



Redondo (Mates of the Mylos #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A down on his luck actor and a battle scarred warrior hoping for love

Thomas

I have a huge problem. My rent is three months past due, and there's an eviction notice taped to my door. The best paying roles I've tried out for all seem to go to someone else, and the payday loans I took out are long past due. Payday loans, which did not come from anywhere reputable, seeing as I'd defaulted on two of those previously and took out one of the shadier loans from 'a guy who was a friend of a friend of a chick a former castmate met at a party' to repay them. I called my agent and spilled my woes in desperation, she had a suggestion: go to the local Scholarship center and apply to try out for the new educational TV series soon to begin production within the Mylos Fleet.

The job comes with some definite perks, free housing and all living expenses paid, free healthcare and dental, and a decent salary. It does have a few catches, however. The first is that there is a five year commitment attached to all of the adult roles. The second is all cast members must relocate to the Fleet. The third is what gives me a moment's pause, all unmarried adult applicants must submit to a mate matching test, with all the legal ramifications should a match be found.

Redondo

I'm Mylos only by adoption, taken in by a Mylos warrior after finding me hiding among a stack of crates after responding to a distress call at a Dragonii colony outpost. I'm larger than most Mylos, nearly a full head taller as well as broader. I'm scaled all the time and my fangs are always present. I'm also winged, and capable of flight. Humans always react in fear when they first see my battle scarred body, so I'm doubtful that my match will be found among them. Mine is probably somewhere else, and I'm unsure if I will ever find him. If I do, I will love and cherish them as only a Dragonii and a Mylos can-giving them my heart and sharing my hoard while fiercely protecting them against any who would come against them. Anyone at all. All I ask is that they love and cherish me back

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CHAPTER 1

REDONDO

“Ondo, I was looking all over for you!”

I turned to find my childhood best friend looking at me in exasperation.

“Why?” I asked, turning my attention back to the gemna fruit vine I was examining for Mylinium rust.

“Because they’re announcing Fleet assignments!”

I shrugged. “You’re the highest rated pilot in our class, both for shuttles as well as fighters, and you aced the battle cruiser helm simulation. We both know you’ll get your preferred choice of assignment.”

Yllip sighed heavily. “I would have, yes, but I opted for a guaranteed buddy assignment instead, you big red idiot.”

I spun around, startled. “You didn’t!”

He inclined his head. “I most certainly did. I promised you as kids that we’d be best friends forever, me and you against the universe, and I meant every single word.”

I stared at him, aghast. “But I’m not going to get a first rate assignment. You know as well as I do that the Council’s Committee of Strategic Oversight has an entire

subcommittee, most of whom are not Mylos, deciding where we cadets are posted. Top marked Mylos get one of their top five choices of available postings, and everyone else gets what's left."

"You were top in your field of science, Ondo. Environmental is key to being able to eat, stay clean, and breathe."

"I deal with plants mostly," I reminded him. "While proficient in things like food replication coding and air scrubber maintenance, in the end, I'm a glorified gardener who helps provide pretty things to look at which also serve practical purposes of providing some of the fresh foodstuffs and fresh oxygen. Also," I pointed at myself, unfolding my sail-like wings from where they hid in pouches along my sides until called upon, "I'm a Mylos in name only."

"You are as Mylos as I am," he pushed back.

"Legally, yes. Physically and in the minds of several within the Alliance, not. They see only a Dragonii, the irritant in their side who refused to join the Alliance until five short years ago."

"None of the Mylos representatives feel that way," Yllip insisted. "In fact, they pressured the Dragonii to join in order to prevent another of their colonies from falling prey as yours did."

"I'm aware I have been a political pawn," I sighed wearily.

"No," Yllip said, clapping his hand on my shoulder. "You've been a rallying cry. The battle cam footage of your fathers fighting the pirates still on the ground, then one of them finding you bloodied and abused by your would-be murderer, led to more unaffiliated worlds joining the Alliance. Together we are all stronger, as colonies and ships traversing the star lanes will not have to rely on thinly-stretched forces on a

single far off world. And you know as well as I do - once a person is Mylos, they are Mylos, genetics be damned.” He looked deeply into my eyes. “Growing up, you only ever let me and your fathers in. It’s you who’ve held yourself apart, my brother.”

