, she was a strong woman, who was not going to let any male dictate to her it seemed, not even in this. I granted her wish, pulling back slightly before slamming back inside. Her heels pulled me forward everytime I pulled back, our bodies moving in perfect sync.

The room filled with the sounds of skin hitting against skin, the bed frame squeaking along. I watched mesmerized as her breasts bounced and jiggled. I fell onto my forearms, needing to taste her. Our lips met and I kissed and nipped and sucked at her lips, her chin, her neck, until I felt a tingling in my balls heralding an impending climax. I reached down and pinched her clit.

“Come for me, baby,” I breathed in her ear before licking the spot at the juncture of her shoulder and neck and biting down.

She let out a primal scream of pure pleasure so intense it bordered on agony, back arching, heels holding me tight against her pelvis. Her walls strangled my cock and that was all it took. My own orgasm crashed over me as I felt hers.

15

BETTY

H oly shit balls. I'd heard it called 'the little death' before now, but it wasn't until I just experienced one with him that I knew that was a mere exaggeration. I'd felt my soul leave my body for a moment there, and I'd swear to that in court on a stack of whatever they asked me to swear or affirm on. None of my boyfriends had ever given me an orgasm. Sex had felt good, don't get me wrong, but like with everything else about them, they had been failures. My fingers and toys of course always managed to find my clit just fine, so I hadn't minded too much seeing as I could give myself orgasms. Those were a pale imitation of what I'd just experienced.

His concerned face filled my vision as I opened my eyes.

"Are you alright?" he asked me, both his voice and face filled with concern.

"Yeah," I replied, sounding as drunk as I felt. "Peachy. I definitely wanna go on that ride again."

His eyes crinkled up at the corners, and I watched mesmerized as the scales on the skin there caught the light. They had a lovely shimmer to them. "So pretty." I reached a hand up to touch them. "And soft." I darted my other hand out and grasped his now soft cock. "Soft but so good." I giggled. "S like ribbed for my pleasure only not."

His eyes dropped to my neck. "You're barely bleeding, so I don't think you've lost

enough blood for this reaction,” he murmured.

I returned to full clarity as the memory of that hit me.

“You bit me!” I said, my hand letting go of his dick to fly to the tender spot on my neck. “Like a goddamn vampire!”

“It was my claiming bite,” he said.

“Yeah, but wow, it was like bam! Needle teeth going in with a sharp sting then hello, fun stuff making it feel good and shooting straight to all my lady parts. Is there some kind of venom?” I wasn’t mad. I had, after all, known there would be a bite. It had been in the information packet I’d been given back at the center.

“In my saliva. Yes. But only during our initial mating because I have to bite hard enough to leave a scar.” He looked far too apologetic for my liking.

“No, don’t you dare look at me like you’re sorry. It’s hot as hell that your beast needed to mark me as part of sealing the deal.”

“Beast? It was all me.” He looked adorably confused now.

“Oh, you definitely turn into a beast,” I told him, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “You look pretty human until you go all scaly, and can go all Godzilla man when really ready to rumble. And not in the fun sexy way, but with bad guys.”

“You mean my battle form, which our mating display is a much less advanced form of.”

“Yes. You, my dear, are a monster fucker fantasy reader’s wet dream. If you guys did ads showing off in mating display form, especially baring fangs and showing a little

claw, day-um. You'd have to hire extra staff for the centers to process all the damned applications."

"You think I am a monster?" he reared back.

"Remember what I'd explained before? That just is the general term for a non-human used in smutty bookworld. Your cock though," I licked my lips, glancing down at it. "Now that's a monster all right. I want to go again, but I think I need a good soak and a bit more patience so you can stretch me more before we get that anywhere near my hoohah again."

He let out a low rumble of amusement. "Noted. Shall I draw you a bath now?"

"You, sir, are a prince among men."

He stood up, shaking his head. "I'm just a normal male. The ones you've engaged with before have merely been extremely poor specimens."

I laughed at his retreating back. "You're not wrong!" I called after him. They had all been shitty, some more than others obviously, with Daryll taking the Grand Shit Stain trophy. But he was also wrong. There was nothing normal about him at all. He was extraordinary. So much so, that I was in danger of not sticking to the idea I'd kinda had all along of us being married and mated but remaining friends. I was fast losing my heart to him, piece by piece. Teeny tiny ones, but he was chipping away at me.

The truly scary part? I wanted to give it to him. He was my perfect match, after all. My soul mate. The one being in all the universe my heart should be safe with. But I just couldn't hand it over so soon. It was ridiculous, but then again, I was judging things from a human perspective and damn it, there were people who claimed they fell in love at first sight and found they were each other's other half and stayed married for fifty or more years, happy as clams. Maybe I needed to take a page from

my romantasy books. Mylos biology was different from human, and they did relationships differently. Maybe if I treated him as if we were in one of those and he was a shifter, I'd be able to wrap my head around things better. Maybe. If I didn't let my past relationships hold me back. And didn't that just leave a sour taste in my mouth at the thought of those guys yet again standing between me and my potential happy ever after.

"It will take a few minutes to fill as it is quite deep," Proslo said, coming out of our bathroom. "I had Hina add healing salts to the water."

"Hina?"

"Our personal bathroom attendant AI. She analyzes our waste, dispenses things such as healing salts and can replicate advised supplements and medications, such as vitamins and medicated mouth rinses. There are several variations of the program in use and they can travel from posting to posting with us."

"So a fancy home medical Alexa."

"Only much more advanced."

Well, duh.

"I have fitted the bath pillow and will go make you a coffee to enjoy while you soak."

"Bring me my Kindle while you're out there, would you?" It was waterproof, being one of the newer ones.

"But of course."

He left then, taking yet another tiny piece of me with him.

PROSLO

We had successfully completed our mating bond, but I could still feel my bride holding herself apart from me. Not physically, but emotionally. I seethed at how battered her soul was from the damage done by the inconsideration of the previous males and the violence of the last before me.

Pumpkin had ignored our meal so she'd asked me to warm them up once she'd gotten out of the bath. I'd done so and later she grinned with delight as she replicated something I'd seen in the vids as a prime meal shared with loved ones - meatloaf and mashed potatoes with a side of green beans. She even served us peach cobbler afterwards. This meal told me all I needed to know - she was as committed to me as I was to her, and while I had already fully given myself to her, heart and soul, she was carefully unwrapping hers because she still felt a need to mentally shield herself. It stung, but I understood it. She understood she was safe with me and felt the same draw of our bond, but emotionally, her scars had yet to heal enough to fully share herself. That was fine. I was a patient male and as she got to know me better, she'd become increasingly more comfortable. Our shared affection for our fur young, Pumpkin, would help draw us ever closer, as would our love for the young human social services would bring us. We would become a true family, hearts and souls fully bound together into one joyful unit. Simply had to give it all time.

Today was, as they said in the vids, a red letter day for us. Today we eloped together so that tomorrow, we could have our human ceremony, adding another layer to our bond. The ride down was not in one of the express shuttles this time, but we were in a

close enough orbit to Guam that the journey was only just over two hours long. It would have only been an hour at most if we'd gone to Hawaii instead as we were geosynchronous with Honolulu.

Betty had decided that our time travelling was spent watching a vid called The Wedding Singer. She found it amusing and while I thought it had a few amusing moments, mostly I was aghast. Was that what most weddings were like for humans? I now better understood why she wished to elope. Normal human weddings looked tedious and full of unfortunate personal interactions with guests and participants alike during what they called a reception. Which apparently was about getting drunk enough to vomit, having sex with your mate or even someone else who definitely wasn't, and making questionable moves on a dance floor to songs being sung by people who couldn't otherwise make a living in the music industry.

"Look, she's already here!" Betty crowed in delight as we exited the shuttle at the Dusit Thani. She ran forward, arms outstretched towards the older female hurrying towards us.

"Betty!" the other woman shouted, kissing her on the cheek. "You know, I was joking when I said to go to Guam, but I'm not complaining. This place is pretty swanky!"

"Are you serious?" Betty replied, eyes wide. "Are you saying you pulled Guam out of your ass?"

Mrs. Titchmarsh laughed. "Kinda. I'd seen it on the cover of one of those magazines for retired people at the doctor's office. It was one of the 'less traveled destinations to paradise' they did an article on."

Betty giggled. "Well, it is pretty hot here, so maybe that's why."

“Let’s go inside,” I said, urging them both towards the lobby. “It will be much cooler inside.”

“You should see the oceanside pool,” Mrs. Titchmarsh gushed. “I plan to put my wrinkly ass in my bathing suit and go for a swim.”

“That sounds heavenly.” Betty turned a wistful look towards me.

“We can do that, but only if you both put on a high factor sunblock that is water resistant,” I replied.

“Yes! Wait - did we bring any?”

“They sell it in the shop,” Mrs. Titchmarsh said. “I went and bought a bottle. I’ve been here almost an hour. It was expensive too. Probably because it’s reef safe and this is a fancy pants place.”

“I hope you charged it to your room,” I said.

“Yeah, the guy asked me if I was the lady who came on the shuttle and did that.”

“Good. All of your expenses are covered. If you wish to leave the resort, please let me know. I have a card to use for that.”

“I like the sound of that,” she cackled, following us inside. “A truly all expenses paid vacation. Even if it is only three days, it’ll be the best one I’ve ever had.”

“You’ll have to come up and visit us,” Betty told her. “The ship we’re on is truly amazing. There’s this one deck that’s got to be several stories tall and it has a sky with clouds that move and breezes and has a park with real trees and grass and everything.”

“There are several parks on board, all with playgrounds,” I murmured before coming to a stop in front of the check-in desk.

“That sounds amazing,” I heard the older female tell my bride before I tuned out the rest of their conversation in order to focus on my interaction with the desk clerk.

“Dr. Proslo, I presume?” the male quipped as if finding his words witty for some reason.

“Yes, and my bride, Betty.”

“Betty Lewis, yes, I have you both right here,” he said, the keyboard clacking quietly as his fingers flew across the keyboard.