I reached up, placing my hand over his, sighing. “I know. But all the eyes always on me made me feel apart. I was the Dragonii kid rescued by the Mylos while everyone else died. The press were on me nonstop from the moment we debarked, following my hospital transport. When my fathers tried to put a stop to it, people tried sneaking in. In public, strangers would come up and ask, ‘Isn’t this the young who was saved?’ Such a tragedy. Everyone stared at my scars. Everyone except you.”

“I know it marked you inside as surely as the marauders marked your outside, but as everyone became used to your presence, you kept pushing them away.” I dropped my hand and he removed his own, using it to swipe down his face. “I often think that the only reason you let me in was because I was also in the hospital with you that second time, having contracted Jorellian fever.”

I snorted softly. We’d both been eight years old or so – no one was quite sure of when I was born or who my parents had been. “You kept sneaking into my room, so once they made sure I was immune, they put you in with me so you’d stay in bed. I had no choice but to put up with you.”

He grinned. “And we became brothers in spirit after that. You were too frightened of everyone to leverage those big dark eyes and sad backstory to get treats from the nursing staff. It was left up to me to bargain on your behalf.”

I laughed out loud then, remembering. “I seem to recall you got your fair share of candy and desserts.”

He shrugged. “But of course. They could hardly give only one of us the goodies.”

I gusted out a sigh, retracting my wings. “Fine, I’ll come, but only because you did such a stupid thing,” I said in a chiding voice.

“I still put down preferred stations,” he said, throwing his arm over my shoulder as we fell into step, “I figured it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Yeah? Where?”

He grinned. “You’ll see. I’ll tell you if they assign us to one of them,” he chuckled. “I picked out the plumpest assignments I could think of.”

“You’re incorrigible,” I told him as we walked towards the auditorium.

“If you don’t ask for what you truly want, you probably won’t get it because someone else will have.”

That was true enough. The audacity of him asking for both a choice assignment and a buddy posting was just so him. He’d probably done it because thus far, no one, not even our instructors, had found themselves able to refuse him. And if I got to keep my one true friend in the universe who was like a brother to me? I’d happily go along on his ride.

He didn’t drop his arm even once we arrived, instead using his free hand to wave cheerily at the underclassmen manning the door.

“Good luck. May the stars favor you,” one of them said, hero worship in their eyes for our class’s handsome ace pilot.

“Study hard and one day you’ll be right where we are now,” Yllip told him as we sailed through the double doors they opened to let us through.

His arm tightened around my neck as the hubbub of our entire graduating class broke over me like a wave.

“I’m here. These all are people who respect you as well as me,” he said in my ear softly. Many would like to be your friend if you’d only let them in.”

I licked my suddenly dry lips and nodded, taking a deep breath. I willed my spine to straighten and squashed down the uneasiness the presence of so many beings always brought me. I might prefer to hide out with my plants and only hang out with Yllip, but I was a warrior as much as the rest of them. I even had the scars upon my body to prove it, the price paid in blood as a child when I’d fought for my life and ran to hide from our colony’s attackers.

“You ready?” he asked me and I nodded. “Okay then.” He dropped his arm. “Top of our specialities, so we’re in the front center row.”

Which is exactly why I’d not wanted to come, that and the sheer number of people packed into this cavernous space. I was here now, though, and determined to see it through without disgracing myself, Yllip, or my fathers.

“Let’s do this,” I said, falling back into step alongside him as we walked up the long aisle to claim seats. The steward monitoring the seating section for the top students tapped our names into his data pad so that our presence would be noted. My gut tightened and my claws lengthened, digging into my arms. This meant we’d be called on and the cams would show our faces on the large vid screen behind the dais as our duty assignments were read out. Anyone not present wouldn’t have theirs announced here at the ceremony but instead posted on a list available to read on the announcement boards in every hall of the academy.

There were two empty seats at the end of the front row, everyone else first in their field already having been seated.

“You first, Ondo,” Yllip whispered softly.

I sat and he took the aisle seat. It was just as well. Now I could tell myself that I had no other choice, as my escape path was blocked. Since it was by Yllip and I found his presence grounding, that was fine.

I nodded to myself, mouth set firmly, shoulders and back straight as I forced myself to relax my fists.

“That’s right,” he said softly. “We’ve got this.”

I gave him a smile that almost, but not quite, reached my eyes. “Yeah, we do.”

And then Admiral Surkane came onstage and everyone ceased speaking.

“Welcome to Assignment Day!” he began, his voice booming out. “Today is the day the majority of you have been looking forward to the most, even more so than graduation tomorrow, as that’s a mere ceremony and today is the real deal. You’ll receive your very first set of official orders. First and foremost, I wish to congratulate each and every one of you for the years of hard work and study you’ve put in. This is the culmination of all your efforts, and once more, your instructors and I are proud to accept you among the ranks of the Mylos Fleet.”

It had begun.

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CHAPTER 2

THOMAS

I peered around the stairwell to see if Mr. Janeski was around. Seeing he was talking to my direct neighbor, old Mrs. Lamont, I quickly hot footed it into the alley. I didn't have his rent and he'd already slapped an eviction notice on my door two weeks ago anyway, though he kept trying to corner me, reminding me that I was still going to be held accountable for the rent and late chargers, so if I just went ahead and paid before the day I had to vacate, he'd let me stay on a month to month as long I could also show I was now readily employed. However, I had neither money nor a job, and I'd already lost my car. No car, no food deliveries, and thus, no money between acting gigs. Not that I currently had any of those either.

The alley had a pull down fire escape I could use to get in through my back door. Except there were two shady looking guys leaning against the brick wall, who smiled as if I was just the guy they'd been looking for. I spun around to leave, but now there was an even bigger guy behind me.

I swallowed."Hi, fellas. I don't have any money, so if this is a mugging, all I've got to give you is my phone."

"Well, now see," the scary big dude in front of me said, "the lack of money is precisely why we're here. Isn't that right, boy?"

"Yes, that's right, Zach," one of them said.

I swallowed.

“Th..this is about Anton?”

“Ring a ding ding!” the man mountain said, lifting a tanned fist to rap me hard on the head. “Looks like there’s something in this noggin after all.” He took a step back and the other two guys came closer, standing now on either side of me. If this had been a casting call for ‘modern hoodlums trying to look respectable’, these guys would be a shoo in. Tight black and navy blue t-shirts, designer jeans, and collectible sneakers, as well as bulging muscles under tanned skin and well coiffed hair. They probably had upper middle class parents who had no idea their sons were thugs who likely were in it for kicks as much as some extra cash.

“Anton said to tell you that you have until the end of next week. He’d have given you an extra seven days, but that eviction notice on the door means you’d be harder to find.” He bent down, his nose touching mine. “Not that you’d ever think of running, right?”

“R...right.”

He patted my cheek. “Like I told him, you’re a good boy. Fit, too. Be a shame to beat your ass, unless you’re into that. I can even hook you up with a guy or two who would pay off your loan and maybe even your rent in exchange for getting to beat your ass and then some.”

He straightened up, taking a step back.

I shook my head vehemently. “No...no. That’s alright. I’ll get the cash, I swear.”

“On your own head be it.” He jerked his head to the side and his two buddies followed him out to the street.

My hand flew instinctively to my chest, clutching my pec over my racing heart. I was in seriously deep shit, no two ways about it, and it was all definitely my fault. If I'd only listened to my mother and returned home to Sarasota, I'd not be facing imminent eviction and a near future, very likely life threatening, beating. No, I'd be using my acting skills to pretend I was ever so glad to see my Uncle Ned's Dented But Dandy customers come through the doors so I could ring them up. I'd still have my car, old enough that it wouldn't look out of place in the mostly abandoned strip mall where the grocery store was located, but new enough to not be too terribly embarrassing.

I hadn't listened to the most recent admonishments during her monthly tirade of a phone call, though. Well, physically I had. I'd sort of mentally checked half way out so I could let her words wash over me instead of soaking all the way in because I knew her words would hurt and reopen soul deep wounds. So instead of going home and moving back into my old bedroom and working for Uncle Ned like I'd done summers during high school, and having to fend off daily recriminations that I didn't go next door to Dented but Dandy into Tabernacle of Miraculous Faith (WE PRAY FOR YOU, THE CITY, THE COUNTY, THE STATE, THE COUNTRY, AND THE WORLD) so they could deliver me from the evil that had afflicted me with 'same sex attraction disorder', and add my voice and part of my pay to the tithe the family gave so that prosperity would rain down upon us. according to Lorraine Abernathy, Prophetess of the Generous Almighty Daddy God. Seriously. That was how the church's name, slogan, and her title were all painted on the shop window glass of the unit they rented. The beat up old metal folding chairs and duct taped folding table they used as an altar didn't scream that she was all too successful, either, and neither did the slightly wilted flowers one of her flock brought from the hospital. There'd still been a Get Well business sized card with a signature in one of the arrangements the one time Mama and Aunt Jess bamboozled me into entering the premises.