“You’re on the thirtieth floor,” he said, handing me a set of room keys. “Ramon will bring up your bags...” his voice trailed off as he took in the lack of luggage, unless you counted Pumpkin’s carrier as one.

“You do realize there is an extra charge for the cat?” he said, recovering from his surprise.

“I do. That’s fine,” I smiled at him in what I hoped was a reassuring manner. Our mating was still new enough that I kept my teeth carefully hidden, all too aware that they were still a bit sharper than most humans were likely to be comfortable with. I hadn’t missed the way his eyes kept straying towards my scales.

“Excellent. Um, as I was saying, once your luggage arrives, Ramon will bring it up.”

“No luggage,” Betty told him breezily. “We decided to buy everything here. We can bring the clothes home with us, as practical souvenirs.”

He blinked. “I see.” His smile widened. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find what you need to outfit yourselves. Just take the walkway over there to The Plaza, where you will find a variety of shops and places to eat.”

“That’s where I found the shop I got the sunscreen from. I thought that mall was part of the resort.” This from Mrs. Titchmarsh.

“Oh, goodness no.”

“Well, the gentleman asked me for my room number so he could charge it.”

“Were you at the small pharmacy, by any chance? The one closest to the entrance?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “We do have an arrangement with them for that. You’ll wish to make sure you have money at the rest of the stores, however.”

“I’ll give you one of the cards,” I told her, reaching into my trousers’ pocket to pull out the slim card case the quartermaster had had waiting for us at the shuttle this morning. “They gave me three.”

“I’ll not splurge too much,” she giggled, “and give it back to you before I go home.”

I smiled down at her. “I know you will and please, don’t feel you need to be cheap.”

“Oh, he’s definitely a keeper,” she told Betty.

“Good thing, because we’re already mated,” Betty laughed.

“Could you recommend a place to eat?”

“I might be able to get you reservations at the Taotao Tasi Beach Dinner Show,” he replied. “Most of our guests recommend it, and it has excellent reviews.”

That would sort out our evening meal and tonight’s entertainment quite nicely, I decided.

“Yes, please.”

“For two or three?”

“Three.”

“Should I call your room or text the number we have for you to let you know if I’ve been successful?”

“Text please. We’ll go up and let the cat out, then we’re going shopping for sunscreen and clothes.”

“Just so you know, we don’t provide a litter box or bowls.”

“There’s a folding one in the back pouch along with a zip top bag full of a small amount of litter, and his bowls are inside the carrier. We will buy more litter and cat food while we are out.” I knew Pumpkin would be fine for a couple hours as he’d used the box and eaten before the trip down. That, and Betty also had a can of cat food inside her purse.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I need to verify your card before you go up. The software needs me to enter its information before it will let me complete the check in, sorry.”

I handed him one of the cards. “They are all the same, so please make sure to change Mrs. Titchmarsh’s to this card instead of whatever she used.”

He swallowed. “Right away, sir.”

I handed Betty one of the room keys so she could take Pumpkin on up while I stood and waited for him to finish checking us in and altering Mrs. Titchmarsh’s entry.

“Done,” he said after a few minutes, handing me back my card.

“Thank you,” I replied simply and hurried towards the bank of elevators I’d watched my bride and her friend disappear into.

BETTY

My jaw dropped as I opened the door. We were in a fancy assed suite with a view of the ocean in all its glory. A single king sized bed sat in the middle of the room, which had a panoramic view thanks to the bank of windows. Upon closer inspection, two of the windows turned out to be a set of French doors leading out onto a balcony where two comfortable looking lounge chairs, each with their own side table, were placed for our relaxation and enjoyment.

“And I thought my room was schmancy pants,” Mrs. Titchmarsh said, eyes widening.

“What’s yours like?” I asked, curious.

“Two twin beds and I can see some of the beach from the windows. No balcony but that’s fine,” she replied. “I plan to spend my time after the wedding either at that pool or at the beach anyway.”

“That sounds fun.”

I turned to explore the mini fridge. It was well stocked but I knew not to eat or drink anything from there as the charges for doing so would be horrendous.

Pumpkin chose that moment to mew plaintively and I immediately felt bad for forgetting to let him out first. I was such a bad cat mom!

“I’m sorry, baby,” I crooned at him softly, setting his carrier down on the bed before unzipping it so he could make an escape. He stepped out, nose sniffing the air cautiously before hopping down to explore.

“Best keep a Do Not Disturb sign on the door so he doesn’t accidentally get let out,” Mrs. Titchmarsh said.

“That’s a good idea,” I heard Proslo’s deep voice rumble as he opened the door. He pulled the sign off of the inner door handle and after quickly making certain Pumpkin wasn’t about to escape, opened the door once more in order to place the sign on the outside handle.

“Thank you,” I told him. Yep, I was definitely not the best cat mom in the world today.

He smiled. “We wouldn’t want our fur young to become lost on our first family outing,” he said.

“Fur young?” Mrs. Titchmarsh looked amused.

“I called Pumpkin my fur baby and he ran with it,” I explained.

“Ah,” was all she said.

“I asked the clerk to make us dinner reservations. He will text me the details shortly,” Proslo announced. He turned to look at my former landlady. “I hope I did not overstep, but I asked him to include you in those arrangements.”

“You didn’t have to do that!” she said, swatting his forearm playfully but I could tell she was touched that he’d thought to.

“You are Betty’s good friend and our guest, so of course I did.”

“I’m just her old landlady,” she protested.

“Just nothing,” I told her. “We became good friends and you know it.”

She nodded. “I guess we really did. I got to feeling almost like you were sort of my daughter.”

I blinked back sudden tears. She had? Now I was really glad that this woman who’d become dear to my heart during the few months I’d lived there was here with us, sharing this time with us. It felt right. She was practically family and had been there during that whole Daryll disaster, and now she was here while I married my alien soulmate.

“I wonder if your bathroom is fancier than mine too,” she said, her eyes suspiciously bright. “Mine is really something. I wish I could pack it up and take it home with me.”

I laughed, thinking that no matter how fancy the hotel bathroom was, it probably had nothing on what we had aboard ship. I didn’t tell her that, though. She’d just have to see for herself when I’d gotten her to come up for a visit. Maybe once we had our placement and the child or children had a few days to settle in. She could visit and be like a sort of grandmother to them. Unlike my own mother, who was goodness knows where. She’d remarried for the fourth time and moved away without a word.

I’d only found out about her marriage because of the scribbled note inside the crockpot she’d inexplicably mailed me, along with an old mug with Rainbow Brite on it and a resin statuette of a frog holding a four leaf clover that had the words ‘Good luck from Cloverdale’ inscribed on the base. That had been two years ago and I wondered if she was still married to that guy and if so, if she was happy and what she

would think about my getting matched. It was pointless wondering about that though, so I shrugged it off.

“Let’s go see, shall we?” I asked my friend instead, and together, we went to have a look.

“See, what did I tell you? Fancy, right?”

She wasn’t kidding. This was nearly as nice as our en suite. It had a separate tub and shower and the toilet was in its own little room. There was a small dressing area with a cushioned bench just outside the bathroom door, which had space beneath it where we could put our shoes when undressing. Two small closets bracketed the bench, and a peek inside showed there were wooden hangers already there, ready to be used, all of them with the logo of the resort burned into the wood. A paper sign inside of each said we were welcome to take the hangars home with us, for a charge of ten dollars a hangar.

“Well, that’s expensive,” I said, closing the closet door.

“What is?” Proslo asked.

“Note inside the closet says we can keep the hangers but they’ll charge us ten bucks a hanger.”

“Perhaps that is part of how they make their money, in order to keep the prices fairly reasonable. We shall take them up on it.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but then closed it. It wasn’t worth arguing about and he was right. I’d looked the place up on my phone last night as soon as Xero had told us where we were going and the prices were actually reasonable for how luxurious it looked from the pictures on TripAdvisor, which, for the record, actually failed to do

this place justice. Them charging stupid money for people taking stuff like hangars and towels was probably how they managed it.

Proslo's kunnarskyn beeped and he glanced at the message that had come in. He beamed, looking at me and my friend. "He's managed to get us reservations to the place he recommended. We need to be there at five-thirty in order to eat at six."

"Did he say what we need to wear?"

"Smart casual," he said.

It was time to go shopping.

PROSLO

A n hour into our shopping trip, the front desk sent another message. This time, letting me know they had made a mistake about the time - we needed to be there a quarter to six, and clarified that the dress code was actually casual, including beach wear. The concierge noted that most guests still opted for smart casual when they went.

“So, smart casual beach wear?” Mrs. Titchmarsh asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Oh! Like a nice bikini top and a pretty sarong and sandals!” my mate replied, eyes shining as she jumped onto the idea.

“Well, no bikini in my case,” the older woman laughed. “An old lady one piece suit for me but I could wear a caftan over it.”

“Caftans...” Betty’s eyes grew dreamy.

In the end, the two women bought two caftans each, Betty three different sarongs, and they got two swimsuits apiece. I couldn’t wait to see Betty in hers, both of them a style she called fifties pin up girl style but which Mrs.Titchmarsh told me her own grandmother and her friends wore as young women in the fifties and early sixties, and they had not been pin up models. I did not, however, look forward to the other males seeing my mate in them, as I knew all eyes would be drawn to her full figured beauty. My expression must have given it away, as Mrs. Titchmarsh cackled and swatted my

arm, telling me I had it bad and had nothing to worry about.

I did ask her what ‘it’ was, having a fairly good inkling. I was already head over heels for my bride. I knew being in love with her was indeed nothing to worry about, nor was I worried that she would go and fall in love with another. I’d only known her a short while, but I could already tell that she was not built that way. She was a pure soul; I could see it shining within her, resilient and strong.