No, I hadn't gone for the physically and financially safe option at all. I'd been dead certain that since I'd had a chewing gum commercial three months ago and it was nearly time for the catalog work I usually did to come around, I would be able to

rebound from losing my job as a dishwasher at Paulie's Tapas and Grill. After all, I'd found a lifeline from the friend of a friend of a friend in the form of an informal loan to keep the lights and water on as well as some pretty basic starvation rations in my belly. Only it hadn't, nor had I gotten any of the roles in any of the plays I'd tried out for. I'd have to call Uncle Ned and beg him to buy me a bus ticket home for tomorrow and wheedle him into giving me a cash advance on the meager wages he'd pay me so I could, at least, give Anton a down payment on what I owed and borrow Mama's car to do some Door Dashing and Uber Eats to pay him the rest as fast as I could. I'd have to agree to go get prayed over and politely extricate myself from the dates with the girls she and Aunt Jess would try to fix me up with. But first, before I tossed myself into that big, hot, and humid, pit of misery, I'd call Cheryl in the vain hope that, as my agent, she'd found something juicy for me at last that was all but guaranteed.

My heart was calm enough now that black spots were no longer dancing in front of my eyes, so I risked taking a peek around the front. Mr. Janeski was gone, as was Mrs. Lamont so I could get in that way. Thank goodness for that, as anxiety had left my arms feeling like wet noodles and my legs weren't much better. I scarpered on up the two flights of stairs in a hurry and quickly opened my door. Slipping inside, I hurriedly shut the door behind me, throwing the bolt. Then I went into the kitchen and did the same thing there, in case those guys came back to pay me an early visit. Sinking down onto the rickety kitchen chair the apartment came furnished with, I raked a shaky hand through my hair before pulling out my phone and thumbing through my contacts.

"Hello? Cheryl, it's me, Thomas."

CHAPTER 3

REDONDO

“Frederick Allen,” Admiral Surkane called out.

The lone human to rank among the top stood up, grinning ear to ear as he climbed the stairs to the stage.

“Congratulations,” the admiral said to him. “You are the first human to graduate at the top of his primary field of study. I understand many underestimated you in the battle training arena, as well.”

Fred blushed. “Thank you, sir.”

The admiral handed him his assignment key. “You have been assigned to the Fleet at Yorshka station, where you will continue advanced medic training under the tutelage of Chief Medic Taranf.”

If Fred’s smile grew any wider, I feared his face would split in half. I was pleased for him. He’d been kind to me, always, and had made overtures of friendship. Which I’d been far too shy to accept, to my deep regret. Yllip was right. I needed to try harder at trusting my fellow warriors to be as accepting as they appeared to be. I vowed that I would make at least one new friend at our duty assignment. If Yllip found them trustworthy, then I would give them a chance.

“Yllip and Redondo,” the admiral’s lips lifted into an amused smile. “Why am I not

surprised you're going to the same posting? Please come on up, both of you."

We stood and walked resolutely up onto the dais.

"Redondo, you put down 'anywhere' as a preferred assignment, and only that. Yllip, you put down some plum assignments indeed, but stated that above all, you wished to go where Redondo went."

"Yes, sir," Yllip replied, all brashness gone.

Surkane studied us closely.

"Redondo, as the only Dragonii within the Fleet, and the first of the Dragonii to become a citizen, it was felt that the universe has something quite special in mind for you. The odds were against your survival as a young on his own during the fearsome battle that set you onto the path which led to you standing before us today. And so, we reached out to the Galactic Council, who consulted with the Fleet's AIs and asked them to compute the most likely place the stars wished you both to be. No constraints, as long as you could be together." He held out our keys. "Tomorrow, after graduation, you are to depart for the Bride Fleet of Earth. May the universe smile, and bring you the joy of finding your mates."

Exclamations broke out from the cadets watching. No one had ever gone straight from the academy to a Bride Fleet. Absolutely no one! It simply did not happen.

The admiral chuckled. "You can close your mouths now and go sit down. I have the rest of your class to hand these things out to and then dismiss everyone for dinner. The first years are looking particularly peckish."

I nodded, staring numbly at the key in my hand.

Yllip tugged at my arm, trying to get me to follow him.

“Settle down!” Surkane told the rest of the auditorium. “You can gossip about the assignments over your meals later!”

I found myself slipping down into my seat, tucking my tail around my waist the best I could to avoid squashing it. I didn’t even remember actually walking back. I blinked, turning the key over in my hand.

“I’d put down some highly sought after assignments, but never dreamed of asking for what we got,” Yllip murmured. “Our parents are going to be so proud, they will be insufferable.”

I chuckled softly. He was correct. I could just hear Papa telling one of his friends, “And of course, the Academy and the entirety of the Fleet’s AI systems saw just how special our Ondo was, and sent him and Yllip straight to the Bride Fleet at Earth,” and my father would go on about how he’d known I was destined for special things, having fought off a full grown warrior well enough to escape and hide during the attack that decimated our colony. Yllip’s parents would be the same, no doubt imagining us finding our mates almost immediately and giving them grandyoung as we rapidly climbed the ranks.

“They’re going to be ridiculous,” I murmured back, then after a glare from the usher, we said nothing more until the last member of our graduating class had been called and given their assignment key.

“Dismissed. Leave in orderly rows, starting in the front,” Sukane ordered and we all stood, filing out as told.

Once in the corridor, Fred hurried over to us. “Wow! And I thought I had a fab assignment! My mom would have been over the moon if I’d gotten Earth. She’s one

of the human IT workers who help write the code that allows human tech to communicate with the Fleet. I'll introduce you tomorrow. I'm sure she'd love to show you all the best places to eat and stuff."

"That's very kind of you," I said.

Yllip beamed at me. "It is, isn't it?" He turned his smile over to Fred. "Thanks. It will be good to know someone already."

He nodded. "We should hang out when I come home for Christmas. Okay, um, I promised Mom I'd call as soon as I knew my assignment. See you in the chow hall! Save me a seat!" He rushed off.

"See why it's good to have more than one friend," Yllip asked me, playfully poking me in the ribs.

I nodded. I'd say we were more acquaintances, but perhaps that was only on my side of things. Fred definitely seemed to believe we were friends. I smiled, liking the feel of that.

"Come on, we should go grab our dinner before all that's left is replicated stuff and we both know how you prefer your vegetables fresh and grown in actual dirt."

I rolled my eyes at him. Just how could he not tell that soil grown tasted superior to anything else?

"We should call our parents as soon as we finish eating though. Let's do a group comm, so we only have to tell them once."

"Seeing as they are traveling together, that sounds best," I agreed.

“A vid comm,” he continued. “The looks on their faces will be something to not miss! In fact, we should record it.”

I chuckled. He was still the same incorrigible being I’d met as a child, despite all the years that had since passed. Okay, fourteen years had passed, not fifty or a hundred, but still. He was the same old male I was glad to consider a brother.

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CHAPTER 4

THOMAS

“Hey, kiddo! How ya doin’?” came Cheryl’s raspy voice.

“Not so well, actually. I’m kinda calling you in a sort of desperate, last second Hail Mary.”

“That bad, huh?” She sighed. “Tell Aunty Cheryl all about it, kid.”

I poured my heart out. Cheryl wasn’t a top tier agent, not anymore anyway. She was a wizened, chain smoking woman in her eighties. Seriously, she loved her Virginia Slims more than anything else in this world, except maybe for her snappy miniature poodle, Tweetie Pie. After those two things, her fondness extended to her ‘kids’, all clients like me. Unlike me, most of them managed to keep their side gigs and scrape by before landing gigs on soap operas, bit parts in films, and lots and lots of print and TV ads.

“Okay, sugar, I hear ya. But I gotta tell ya, you not keeping up your SAG card has created a huge stumbling block as to what I can send you for. The sort of work that I can, has mostly dried up and even if there was anything, it wouldn’t pay you enough to keep you from getting thrown out on the street and facing your ‘creditors’.”

I could hear her making the air quotes through the phone and it somehow made my situation even more humiliating.

“I wish you’d come to me much sooner,” she continued.

“So there’s nothing?”

“Well, there is one thing,” she replied hesitantly.

“Yeah?” My ears perked up. “I’ll take anything! Anything at all!”

“Well, looking at the specifics, if you get cast, it definitely would pay off all of your debts and provide free future housing and all meals. It’s a five year contract. ”

“Oh? Is it one of those deals where I’d have to live on set?” I didn’t hate the idea, but if they were filming outside the US, I’d have to ask for an advance so I could pay for a passport.

“You could say that,” she said after a moment too long.

“You sound like you think it’s a really bad idea. Why? Is the director a known handsy asshole or something?”