Hats, sunglasses, more sunblock, water shoes, and various sandals also made their way into our shopping bags, along with shorts, some trousers both females referred to as pedal pushers, t-shirts, and a few sets of tunics with matching leggings. There were so many bags stuffed to the gills that we had to take the walkway back to our hotel to drop off our bags before going back out for lunch and even more shopping, as Mrs. Titchmarsh was adamant that the various outfits needed different ‘looks’. Betty tried to convince her that was why they had both casual and dressy sandals, but she wasn’t having it. So after lunch, we went shopping for necklaces, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and several more pairs of sunglasses as well as hair clips, headbands, and such for them to do their hair.

“Are you sure it’s not too much? I don’t want to get you in trouble because we became shopaholics,” Betty asked me while we waited for Mrs. Titchmarsh to come out of the ladies’ room.

“Not at all. Most of these are for you and I’m sure she will find occasion to wear the rest when joining us on family vacations later.”

“You’d let me invite her along to our family vacations?” she gasped.

“Is she not like family to you?”

She nodded. “Like a favorite aunt,” she confessed.

“There you are then. And I think perhaps you should tell her, so she knows. We should never let the people we care about go a single day without knowing we love them.”

“Tell who?” the lady in question asked, overhearing as she came up to us. “Are you two declaring undying love to each other? Right here, by the public toilets? Really?”

“Um, no,” Betty chuckled, blushing a little.

“Actually, we were talking about you,” I said to give my mate a nudge.

“Me?” Mrs. Titchmarsh looked surprised at this revelation.

“Well, yeah,” Betty replied softly. “We were just saying how you’re more than just a close friend. You’re family, really. Like a favorite aunt.”

Tears welled up in the older female’s eyes. Sniffling, she replied, “Then you best just start calling me Aunt Lou. My first name is Louise, but everyone I actually like calls me Lou.”

“Aunt Lou,” Betty echoed, and I watched as the two women hugged out their swelling emotions.

Breaking apart, Aunt Lou looked at me and opened her arms wide. “Come here, you big lug. Give your auntie a hug too.”

I accepted her embrace, wrapping my own arms around the diminutive female. She felt small and slight against me and I made a resolution to have her come visit once we returned from our honeymoon. I knew we’d both enjoy seeing her again and sharing highlights of what we’d seen sightseeing as well as showing her around the ship, but I also was determined to give her a thorough medical checkup. She was

important to my mate and had quickly become family to me as well. It would devastate us both if we lost her to something preventable and by claiming her as adopted family, she'd gain the privileges of a Mylos, including access to our medical care. As we walked back into the main plaza, I quickly tapped a request to Xeranos to take care of adding her to my extended family immediately. A confirmation came shortly after verifying her eligibility. Now, I just had to find an appropriate time to let both females know what I'd done.

"Oh!" my bride exclaimed, stopping in front of a fine jeweler's. "We bought costume jewelry and simply gold hoops and stuff, but we haven't chosen our rings yet!"

"How about I go sit and have a cold drink while you two go do that," Aunt Lou suggested. "I can mind the bags while you take your time. Just don't take too long because we've got to get ready to go out for dinner and I would like a short swim in that pool first."

It didn't take us long to find a place selling bubble tea and she settled down to drink it and rest her feet. Returning to the jeweler's, Betty chewed her lip. "Everything is so gorgeous and so very expensive." She looked up at me worriedly. "We've already spent so much. Maybe we should go to a place that sells gold plated silver."

"If it was excessive, I'd have let you know. I have no wish to be called in to see the purser and Commander Gundar and explain any extravagances," I reassured her. I looked down into the case, then up at the salesman behind the glass counter. "Could you please show us engagement and wedding sets?"

"With a matching band for the groom?"

"Yes, please."

He unlocked the case and placed a velvet covered ring tray in front of us. "Here we

have a classic solitaire,” he said, taking out a ring with an etched band and a very large stone.

“Oh! Nothing that big, please. I’m a nurse.”

“Who is training to become a fully fledged Mylos assistant medic,” I informed him proudly.

He returned that tray to the case and moved it to the right, removing a trio of rings. “We have this set. It’s only a quarter of a carat but the clarity is excellent. A plain rounded narrow band as you can see, on both it and the matching wedding bands.”

“Could I try it on?” she asked and he nodded. She held out her finger and he slid it on as far as it would go, just above her second knuckle.

“It’s too small,” she observed sadly.

“We can resize it for you.”

“We need it for tomorrow afternoon,” I told him.

“For an extra hundred dollars, we can have them ready in an hour.”

“Is this truly the one you want?” I asked her softly.

She nodded. “It’s simple, classic.”

“We’ll take it.”

He nodded and took the ring from her, placing them in a locked drawer from which he took out a set of metal rings which he used to size our fingers. The male’s wedding

band turned out to already be the correct size, and only her engagement and wedding band needed enlarging two sizes.

“How late are you open?” I asked, seeing the time on a clock behind him. We had just enough time left for Aunt Lou and Betty to have a very quick swim, followed by a shower before we had to take a cab to the dinner show.

“Nine,” he replied. “But if you are staying at the Dusit Thani you can arrange for the concierge to come collect it and deposit it in the safe for you.”

“That would likely be the best course of action, thank you.”

“I’ll just ring these up and give you your receipt. Have them copy it at the front desk so they can produce it when collecting it. You could give them the original, but I advise against it in case it becomes mislaid. The engagement ring will be accompanied by a certificate for the diamond as well, verifying its weight and clarity. Keep that safe for insurance purposes.”

I paid him and we left to collect Aunt Lou so we could return to our rooms.

BETTY

Underneath the serious demeanor, Proslo was not only a big softie with a generous heart, but a bit of a scamp. All he'd told us was he'd had dinner reservations made and it was casual. Here I thought it would be someplace like the Hard Rock cafe, but no. It was only one of Guam's most popular attractions - a freaking beach side dinner show that was like nothing I could have ever dreamed up.

"This is like one of those fancy luaus in Hawaii on steroids," Aunt Lou said, watching Tahitian fire dancers appear after some of Guam's own Chamorro warriors did a set.

"I can't believe you got last minute VIP seats," I told my mate. I didn't even want to know how much that had set the Fleet back, especially when the host seating us mentioned they were Super VIP seats and confirmed he'd paid for meals as well, including lobster tail.

"It was very fortuitous," he agreed. "Usually they are sold out quite early."

"It's no wonder, it is fabulous!" It truly was, too. The food was excellent and the interactive bits where they asked for people in the audience to come up and join them was as fun as the rest of it and was genuinely jaw dropping. I nearly fell out of my seat when Aunt Lou volunteered and got up to shake her hips along with some Tahitian dancers doing something called an Ori Tahiti that looked a lot like what I'd thought a Hawaiian hula did. They were different, however, and knowing from the

Introduction to Fleet Life information packet I'd gotten and read, I could explore real hula myself if I so chose, thanks to there being actual hula classes available because of a cultural exchange program. In fact, it seemed that all of the Mylos attended them as part of their physical fitness regimen. I couldn't wait to see my man in action.

By the time the show ended, we were tired and far too full. Thankfully the cab ride wasn't terribly long and as I'd elected to wear a caftan it was a simple matter of taking off my chunky polished stone necklace, shucking off my sandals, and pulling it off over my head. I'd been rather naughty and not bothered with a bra and I was worn out enough to say screw it and go to bed in my ear studs and light make up.

We ordered room service for a late breakfast and I showered while we waited for it. After breakfast, Proslo went down to verify that our rings had been picked up the night before and were indeed locked in the hotel safe. Aunt Lou and I went to lounge by the pool and splashed about a bit. There'd be time for the beach later, after all, as we were going there this very afternoon to exchange vows. And wasn't that something? Not even a week ago, I was sitting in court watching my barely-could-call-him-an-ex face justice for damaging my TV, coffee table, and a lamp, slapping me, kicking my poor cat, and yelling threats at police officers. Now here I was, about to train as a sort of supercharged RN, mated and living with a man straight out of a romance novel, enjoying a life of relative luxury. And we were about to have a destination wedding and honeymoon! As if that wasn't enough, we were going to take the foster parents' course and wait for a placement, as apparently, part of the matching process included a screening that gave us instant approval should we wish to foster and/or adopt. I felt as if I was now living a charmed existence. Everything I'd ever wanted out of life was within my grasp. All I had to do was reach out and take it.

But I wasn't just a taker and that hit me particularly hard when we were standing on the beach in front of the officiant. I was a giver. It was what led me to adopt a rescue cat, to wish to give at least one child in the system love and a home, and even to

choose the career I did. It was why I'd sought love from a partner so hard even though I'd struck out horribly until I marched into that Scholarship Center. Shielding my heart had never been a genuine option. I'd lost it piece by piece with every word, every gesture, every kiss from this man across from me.

"And now, they will say their vows to each other."

Crap. We were supposed to have prepared something to say? Thankfully, he was looking at Proslo, who took my hand. I'd put on my engagement ring this morning and now he was going to say his piece and slide the wedding band on over it. My breath hitched as he looked deep into my eyes.

"As a Mylos, I have waited to find my perfect match, ever hopeful that I would be lucky to find you. The stars watched over us all as my people explored the known edges of our universe, coming across this little blue and green world by chance in this fairly empty quadrant. It was fate that your people were at a stage where we could treat with them, the design of something far beyond our comprehension evident as so many of my brothers found their mates. And then I was selected to come here and try my luck. Just how lucky I turned out to be was proven the day my kunnarskyn alerted me to your existence. I promise to never take you for granted. To cherish you always and to treat you as my equal in all things to do with our personal lives. To encourage you in your pursuit of joy, for you should always be filled with the same happiness that you continually fill me with. I will be yours now and until the universe itself is nothing but dust." He slid the band over my knuckle.

I had tears running down my face now and I didn't care, though I did spare a split second to be grateful that I'd worn waterproof mascara. I took his ring from Aunt Lou and sucked in a deep breath. I knew now what I had to say and it was simple, but filled with a deep meaning that he'd understand the full import of.

"I promise to always be your friend as well as your lover. I am trusting you with my

heart, knowing you will keep it as safe as I will yours. Until the stars fall, we are united as one.” I slid his ring on and he closed his eyes to compose himself, his face showing he was just as overcome with emotion as I was.

“Atta girl,” Aunt Lou said, sniffing.

“You may now kiss to seal your union. Congratulations.”

We both laughed, Proslo opening his eyes to bend down. It wasn’t a chaste kiss by any means, but that was more than okay. I’d cash in the promise it made later.

PROSLO

“So, we’ll take the class virtually, and it starts the week after we get back home,” Betty said. “And since they’re half day classes, I can do my homework so I can start at Sickbay the week after.”

“Providing you’ve completed the homework satisfactorily, yes,” I smiled at her from across the table.

She quirked her lips in that lopsided smile I adored so much. “And we both know that between my smarts, Xero’s tutelage, and the help of my hubby who just happens to be the Fleet’s Chief Medic, I will know that stuff backwards and forwards in time and be able to pass a test on it in my sleep”

“That husband of yours sounds a pretty impressive fellow,” I teased.

“Oh, he is, trust me. And he’s a real animal in the sack too, rawr,” she joked back before taking a sip of her Red Dragon margarita.

“I’m sorry, sir,” a member of the hotel staff said to me. “But there’s a woman asking for you at the hotel desk and she says it’s quite urgent.”

We both immediately became serious. “Is it Aunt Lou?” she asked.

The man shook his head. “I don’t know who Aunt Lou is, ma’am, but this lady is

from Social Services.”

“Do you think something happened to Aunt Lou after she flew home!”

“I’m certain Xeranos would have notified us directly, as she’s on the official family registry. Any hospital treating her would immediately find she is now Mylos and notify the Fleet.”

“Then what?”

I stood up. “I’d best go find out.”

“I’ll come with you,” she said, abandoning her drink.

I hoped I was right and that Aunt Lou was fine. Logically speaking, I knew I had to be. This had to be about something else. But what?

A harried looking woman in a skirt and what I recognized as a business style jacket hurried towards us as we entered the hotel lobby from the outside bar.

“Dr. Proslo! I know you’ve only just arrived here on Oahu for your honeymoon, but I’m afraid this is rather urgent and Dr. Morrissey at Queen’s asked me to reach out to the Mylos who told me you were here.”

Ah. It was a medical case then, for something the humans were unable to treat.

“Tell me what you need.”

She glazed over at Betty. “Is this your wife?”

“Yes, I’m Betty.”

“Oh, thank goodness. Perhaps you can help us even more than we’d hoped. I see you’re both scheduled to take the virtual foster parents’ introductory course.”

We glanced at each other.

“Yes, we are,” Betty replied.

“Is there somewhere we can talk privately?” she asked. “Sorry, I’ve failed to introduce myself properly.” She lifted a lanyard to show us she was indeed a social worker working for the state of Hawaii. “My name is Keilani Ortiz and this is my official ID. Just call me Keilani please.”

“We were just at the bar having drinks, could we offer you a coffee there?” I suggested.

“That would be great, thanks. I have been on the go with this since eleven-thirty last night. I haven’t stopped to get coffee or anything.” She smiled ruefully. “I did manage to get a donut from the office when I went in to get the papers in case I could get your agreement to help us, though.”

“Coffee and lunch then,” Betty decided. “I could eat, how about you?” she asked me.

“Most definitely.”

We ignored Keilani’s protest about not having time to eat.”

“If you faint from hunger, you’ll do no one any good,” I told her sternly, pulling out a chair for her.”

She grimaced halfheartedly. “Okay, if it’s doctor’s orders.”

“It most definitely is.”

I pulled a second chair out for my bride before seating myself, and a waiter came over immediately.

“Would you like me to refresh your drinks?”

“Yes, but make them virgins,” Betty replied and I nodded approvingly. We needed our heads as clear as possible for whatever this was about.

“And I’ll have a coffee. Just a regular old coffee.”

“One Kona Plantation Americano coming right up. Would you like cream and sugar with it?”

“Yes, please.”

When he returned with our drinks, we all quickly ordered our food. That done, Keilani cut right to the chase.

“Right, so the reason the hospital called me was because one of children in our care was rushed in with end stage heart failure. She’d be a candidate for a heart transplant if resources were available to ensure she made a full recovery, but without a stable home, that’s put her farther down the list than we’d like. She and her siblings went on TV four times in the past eighteen months, both locally and twice nationally, in hope someone would reach out to adopt them so we could see about getting things kickstarted if a heart became available.”

“But that didn’t happen,” Betty supplied.

“No, nor has there been a suitable heart. But I understand that your people might be

able to repair or even regenerate her heart using nanotechnology and that it might be possible to get a long term foster for her and her siblings within the Fleet.”

The way she looked at us hopefully spoke volumes. She wished the child to recover, but she also hoped that we would be the parents she desperately sought for these young.

“I’d have to look at her records and assess her myself using our own equipment,” I told her softly. “That might not be possible, but if there is a way to save her, we will.”

“And will you foster her? Ideally with her siblings as I feel having them with her will keep her spirits up and aid in her recovery. Breaking apart siblings is the last resort, anyway, but sadly, we’ve had to with them. The younger two are in one home, she’s in another, and her older brother is in a group home as teens are hard to place.”

“There’s four of them?” Betty gasped.

Keilani silently pulled a photo from her briefcase. Four children of varying ages smiled hopefully at the camera, all dressed up.

“This is the picture taken for the adoption appeal.”

“Pros...” Betty turned beseeching eyes towards me.

“We haven’t gone through the introductory course,” I reminded them both.

“As long as you take it within the first thirty days, we’ll waive it as a prerequisite given the circumstances.” She tapped the photo. “That’s Akoni and he fits his name to a ‘t’. He’s fourteen and smaller than a lot of boys his age and is really into helping take care of his sisters and little brother. He loves animals and as you can see here in the caption, hopes that if adopted, he’ll get to have a dog or cat. The next eldest is

Kaia, and she's twelve. She likes to read, play with Barbies, and do puzzles. Her wish is to get to learn to ride a bike. The younger two are twins, and they are four. This sweet angel," she pointed to the small male, "is Maui and the cutie next to him is Moana." She gave a small laugh. "None of them are of native Hawaiian descent and they came to us permanently after their mother tested positive for drugs while pregnant with the twins and again during their delivery. The older two already had a worker as she'd been arrested at the airport previously while disorderly and under the influence, so the decision was made to take them in and unfortunately to sever her parental rights when she proved herself more interested in drugs and an itinerant lifestyle than looking after her children. It was especially critical as Kaia was discovered to have a bad heart after a series of fainting spells at school two years ago."

I reached for Betty's hand, giving it a squeeze. "When can I see the patient and meet the rest of our new family?"

Keilani stared at me. "That's it? Just like that? I understand being willing to treat Kaia, but you're sure about taking all four of them in as yours during her treatment and recovery."

"No," Betty replied, her voice firm. "For forever."

"Once we sign, it's done. They become Mylos," I told her. "Foster children are placed and the adoption is immediate, by treaty."

"Oh," she replied faintly. "I knew that, but I thought given the situation, you both would want temporary so as to have time to think about it and see how it goes," she grinned. "In which case, I need the second set of papers my supervisor insisted I bring. Let's do this thing! We'll get this signed, eat, and I'll take you right over to the hospital. Um, I'll call and have the other children brought to the hospital so you can bring them back with you."

“No, bring them here,” Betty replied.

Our server came with our food and we paused the conversation until he left.

“Proslo needs to take her up to examine her. I’ll stay here and get to know the children and keep them entertained so they don’t worry too much about what’s happening. Once Proslo lets me know what the next step is, we’ll decide where to go from there.”

Keilani nodded, passing over a pen and a sheaf of papers to me. I read them as I ate, signing once done, then handed them back to her after Betty signed the page accepting custody. It was official. Kaia was going to receive treatment only the Mylos could provide and as a bonus, we’d just become parents to four beautiful young.

21

BETTY

Just over an hour later, I found myself back in the hotel lobby, sitting on a sofa meeting three of my new children. It was both exhilarating and terrifying but I was so here for it.

Keilani smiled tightly as I smiled gently at them.

“You’re really married to an alien?” Moana asked me, pushing a chunk of her dirty blonde bangs out of her eyes. They’d grown too long and she needed them trimmed. A quick glance at the two boys told me they could use a trim as well, their shoulder length hair looking dry with a lot of split ends. One of the reasons for the damaged ends quickly became readily apparent as Akoni lifted a lock and began to chew on the ends nervously. Maui quickly copied his brother.

“Yes, I am,” I replied brightly.

“Cool. Me and Maui are named after demi gods but we got no powers. Will we get alien powers, space guns and stuff when we go live on the spaceship?” Moana said next.

“They won’t give kids guns, Mo-mo,” Akoni admonished her, rolling his eyes as he let his hair fall from his mouth.

I laughed. “I’ve never seen any of them with any kind of a gun. I know they’re

warriors and practice hula and sword fighting though.”

Akoni’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Sword fighting? Cool! How old do you have to be for that?”

I shrugged. “You can ask Proslo that when you see him.”

“When will that be?” he demanded, crossing his arms.

“After he’s done looking over Kaia and starts her on a treatment plan,” I explained. “So, maybe not until tomorrow.”

“We gotta sit here until tomorrow?” Maui asked, his brown eyes looking alarmed at the idea.

“No, no. We’re only sitting here until they have our new room ready. Proslo and I only had a room for two people so they are readying a suite for us. Right now though, how about we give your luggage to the concierge and he’ll have them taken to our new room as soon as it’s ready. We’ll go to the Plaza and buy some floaties and new swimsuits and go play in the pool.”

“Pool! I wanna go to the pool!” Moana shouted, jumping up, ready to go there right now.

“It seems you have things well in hand,” Keilani said, getting up to leave. “I’ll take the luggage over to the desk for you. I’m sure Akoni here will help you take the twins shopping.”

“Yeah, I’ve got ‘em,” he agreed with her, standing up and taking them by the hands.

I watched as the social worker took the small, battered cabin sized suitcases to the

desk before getting the hell out of dodge as if she was afraid I'd change my mind and hand them back. Did people really do that?