“It’d be the furthest place you could probably ever think to travel to.”

The penny dropped. “This is for a gig aboard the Mylos Bride Fleet, isn’t it?”

“For that children’s education series that was all in the news, yes. Just forget about it. Put it out of your mind that I even suggested it.”

“It would definitely pay off my debt and get me far away from here if I get hired, so they couldn’t bother me for even more money. I don’t trust them not to get any funny ideas if I do pay them off, Cheryl. My landlord, yes. The loan shark and his hoodlums? No.”

“This is the first casting call, exclusively for already married or partnered actors or those willing to sign up for the Mylos Mate Matching Test. Now it does say that failing to be matched will not bar anyone from employment.” She sighed again. “You know what? No. How about you crash on the couch in my office instead? You can take a few weeks to find a new job to get money to pay your fees. Then you’ll have more gigs to apply for without having to peddle your ass to an alien.”

I laughed. “But if he’s my perfect mate, the one the universe intended me to be with all along, it wouldn’t be peddling my ass, now would it?”

“Love isn’t real,” she growled, and I felt sorry for her then. Someone had to have hurt her a long time ago, leaving her scarred like this. That got me thinking. I’d dated a lot of losers. Well, dating was too strong a term for most of them, but I had had a few actual boyfriends. The last one helped get me into this pickle, in fact. He’d taken my debit card from my wallet, added it to his Android Pay account, and spent what money I had on a side piece, and then told our boss I was harassing him, which was what got me fired. Me harassing HIM! All I’d done was ask when he was going to pay me back as I really needed the money he stole. Unfortunately, his side piece was the owner’s nephew and they thought Kyle had been dating him the entire time, not me. The police told me to file a claim with my bank, who were not being helpful at all. So a chance at finding the perfect guy for me? One hundred percent guaranteed, if we were matched?

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t mind a chance at a job and a happily ever after.”

“Fine, if you insist. I think you’re just really scared and those Mylos are seriously hot to boot so you’re not thinking straight.”

I laughed. “There’s never been anything straight about me, you know that!”

“I’ll text you the details. Don’t be late. I shouldn’t have to tell ya that since they

haven't caught the rest of those Friendship Day kidnappers to not tell anyone where you're going or what you're trying out for."

"I won't. What role are they casting for?"

"All the adult characters, so about twelve people. They'll have you read a few samples and consider each applicant for each available part."

I grinned to myself, suddenly feeling positive that I was going to get this job. Instead of calling home to beg for bus money, I'd be telling them all about my super successful new job. Ha!

Cheryl coughed. "Okay, I'll send you the info in a few minutes. I gotta hang up now as Tweetie needs to go tee-tee. Then I promised to take him to the drive-thru for a bottle of Malt Duck and then for some Five Guys."

"Okay, Cheryl. I can't thank you enough."

"You can name one of your alien hybrids after me if they probe you where the sun don't shine and knock you up."

I doubled over at that, my belly hurting from the howls of laughter I was trying to hold in. "Pretty sure that's not a thing," I managed to gasp out.

"Whatever."

I kept laughing, knowing she couldn't hear me, but damn, she was a funny old broad as she liked to call herself. Five Guys and a bottle of Malt Duck - somehow I thought the dog's veterinarian wouldn't approve, but would be too scared of Cheryl to say so. She was kind to her clients but tough as nails to everyone else. True to her word, moments later, the audition information came through and my eyebrows shot up. It

was tomorrow, and being held aboard the mothership. Holy crapola! I was going into space!

CHAPTER 5

REDONDO

The dirt from the street swirled up in little dust devils as something screamed down from the sky. I glanced up as all around me, people ran for cover, some of them screaming. I stood mesmerized as I saw the gleaming ships darting down from far above, agile things reminding me of the stinging insects that hung around the linea vines, hoping for a taste of their pollen. My mother grabbed me, pressing me against her chest as she ran towards the nearest shelter, the general store where we'd just been to purchase flour, seeds, and fuel cells after first selling them some of our eggs and produce.

Everything was ruined now, my mother having dropped our purchases onto the ground. I watched wide-eyed as a beam of light shot out, strafing the road, people dropping in their tracks as they were hit. The smell of cooked meat and smoke began to fill the air, as the beam then turned our shopping into nothing except ash. A boom, and we were airborne, my teeth clacking together uncomfortably as my mother hit the ground. She released me.

"Run," she wheezed. "Go hide. Get as far away from here as you can."