I shook my head mentally. No, she likely was in a hurry to go help the next child on her far too long list of cases.

"Okay," I said, keeping my smile fixed firmly to my face. "Let's go have some fun!"

"We can't get too much or it won't fit in our cases when they come to get us again," Akoni said. "The donated suitcases are hard to come by and I'd rather not lose mine because my stuff will only fit in a trash bag."

My heart broke then but I pushed that right down. I could cry about it later. Right now, I needed to make them feel secure.

"No one will be coming to get you," I told him firmly. "Didn't Keilani explain? Once you're with a Mylos family, that's it. You're adopted under the terms of the treaty and Mylos do not give up their kids. Not ever. Children are considered the universe's greatest treasures."

Akoni gaped at me. "Are you serious? I thought she was saying you guys were hoping to adopt us if you liked us, not that you'd already adopted us." He looked panicked. "What if you find we don't fit? What if you decide four kids are too much? Especially when one of them is super sick?"

I noticed he never asked if what if they didn't like us. I filed that away for later.

"Yup, done deal. Same thing kinda happened to me. I went in to see if I was a match because I wanted the scholarship and bam! Alien married. But seriously, this is all the best thing to ever happen to me and I'm positive Proslo will tell you the same thing."

“You’re our mommy for reals?” Moana asked me, pulling free of her brother’s hand and reaching her arms up.”

“I am,” I replied, picking her up, feeling positively giddy at how happy that made the both of us in this moment.

She flung her arms around my neck. “I have a mommy! My own forever mommy!”

“Me too!” Maui insisted. “She’s my mommy too!” He reached his arms up as well, wanting to be picked up.

“I can only carry one of you at a time,” I told him.

“I’ve got you,” Akoni said, coming to the rescue, scooping his little brother up. “Just so you know, he’s got a teddy bear in his case and she has a rag doll but that’s it. The toys we always get given at Christmas by the charity never make the move with us, but then again, a lot of the time they get broken or stolen by other kids so not worth taking anyway. So they’ll probably beg you for every toy they see thinking since you’re our mom now you’ll buy them.”

“Would you help me pick out some tonight? We can order it and beds and stuff so your rooms will be ready for you.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

He was doing his best to sound aloof, but I saw the glimmer of excitement and hope in his eyes that he was trying his hardest to suppress.

“Great!” I said as we entered the Plaza. “I think first, we’ll find a place that does walk-ins and get our hair cut. I need a trim and I think Mo-mo could use her bangs trimmed shorter.”

“Yeah, okay.”

So far, so good, I thought to myself as I led us over to the directory sign. I can do this. Definitely.

PROSLO

Kaia's medical file made grim reading. She had no medical history before the age of nearly eight as both she and her older brother had been unattended births and never taken to see a medical professional. Not for so much as a check up, no immunizations, and definitely not whenever they'd inevitably fallen sick. Neither child had seen a dentist prior to then, either.

Cross-referencing this information with what was in their social services file legally, the two children had never existed prior to the day their mother, one Kathleen McGillis, tried to board a flight from Honolulu to Hilo, on the Island of Hawai'i, for which the state was named. She had been acting erratically and was found to be under the influence of what was later determined to be an illegal substance known as magic mushrooms. She also did not have a valid ID, instead insisting that the flying was freedom and that they could just take her word that her name was Plumeria Surfrider Stargazer.

Her fingerprints quickly proved that to be false and she told the social worker who came to take the children that their fathers were 'all men' and she didn't have names for them. Kathleen's parents hadn't been able to take the children for medical reasons of their own, nor had they wished to.

Kaia's heart condition was discovered after she fainted several times at school and her foster parent took her to a pediatrician. It was determined that at some point she'd most definitely had had scarlet fever, which had attacked her heart, and further

damage was caused to it from advanced dental caries. What could be filled had been and several of her baby teeth had to be pulled. She had adult teeth appearing and they were coming in decayed.

Akoni was fortunately healthy, despite his own bouts with childhood illness, poor diet, and lack of appropriate medical and dental care. He too, had cavities, but nothing as severe as his sister's. A note was there stating that Kathleen had told them she'd given Kaia pineapple juice mixed with sweetened coconut milk in a bottle to keep her quiet as she was a colicky baby who'd cried a lot. Copies of their dental records showed the pediatric dentist felt the decay was due to sugars pooling in the mouth from sweet drinks placed in a baby bottle they kept in their mouths as infants and toddlers and made worse by a diet which contained a lot of fruit, candy, and carbonated soft drinks.

I took a closer look at Kaia's test results and scans done at the human hospitals and compared them to the doctors' findings as to the severity of her heart problems. Our own scans had quickly revealed the damage not only to her heart and teeth, but her immune system in general. Getting up from the conference table I was currently using as a desk, I returned to sickbay, entering the acute care wing. I plastered a smile on my face, approaching the bed holding the girl's diminutive form.

Michik and Lithir looked up from where they were reading the monitoring screens.

"There's your dad now," Lithir told her brightly.

She stared at me wide-eyed.

"Hello, sweetheart," I said to her, keeping my tone gentle.

"Hi." Her hand reached for mine and I took it. She was frightened, her fingers squeezing mine in desperation.

“She’s a brave little female,” Michik informed me, reaching down to ruffle her hair. “She didn’t even flinch when I held the injector against her arm to release the nanites into her system.”

“I’m used to needles but that was better because it didn’t hurt,” she told him gravely. “Just a poof and some tickles which made me want to wiggle.”

“That’s my girl,” I praised her, bending down to kiss the top of her head. She stared at me wide-eyed, as if no one had ever done that before.

“So it’s for real? You’re my forever Daddy and the little robots inside me are going to fix my heart?”

“I am your Daddy and the nanites will do what they can.”

“I’ll just take the DNA sample to the lab so they can start,” Lithir said, hurrying away with a sealed swab he picked up from the side table.

“The nanites will fix it enough to make you well enough to go home,” Michik explained to her. “The lab is going to sequence your DNA and use it to grow you a new heart. After you get it, it will be as if you’d never been sick.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

Michik turned his attention to me. “I injected her with three different sets of nanites. One set is repairing and maintaining her heart and its functions, the second will repair any other damage they find in her body and support her immune system in general. The third set I have repairing the enamel on her teeth and killing the unwanted bacteria in her mouth feeding caries and causing plaque. Once she’s had her new heart, she’ll need to rest while her body gets used to having full function. Then we’ll have her come in, remove the fixes the human dentists did by filling and capping, and

introduce new nanites which will continue the repair to her teeth, both those above and below the gum line.”

I nodded. It was a sound plan, one I would have implemented if I had been in charge of her case. She was my young, so I wasn’t.

“Where will I go home to?”

I looked at Michik. “How many days?”

“Two should be sufficient, including today. The nanites will be well established and done enough by then. We’ll run diagnostics first to be certain, however.”

Two days. We’d still had a week left of our honeymoon, having spent a week in Guam for our wedding and the first half of our honeymoon before arriving in Honolulu to start the second half. We’d been there less than a day when Keliani had shown up to upend our lives once more.

“Well, first, we’ll go back to the hotel so we can continue our vacation. Vacations are wonderful ways to rest. You can float in the pool and we’ll go sightseeing. Have you ever been to the royal palace or the aquarium?”

She shook her head. “I was in the hospital when my class was supposed to go to the palace and aquarium tickets are expensive.”

I winked at her. “We don’t have to worry about that.”

“Just be sure she doesn’t overdo it. In fact, I suggest taking a hoverchair for her to use when you take her out anywhere she’ll have to do a lot of walking.”

I nodded. “I’d planned to.”

“I’ll go make the arrangements.” He tapped Kaia’s nose playfully. “I’ll leave you to get to know your daddy better and see you later.”

“Okay. Bye Dr. Michik!”

She watched him go, then said, “This is a lot different than Queen’s. It doesn’t smell as funny and the tests and stuff don’t hurt or take a long time.”

She swallowed. “Will getting a new heart hurt?”

“You won’t feel it,” I promised her. “You’ll go to sleep for a very little while, and Dr. Michik will use nanites to help remove your heart and ferry your blood where it needs to go. Then he’ll put the new one in and the nanites will make it grow new connections.”

“But they’ll cut my chest open and break my ribs.”

I winced. “The nanites will fix those right up as well and it will be as if you’d always had your new heart and never had surgery.”

“Like magic,” she breathed, wanting to believe it was true so much it broke both of my own hearts.

Thankfully, it was true and in two month’s time, she’d discover the truth of it herself.

“It might seem like magic,” I told her, “but it’s simply advanced technology.”

“Like Star Trek,” she nodded and I nodded back at her, having heard the analogy to a human vid franchise before. “So, I’m getting a floating wheelchair and we’ll take the flying saucer back to Hawaii only we’re there for vacation and not to go back into foster care.”

“That’s right. You and your siblings have now been adopted by my mate and I.”

“So Kathleen can’t try to get us back again?”

“Only for vacation if we want to.”

“And she won’t be allowed to come see us?”

“Do you want to see her?”

She shook her head no. “She’s too messed up,” she replied sadly. “Plus, I don’t think she’d be nice to you and my new mom because you’re more regular people. You know, following government rules and stuff. She’d call you child stealers like she did my one foster mom this one time.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry about that. If you don’t wish to see her, you do not have to.” Besides, I knew from the file that she was currently in prison once more, this time for possession of illegal drugs and for vandalizing property belonging to the intentional community farm who’d taken her on in a work trade situation after she’d somehow managed to get a fishing boat to take her to the Big Island. She’d slacked off of her work assignments and failed to pay rent, so had been evicted, but not before she damaged their solar panels, water tanks, a pick up truck, and the one bedroom cabin she’d been staying in.

“Can I talk to Akoni, Maui, and Mo-mo before we go?”

“We can see if they’re available now,” I told her, knowing that Betty would have kept her tablet nearby at all times in case I called..

“Yes!” she replied excitedly.

“Xeranos, video call to Betty please.”

The wall across from the end of her bed rearranged itself to show a picture of Betty and we heard ringing sounds as if a human telephone was alerting its owners to an incoming call. I heard her suck in an astonished breath at the sight, her eyes wide in surprise.

“Hello!” Betty answered. “You caught us at precisely the right time! We just sat down to eat.” She panned the tablet around to show the other three children sitting at a picnic table outside of a food truck in a beach parking lot.

“It’s Kaia!” Maui shouted. “Hi, Kaia! Did they fix your heart yet?”

“They started to! I gotta still get a new one but they’re making mine good enough for now so I get to come back the day after tomorrow! And I’m getting a floating chair!”

“Hi!” Mo-mo said around a mouth full of food.

“So she’ll be okay until you find a donor heart?” Akoni asked, obviously addressing me.

“She’s being grown her own new one, using her DNA,” I explained.

“Wow. So like, a cloned heart?”

“More or less.”

“Cool.” Then his eyes flicked to Kaia. “You do whatever they say. We need you.” His voice cracked.

“I will. Daddy and his doctor friends are making sure I’m getting better and then he

said we'll get to go see the palace and visit the aquarium and stuff. That's why I'm getting the floating chair, so I don't get too tired."

"Can we go to a luau?" Maui asked.

"Maybe before we go," Betty hedged.

I made a mental note to see if we could book tickets to the one our hotel held. They held them weekly and I was certain the next one was scheduled for the night before we left.

"We gots hair cuts and Maui didn't want the lady to wash his hair," Mo-mo tattled. "I didn't make a fuss though 'cuz we just had to lay in the chair and gots to wear a hat that didn't let stuff get in our eyes. Mommy bought two for us to keep from the lady when she paided." She lowered her voice into a whisper, speaking as if she thought that would make Betty and I unable to hear what she said next. "I think they're rich. We gots new big suitcases and clothes and Maui gots a toy fire truck and I gots a new doll." She picked it up from where it had been sitting on the bench next to her, out of sight. "She drinks from a bottle and pees! Mommy says she's gonna get her some cloth diapers and clothes after we get home!"

"She's very pretty," Kaia told her. "What's her name?"

"Baby Doll," Mo-mo answered.

My young were all the most adorable beings ever, next to my bride.

Akoni leaned back into the frame. "Once you're all better from your new heart, you can have surfing lessons and go paddle boarding with me! They have a holo deck just for that and taking hula!"

“Really?” Kaia looked at me for confirmation.

I nodded at her encouragingly. “Once you are cleared to do so, you can do those things if you wish.”

“Yes!” she replied, excitedly.

“We’ll see you soon in person, and we’ll call you again in the morning at nine,” I promised them. “She needs to rest now.” I could see tiny lines of fatigue on her face. The nanites were hard at work, but it had only been a few hours. They still had much to do and right now, she needed to rest and let them do it.

“Bye! See you later!” the twins chorused.

“Get some sleep,” Akoni told her. “Bye, Dad.” My heart swelled with emotion at him calling me that. I’d not expected him to for a while yet. Hoped, yes. Expected, no.

“Talk to you later. Akoni and I are ordering some things for them all so please let whoever you need to know to put them inside. It’ll be beds and stuff.”

I nodded. “I’ll let the mover know. We’re being given larger quarters.”

“We’re moving again already?” Betty groaned in dismay.

I shrugged. “The quarters on either side and above and below us are already occupied so they couldn’t enlarge the space. They’ll put everything in the same places in the correct rooms in the new one.”

She gusted out a breath. “Well, okay. More room would be better, I guess. I love you. Speak to you later.” She blew us both a kiss before disconnecting.

“I like her and are we really getting a big house?”

“Yes. You each will have a bedroom plus there will be a playroom and a spare bedroom should we decide to have another young.”

“You guys must be crazy rich.”

I smiled down at her gently. “The Fleet takes care of its own. Now, would you like me to read to you?”

“I’m twelve, so you don’t have to. I can read pretty good now by myself.”

“I know, but I’d like to.”

“Okay, then,” she said, unaware of how much like her new mother she already sounded.

I picked up the tablet she’d been provided for amusement and opened the library app. I tapped the selection for ‘classic children’s novels’ and selected the first one recommended for ages ten and up, ‘The Phoenix and the Carpet’. She listened raptly but as Xeranos lowered the lights, her exhaustion won out and soon she was fast asleep. I sat and watched her for several minutes, in awe that such a wonderful being had been entrusted to my paternal care, along with her equally special siblings. I was a lucky male indeed.

23

BETTY

We celebrated Kaia's release from Sickbay by going to Duke's for dinner.

“I think you will like our new quarters,” Proslo said, addressing mainly me, but not excluding the children. “The layout is much like our old one, but with a playroom between two bedrooms on one side, with a shared bathroom tucked behind.”

“How did they manage that?” I asked, marveling.

“It’s what they call a half bath only - just a toilet and a sink. It has what I am told are jack and jill doors, so access is via either bedroom. The playroom door is in the hall. Then there is a regular bathroom with a tub and a shower at the end of the hall. And on the other side, there is another pair of bedrooms with a second full sized jack and jill bathroom so Kaia and Akoni do not have to share facilities with the twins. There is a small study behind the twins’ rooms, coming off of the living room, which also has a half bath and which can be converted into another bedroom. For now, I had them put the arts and crafts supplies and boxes of puzzles in there. Your desk is in the office space by our bedroom, to make room for the larger table and sideboard we selected.”

“It’s a mansion!” Mo-mo breathed.

Proslo and I smiled at her.

“Not quite, but I will admit the Mylos provide housing a lot fancier than I was used to before I married your Dad.”

“Really?” Kaia asked, looking interested.

“Goodness, yes. I wasn’t poor or anything, but I lived in regular old apartments and my furniture came from the furniture store when there was a sale and flatpack stuff from Walmart and Target.”

“Now we have stuff from Ikea,” Akoni pointed out.

“Yes, well, one stop shopping and the Mylos apparently love the stuff, so it was easy to get.”

“Plus they had really nifty rooms you could just order,” he said, his eyes gleaming as he no doubt thought about the replicated student loft style room he would be coming home to with its double loft bed with a loveseat sofa bed and side table beneath it, colorful abstract rug in the center of the room so he could watch ‘TV’ without the twins interrupting. One of the cool gaming desks and chairs sat to one side, along with a mini chiller unit so he could do school projects in peace and grab drinks and snacks I’d keep it filled with, and turn the chair to face the wall to game using the wireless Mylos gaming controls that would make use of the same viewscreen area of wall as the TV would.

“I can’t wait to see my room,” Kaia confided shyly. “I never had my own room before.”

I was also excited about her room and couldn’t wait to see it in person. Her bedroom wasn’t from Ikea. Instead, while browsing, I’d spotted a vintage French Provincial inspired bedroom set from Sears from the ‘70’s, a four poster one, and knew immediately it had to be hers. That set had come with the bed and two night tables,

but Akoni had helped me find a matching dresser in good condition on Facebook Marketplace and the desk with a hutch top and a chair on eBay. That had been up for auction as a new listing, but a quick message to the seller explaining the situation had her agreeing to change it to a Buy It Now at a reasonable price. Akoni had told me that her favorite color was baby blue so I'd gotten bedding and rugs in the color, as well as ruffled curtains to match once Proslo had confirmed there was wall space for four 'windows' in the room. eBay and Etsy had also yielded several Barbie Christmas ornaments and even a few actual vintage Barbies which I'd snagged to place on the hutch shelves along with a fashion doll sized sofa and chairs to sit the dolls on.

“I got my own room too,” Mo-mo reminded us all, talking with a mouthful of hula pie.

“Wait to talk, honey, until you've swallowed your food,” Proslo told her gently. “We don't want you to accidentally choke on your food.”

“Plus it looks gross,” Maui told her, glowering. “See?” He stuffed a bite of his own pie in his mouth and chewed it up, then opened up to show her.

“Ew!” she replied after swallowing. “Sorry, Daddy, I forgot that but I didn't forget I have my own room and it's no boys allowed except for you, Daddy. Mommy and Kaia can come in too.”

“That's not fair!” Maui said, thrusting his lip out. “If I can't come in your room, then you can't come in mine!”

“Unless invited, no one except me and Daddy should ever go in someone else's bedroom. And Daddy and I will only go in to clean and check that you're okay.”

“Xeranos will always be there as well,” Proslo reminded them.

“That’s like Alexa kinda, only more like Data cuz it’s a person only it’s not got a body,” Kaia told them.

“That’s so cool,” Akoni enthused. “As long as it uses its powers only for good.”

“Xero’s pronouns are he/him,” she told him primly. “I asked.”

“Cool,” Akoni said once more.

“What’s my room like, Mommy?”

“It’s a surprise,” I told her. “And so is yours,” I added for Maui’s benefit.

“As long as there’s lots of toys,” he replied pragmatically.

“The playroom is full of them,” I promised.

“You’ll love your rooms and the toys,” Akoni promised him. “I helped Mom pick them out.”

“I may have added a few too, with Kaia’s help,” Proslo admitted and I laughed, knowing we both were definitely going to have to rein in our impulse to spoil them.

“Is it Christmas again?” Mo-mo asked.

“No, honey,” I answered.

Akoni smiled. “It’s even better, because it’s all from Mom and Dad. Santa will come later this year though. Remember? The Mylos have Space Santa. We saw it on TV. Everybody did.”

“Space Santa!” the twins shouted, getting amused glances from nearby diners.

“Shh, inside voices,” I said. “Now, let’s finish our pie and go back to the hotel. There’s time for you to watch a movie before bed if you don’t dawdle.”

“Yay!” They cheered and began enthusiastically eating once more.

Proslo beamed at me from across the table. We totally had this.

PROSLO

The young had all been on their best behavior the entire vacation. The introduction to foster parenting course Betty and I completed while the children slept at night had let us know that this was common. Children either remained withdrawn and possibly even defiant, or tried to be what they thought we'd see as perfect. One reaction was to try to go ahead and get the rejection over with, while the other was a desperate attempt to get us to want to keep them. In either case, our job was the same - to wait for the children to feel emotionally secure and settled.