"Come on, Mittir," I begged her, as she struggled to sit up.

"Go!" she commanded. "I need to find your father."

Another boom and I turned, startled to see that the ships were firing upon the

buildings. It made the air shove against us as it boomed.

She stood now and reached for the small blaster she always carried. I'd never seen her have to use it, not once, but when I asked, she said things about 'frontier' and 'danger that could come knocking'. I understood then that this was what she meant.

I began to run, zigzagging like she'd taught me when we played the 'Danger Danger' game. More beams shot out, one narrowly missing my tail. I made it all the way to the spaceport, thinking that surely they knew that was too important a place to blow up. Offworlders came there and important people! I soon learned my mistake. More of the ships were there, already on the ground, with armored warriors firing blasters and swinging blades.

One of them noticed me as I tried to hide in what little shadow there was.

He called out something I couldn't understand, gesturing towards me. One of the others replied and whatever it was he'd said, it was obvious neither of them saw me as a threat as the first one holstered his blaster as he approached. It was not a reassuring sight at all. I saw people I knew had to be dead, pieces of them lying about, some with holes through their chests. This warrior might not shoot me or use his sword to cut me up, but the claws on his hand and the spikes upon his arm told me he could still carve me up like one of my mother's roasts. He reached for me, grabbing me by my arm, pulling me towards him. I fought back, baring my fangs and swiping at him with my claws. He smacked me, hard across the face and blood dripped down into my eye as I howled from the pain of it.

"Just you wait!" I screamed at him. "My mother and father will get you!"

He laughed and reached for me again. This time I fell and rolled away, another skill I'd learned playing 'Danger Danger'.

Now it sounded as if he was swearing at me and his friend laughed as the others ignored us, marching into town. I could see more smoke in the air and heard the panicked bleating of animals carried on the wind. They were burning our farms and hurting the sweet faced grassies that grazed in our pastures and provided us with milk, meat, and wool. Why?

Infuriated, I tackled his legs, only to catch his arm spikes across my chest as he swatted me away.

His friend shouted for him, and he turned away then, leaving me bleeding on the ground as he joined the rest of the warriors bent on finishing the destruction they had started.

Hide, my mother had said, but where? They knew I was here and they were destroying the buildings. All except this one. I got up, clutching the throbbing wounds on my chest, and went into the spaceport. I promptly wished I hadn't, and ran back out, vomiting the sweet treat my mother had bought me at the store. I'd only finished eating it mere moments before the attack.

There! Some crates which must have been waiting to be loaded on the destroyed ship burning on the landing pad. I wedged myself behind them, the solid feel of the building behind me reassuring in its continued existence.

I sat there for I didn't know how long, my legs cramping and my wounds throbbing, but then I saw it. The warriors were returning, this time with people. I saw my mother, one of her arms a bloodied, bandaged stump, and a handful of young I knew, and several adults my mind refused to put names to even though I knew many of them. They were all wounded in some manner, the young nearly all crying. My father was bound along with several other males, and was being dragged.

I fought the urge to run out to them, to let them know I was safe and had hidden like a

good boy, just as my mother had told me to. Two of the warriors broke off from the rest and began looking around and I swallowed back a whimper, knowing it was me they sought. A shake of the head and an arm wave from one of the other warriors had them rejoin the group as a shuttle landed. They shoved everyone inside, made off for their fighters, and took off.

I didn't come out. I knew I had to be the last Dragonii on the planet and nothing but fire and death awaited me out there. I sniffled, crying until I fell asleep.

I startled awake, my scales clammy.

“Fuuuuuck!”

I sat up, waiting for my hearts to calm down from their incessant hammering in my chest. It had been years since I'd dreamed of that moment, the day the marauders came to our small colony, destroying the buildings, killing nearly everyone they came across, capturing the rest, and taking them away. It was only as I became much older that I realized that everyone there who hadn't died that day had most likely been sold as slaves. Everyone except me, because of luck.

I got up and walked to the replicator, asking for a drink of cool water to soothe my parched throat. Glancing at my kunnarskyn, I saw I had two hours before my fathers arrived to have a celebratory graduation breakfast with me before the ceremony. My adoptive fathers, but still my very real ones. I couldn't greet them like this, nerves jangling, scales damp with flop sweat, smelling of childhood terror revisited.