The first cracks appeared our first night home.

"But I want to sleep with Maui!" Mo-mo screamed as she was led from the bathroom to her room for bed.

"No! It's my room and no girls except Mommy allowed!" Maui shouted from his own room, where I was trying to read him a bedtime story.

"Come on, you can say goodnight to him," Betty said placatingly. "If he doesn't want you in his room, you have to stay out. Just like he does with yours."

"I'm not saying goodnight because I'm going to watch TV!" Mo-mo now insisted, flouncing past Maui's open door towards the living room.

Betty took a deep breath. Akoni came to her rescue.

“Oh no you’re not!” he scolded his little sister. He took her by the hand. “You’re acting like a grouch. You don’t want to grow green fur and have to go live in a trash can do you?” He led her past Betty and I could now hear them in Mo-mo’s bedroom.

“No,” she whined.

“Then don’t let the grouchiness get you.”

“How?” she demanded.

“Well, it’s trying to keep the sleepies away so you stay super duper tired and grouchy, so you gotta get in bed and let Mom read you a story and then go to sleep.”

She must have climbed into her bed as Akoni reappeared in a moment.

“She’s ready now, Mom.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you, Akoni.”

“No problem. You know what to tell her now to get her to stop.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I do. Thanks again.” She waved at me and I returned my attention to the story I was reading our youngest son, another classic recommended by the library app. This one was ‘The Adventure of Jimmy Skunk’ and followed the woodland antics of Jimmy and a host of anthropomorphized animals in an Earth woodland as they lived their ordinary lives.

A message appeared in the corner of the tablet, letting me know that Betty had started ‘Winnie the Pooh’.

When I finished the chapter I was reading, Maui was still awake, though drowsy, so I

pulled a picture book from the nearby bookcase and left him to look at it with the lights dimmed.

“Good night,” I said, pressing a kiss to his head.

“Good night, Daddy,” he murmured tiredly back. I hummed happily as I left the room. He’d be asleep in no time. Betty emerged a minute later and seeing Maui was still awake, she went in to kiss him goodnight once more, the first one having been as he came out of the bath.

“She asleep?” I asked, tilting my head towards Mo-mo’s door.

“Yes. I barely got through three pages before she conked out. Don’t go in case you wake her.”

I’d kissed her goodnight on the way to her bath as I took Maui to his room, but disappointment still filled me. I couldn’t get enough of showing our young affection, loving the way they soaked it all up.

We both went into the living room where we found our eldest two children playing with Pumpkin, waving a wand that dangles a felt fish stuffed with catnip. They were giggling at the cat’s antics as he sat on his hind legs, batting at it with an intense expression that reminded me all too much of that day he’d gotten the catnip induced zoomies.

“I’m beat,” Betty said. “I’m going to grab a shower and read in bed.”

“I’ll make us all some hot chocolate,” I replied. “I’ll bring you yours once you’re out of the bath.”

“Thanks, babe,” she replied gratefully, brushing a kiss across my lips before

withdrawing.

“I’ll help,” Kaia said, following me.

“I’m just going to replicate it.”

“I can take it to the table,” she insisted.

“I’ll get some cookies to go with them,” Akoni announced, coming in and began looking in the cupboards. “Result! There’s Oreos!”

“Can we have whipped cream and marshmallows?” Kaia asked me. “I’ll be extra careful brushing my teeth.”

I smiled at her before replicating her cup just as she wanted it. She beamed in reply, taking it from the replicator and carefully carrying it to the dining table.

“No marshmallows on mine,” Akoni requested and I obliged, making us each one with just whipped cream.

“Mm, this is good,” Kaia said, sipping hers.

I knew she meant the hot chocolate, but this moment here really was. Families had their ups and downs and we’d weathered them all so far, from Kaia’s illness to Momo’s tantrum.

“It sure is, honey,” I agreed.

PROSLO

“It’s fine, Betty,” the twins’ K-4 teacher, Pok, assured her. “They can have lunch with the regular Kindergartners and then join me for the afternoon K-4 class. I’ll just offer that class the alternate enrichment worksheet and coloring pages for today’s alphabet work. That way, they won’t get the same ones twice today.”

“Are you sure?” Betty asked her.

“I’m positive.”

“It really will be okay,” I promised her.

“We get to stay and play all day?” Mo-mo asked, looking excited. “And have lunch with the big kids?”

“You sure do, honey,” she told him.

“Woohoo!” Maui cheered.

She took a deep breath, steeling her nerves. “Okay, you guys have an extra fun day and listen to Ms. Pok, okay?”

“Yes, Mommy!” they chorused and I reached for her hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Akoni will pick them up,” I informed Pok.

The female’s face beamed. “Sure thing. And we’re all rooting for Kaia. She’s in the best of hands, so I just know she’ll be fine.”

I smiled warmly in response as Betty murmured, “Thanks.”

We stood and watched the twins follow the rest of their class into the elementary school wing.

“Come on,” I told her. “We don’t want to be late.”

“We need to let Akoni know to pick them up after school.

I tapped out a message on my kunnarskyn to the junior high school’s secretary.

“There, they’ll let him know.”

“Tell me again how this won’t go wrong.”

I kissed her temple as I led her to the bank of elevators.

“The chance of anything going wrong is so infinitesimal that it’s all but nonexistent.”

“Oh,” one of the parents said, “Is that today?”

I inclined my head.

“We’re all thinking of you,” the female continued. “I know how difficult this must be for you. She’ll be fine, but that doesn’t stop you from being eaten alive with worry.”

"It's the parents' burden, always worrying over our children," another commented.

I was glad when we were able to get off on the next floor and walk to Sickbay.

“Hello, Mom and Dad,” one of the trainee medics, Travis, greeted us brightly. “Follow me to the conference room and I’ll seat you where you can observe everything.”

“Thank you,” Betty said. “I know it’s not what’s done usually, but -”

“But it’s your kid and observing is part of your training anyway,” Travis finished for her. “Trust me, if I was in your shoes, I’d fight tooth and nail to be observing as well.”

We took a seat and Travis asked Xeranos to patch us into the sterile surgical unit. Kaia reclined on the table's padded surface.

“Look, Kaia, there’s your Mom and Dad,” Lithir told her and she looked back at us, waving.

[illegible]

I'm going to take a nap now," our brave little young said, eyes shining, "and when I

wake up, I'll have my new heart and not even have a scar, just like magic!"

"Say goodnight now," Lithir told her softly, reclining the head of the table down.

"Goo-" she didn't get to even finish her sentence as Lithir placed her into stasis.

"Xeranos, activate medical protocol two," Michik ordered.

"That turns off the viewscreen on their side so they won't be distracted by our presence," I informed my bride.

"So we can see and hear them but they can't see us."

"Correct.

"Injecting the first dose of nanites." Michik took a hypospray from the surgical tray and pressed it against our daughter's neck. Within moments, the nanites had mapped out her heart and the surrounding muscle and a hologram display above her prone form showed their work as they began the delicate task of disconnecting her heart. At last, Xeranos spoke. "The organ is ready for retrieval. Deactivating the nanites." the hologram winked out.

Michik held a gloved hand out and Lithir passed him the laser scalpel. Michik made quick work, Betty whimpered as he pulled our daughter's chest open, glancing away for a moment to try to compose herself. I forced myself to keep watching as the pair worked efficiently, removing the damaged organ and placing it in a container to be disposed of. A senior trainee medic whisked it away and Lithik removed the newly grown one from a sealed stasis unit.

"Such a small thing between life and death," Betty said, looking once more.

Michik placed it within her chest, carefully positioning before removing his hand.

“Xeranos, reactivate nanites.”

Another hologram appeared, this time showing in detail the veins and tissue growing together.

“That is amazing,” Betty whispered.

“Inject the second set of nanites,” Michik told Lithik, who obliged.

“Those are to boost her immune system and help repair any other body damage she might have as a result of her weakened heart.”

“Then one more for her teeth,” she said.

“And her bones,” I confirmed.

“Organ replacement complete,” Xeranos said.

“Inject the third,” Michik said. Before our eyes, her ribs knit back together.

“It does look rather like sorcery,” Betty said as the skin began to heal over the now repaired ribcage.

“Activate medical protocol seven. The heart only.”

“Protocol seven activated.”

The hologram showed us her heart as blood began to move through it.

Everything looks normal,” Michik said, reading the reports scrolling along the hologram image. “Remove the rest of the stasis field.”

“Heartbeat and blood pressure normal,” Xeranos reported.

Michik removed his mask and smiled. “Another success. We’ll move her to a recovery room and let her wake up on her own.”

“Thank you,” Betty said tearfully.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “You have my eternal gratitude.”

“She’ll be in Recovery room 3-B in the pediatric wing. You can come see her as soon as we have her situated,” Lithik replied brightly.

Our viewscreen returned to its normal bare wall state.

“Our baby girl is whole,” Betty sobbed.

“Whole and healthy and will live a very long time.” Tears rolled down my own face.

“Come, let us go. We can see her for ourselves now.”

26

BETTY

A koni had been disappointed to discover that he couldn't go visit his sister.

"She'll be home in two days," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but still. I was worried all morning until the secretary called me outta class to tell me she was okay."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"It's okay. Rules are rules and you said I could stay home with her for the first three days so we could hang."

I ruffled his hair and he ducked his head away from me.

"You're a great big brother, kiddo."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm gonna go shower now."

He hurried away towards his room.

"Mo-mo finally fell asleep," Proslo said, returning from settling her down. Unlike Maui, we couldn't trust her to remain in bed and look at picture books until she drifted off. No, Mo-mo would sneak into the half bath and play in the sink, making a

mess or try to sneak out into the hall to go into the playroom. The only thing that worked was reading to her until she fell asleep. Sometimes that only took a few paragraphs. Other times it could take up to four chapters.

“Only an hour this time,” I said.

He grunted.

“I’m going for a shower. Wash my back?”

He looked at me in surprise. The past two weeks, we’d both been too stressed from Kaia’s upcoming surgery to even think about sex. Now, however, my libido was awake and wanting to cha cha.

“You naked in the shower?” he asked, pursing his lips thoughtfully as his gaze grew heated and his eyes turned into reptilian slits. “Watching water run down your bare skin will make me want to dirty you up, not help you get clean.”

“Bring it on,” I challenged him. Yep, that whole “celebrate life with raunchy sex after the specter of death was vanquished” thing turned out to be real.

“Lead on,” he said.

I began stripping as soon as I was through the bedroom door, secure in the knowledge that none of our children was around to see me by accident.

He growled, closing the door behind him, toeing off his boots and flicking open the button of his trousers with enough haste that he accidentally tore it off.

“Whoops!” I laughed, sliding off my leggings.

With that last piece of clothing off of me, I finally felt free. It was as if I'd peeled off the final layers of worry and stress.

Proslo's response was to pick me up and toss me onto our bed.

"Can't wait," he told me, his scales peeking through the skin along his cheeks and jaw. God, that was sexy.

I bent my knees and spread my legs. "Then don't."

He climbed onto the bed, crawling over in me in a manner that could only be described as a prowl.

"You set my blood on fire, female," his voice rasped before he lowered his lips to mine, claiming them in a bruising kiss.

I pulled my head back, nipping his lip as I did so.

"Sweet talk me you all you like but if you don't get around to fucking me right goddamned now, I guess I'll just have to satisfy myself."

"You want this?" He rubbed his hard cock through my wet folds.

"Yesss," I hissed, loving the delicious friction, though it wasn't enough. I shifted my hips, wrapping my legs around his waist, ankles crossed. I shoved myself upward while pushing my heels down so that his hips punched forward. "Ah, like that. More," I gasped as my maneuver pushed him inside of me.

He groaned, burying his head into my neck. "So hot and tight and wet just for me." He pulled back and thrust forward again, all the way to the hilt.

“Harder!” I demanded, and he raised his head to lock his burning gaze to mine as he began to thrust with abandon.

I grabbed his shoulders, holding on for dear life, my nails digging into his back as I met him thrust for thrust. He reached a hand up to my nipple, giving it a tweak and that little bite of pain gave me the last of what I needed. I came screaming his name. His movements became erratic as my walls clamped down on him as if desperate to keep him inside of me. Then his hips stilled and he threw his head back, filling me with hot jets of cum as his mouth fell open in a silent roar, his eyes fixed blindly onto our ceiling.

Afterwards, he rolled off of me, laying on his side next to me.

“We really do need a shower now,” I chuckled softly.

He groaned.

“You start the water and I’ll get a clean coverlet.”

It was a good thing we had unlimited hot water at our disposal thanks to the ship’s ability to recycle what was used because before we finished washing each other, we dirtied ourselves up again. Twice, in fact. None of my old apartments’ hot water heaters would have coped.

“I best get out before I ravage you again,” he said as I turned off the water once we were clean for the final time.

“Yep.”

He stepped out, wrapping a towel around himself.

“It’s only nine-thirty,” he called out from our bedroom. “Do you want to read in bed or watch a movie?”

I dried myself off and put my robe on.

“A movie sounds good. How about I pick this time though?” I knew if I didn’t, we’d watch something good but probably old thanks to the algorithms he’d created because of his viewing habits and his habit to select from the automatic suggestions.

“Okay. I’ll go make us some coffee.” He pulled on a pair of sleep pants and went into the bathroom to hang his towel up to dry.

“Replicate some pistachio biscotti with it, please.”

“One piece or two?”

“Just one for me, thanks, babe.”

He nodded, opening the door to go out.

Now I just had to decide what we should watch. I laughed to myself. Star Wars would be a hoot, I decided, thinking of his reactions to humanity’s ideas on advanced intergalactic civilization. I undid my robe and quickly slid on a clean pair of panties I grabbed from the dresser, before slipping on a nightgown. Yes, Star Wars was perfect.

“But only the first three in order of release,” I reminded myself aloud.

“Hm?” Proslo asked me, thinking I was talking to him.

“Just thinking about what we’re going to watch.”

“Ah,” he replied, following me into the living room. Placing our coffees and biscotti down onto the coffee table, he settled down onto the sofa, stretching an arm out. I cuddled under it, smiling up at him as I said, “Xero, we’re ready to watch a movie. Please play Episode IV: A New Hope.”

“Playing Star Wars: Episode IV, A New hope. May the Force be with you.”

I laughed as the wall rearranged itself to display a star field and John William’s famous score began to play as words scrolled up the screen.

PROSLO

“A re we going to see Aunt Lou?” Akoni asked.

“No,” Betty replied, a secretive smile playing around her lips.

“We’re all dresseded up,” Maui said. “I bets we goin’ to dinner on another ship. Mikey went to eat on another ship and nohlies.”

”Nohlies?” Kaia asked. “What’s that?”

“The sketti and zahnya place there has them. They gots cream inside!”

“I think he means cannoli,” Betty said, her own look of confusion clearing. “And yes, we’re going to eat but not to another ship.” She looked at me.

“There’s something we need to see first,” I hedged. “Did any of you happen to recognize our pilot?”

All of the children’s heads swiveled to look. He turned around his chair, giving them a quick wave.

“It’s Space Santa!” Mo-mo squealed. “Why he not dressed in his Santa clothes?”

“I didn’t wear it today,” Polmar, our pilot replied, “because I’m not on official Santa

business exactly seeing as it's not Christmas."

"Oh, okay," Mo-mo replied, looking disappointed.

"Now, I usually only deliver things and don't fly people, but today, your father has a special something to show you, so Commander Gundar asked me if I'd deliver you to the present your father has worked so hard to give."

"Deliver us to a present?" Kaia asked, looking puzzled.

"Yes, while we waited for Kaia's new heart to grow, your father spoke to the Commander, who spoke to the ambassador, who spoke to the previous ambassador, Ambassador Tellan," Betty explained.

"I've heard of him," Akoni interjected. "He's the Mylos that negotiated the treaty between Earth and the Mylos."

"That's right, bringing the gift of education and access to some more advanced tech," she confirmed. "And from that, came all the rest - which brought us you."

"And brought you to us," Maui added, not to be outdone. "Is that why we gets a present?"

"This present is because of you, and is not only for you, but all of Earth," Betty explained.

Polmar smiled. "There it is." He activated a viewscreen.

"It's a ship," Akoni replied, puzzled. "You got a ship for humans to go explore on their own in?"

"It's two ships actually," Polmar said, panning the view so they could see the second

ship.”

“And no, the ship isn’t for humans to fly. Do you know what the greatest gift to humanity has always been?”

The children shook their heads.

“It’s hope, and I’m sure it’s true for every species in the universe.”

“Hope?” Mo-mo asked, her face screwed up in confusion.

“That ship is called Kaia’s Hope and the other one is Kaia’s Gift. They’re hospital ships. To be more precise, Hope is for children and Gift is for grown ups who need transplants or have deadly illnesses only advanced tech we have access to can cure. Rich or poor, it’s available to those in need.”

“But won’t millions of people need help?”

“More ships are on their way, but we know we can’t help everyone. We will help the neediest, free of charge. At first, we will work with those who have been waiting far too long for a suitable transplant to become available and those refused because they were deemed to not have suitable support for recovery.”

The children stared open-mouthed.

“Daddy and Space Santa are making it so no more kids die like Kaia was going to?”

“That’s our hope, sweetheart,” I told her, stroking her hair.

Kaia burst into tears. “Best present ever,” she cried. “And it’s not even actually mine. Not really.”

“Oh, there’s an actual present for you as well,” Polmar told her. He stood up and walked over to a storage compartment.

“Um, don’t you need to fly this?” Akoni asked, looking panicked.

“We’re stopped. Think of it as being in park, with the engine on.”

“Ah, okay,” Akoni said, gusting out a sigh of relief.

“This gift is for Kaia, for being brave all this time and always keeping a happy outlook.” He opened the storage compartment, revealing the bicycle we’d had hidden in our shared office until now.

“A bike!” Kaia shouted, unfastening her harness to run to it. “Look, it’s got a basket and helmet!”

“You said you wanted to learn to ride, when they interviewed you for the TV adoption spot.”

“I do! I hope I can do it without falling off,” she sniffled.

“Kaia’s got lots of hopes. A ship and a bike, and to not fall off,” Maui said. “You know what I hopes?”

“What?” I asked him.

“I hopes we are having sketti and nohlies for dinner. And I hopes I don’t have to go on the ships and have an operation.”

“We all hope that, buddy,” Akoni said.

“You wanted sketti and nohlies too?”

Akoni looked startled and barked out a laugh.

“Yeah, let’s go with that,” Betty giggled.

“That and the no more surgeries for anyone in our family,” I added.

Kaia walked over, throwing her arms around my neck. “Thank you for being my Daddy.” She turned to Betty, giving her a hug next. “And thank you for being my Mom.”

“And ours! They’re our Mommy and Daddy too!” Mo-mo reminded her.

“Yes, we are,” Betty laughed before turning to me. “Just so you know, the day I walked into the Scholarship Center and took the matching test ranks up there as one of the best days of my life.”

I leaned over to plant a kiss onto her lips. “Mine too, rivalled only by the day we agreed to adopt some children a social worker interrupted our honeymoon to ask us about.”

“Okay, I hate to interrupt, but it’s time to head back,” Polmar said. He wheeled the bike back into the storage compartment before helping Kaia refasten herself into her seat’s safety harness. Before retaking his own seat, he turned to wink at the children. “Be sure to be good all year.” he tapped the side of his nose. “I’ve got it on good authority that if you do, Space Santa will be coming to see you again on Christmas Eve.”

“Yay!” Maui and Mo-mo shouted.

Yay, indeed, though I couldn’t think of a better gift than what I’d already been given. I had a mate and we shared four healthy human young as well as an orange striped feline one. My life was now so full of love both given and received, it was close to

bursting.

The end