“Bath,” I mumbled, hurrying into the special bathing chamber the academy had given me, to accommodate the sand bath most Dragonii preferred. Honestly, I only used it when burying myself in the warm, golden sands would absorb the sweat quickly and allow me to polish the fine scales upon my skin without having to dry myself off before oiling and buffing myself all over in a laborious process.

I climbed in, already nude as I slept that way, and asked the bathroom's AI to start filling the large basin.

"Your heart rate is elevated," he told me.

"I had a nightmare," I replied.

"I'll add some essential oils to help calm you," he replied.

"Thank you."

"But of course."

The sand began to pour in slowly from spouts on all four slides and I waited until my legs were covered before leaning back. I picked up a handful and sniffed. Lavender, from Earth. How appropriate, that the very planet I was being assigned to would also be the origin of that which soothed me. The warmth soaked into my bones and I felt my hearts slow as my muscles lost their tenseness. I took the handful of sand and began rubbing the scales on my chest with it. All too soon I felt nearly boneless and knew if I didn't get up, I was likely to fall back asleep and my fathers would end up coming to find me. I reluctantly stood, the sand covering me sliding down into the tub in a shower. I bent down, grabbing more sand, and began rubbing myself clean all over.

"I'm done," I told the AI as I stepped out onto the mesh topped grate in front of the basin. The bottom of the tub dropped open, taking the sand with it. A blast of directed warm air gusted, blowing the remnants off of my skin and from the sides of the tub, into the opening below where it would be fed into the recycler to feed the replicators.

I grabbed a towel, using it to rub the stray bits of sand still on me off before making my way back into my room. I pulled out a pair of Mylos Fleet uniform pants, the

leather soft against my hands. I put them on, along with my weapons belt, followed by my newly issued lined boots. A quick brush of my hair and I was finished. Staring back at me was no youthful cadet, nor a frightened young who'd had to hide in order to survive. Before me stood a warrior, a Dragonii Mylos who would protect Earth with his last breath from such violence. One who came in peace, who saw war as a last resort, wanting nothing more than to live in joy among the trees and flowers.

I gave this latest incarnation of myself a nod. It was time to go meet my fathers and face the day.

CHAPTER 6

THOMAS

There were so many people going for auditions and interviews that as soon as I got off the bus half a block away, I could see a line of people snaking their way into the adjacent parking garage. I sauntered over, with the required clothing and whatnot for a three day stay as Cheryl's text message had instructed. I'd crammed it all into one of those zippered top shopping bags on wheels that I used to bring home groceries in, not wanting it to look like I was running off, seeing as I was in enough trouble as it was and I was pretty sure that my neighbors were spying on me for the landlord, and Lord knows who might be reporting back to Anton.

Just thinking about Anton gave me the fucking shivers. I glanced around, and no one stood out but what did I know? The guy who got off the bus behind me and was now going into the nearby coffee shop could be one of his goons, I supposed. The last ones he sent were ordinary looking middle class guys, the same as him. Though he had already been on the bus when I got on, so there was that. Deciding that I was letting paranoia get the better of me, I walked up to read the signs on the door of the Scholarship Center.

"Auditions and interviewees please report to the top level of the parking garage," I read aloud.

A woman with two young kids who was moving to join the line that had formed spoke up. "You here for an interview for one of the adult roles?"

“Yeah,” I replied.

She sighed. “You just missed a guy who said for those who were to take the stairs and go straight on up. Those of us here for the child auditions are going separately to another ship as there are so many. A thousand! Can you believe it? They’re flying up people from all over, mostly kids!”

“It’s a kid’s show, so aren’t most of the roles for children?”

“And puppets, yeah.”

I hoped that there were only a very select few trying out for one of the adult roles. I’d looked over the list Cheryl had sent me. There were a handful of adult neighbors, human and Mylos, a human assistant shopkeeper, a librarian, and various unnamed characters who would feature in small skits revolving around literacy, nature, and so on. As I bypassed the line which turned out to be waiting for one of the two elevators, I felt my previous confidence wavering. It still hadn’t returned by the time I’d walked up the eight flights of stairs and exited onto the roof.

“Name?” a frazzled looking Mylos holding a datapad asked me.

“Thomas Casey Ross,” I replied, giving my full name.

“Do you have your pass?”

I remembered the QR code looking thing Cheryl had sent as an attachment and brought it up on my phone.

“Excellent. If you’ll go over there to the far side,” he said, holding up his datapad to scan it before pointing to where another Mylos was checking everyone’s bags out, “and let us finish making sure you’re good to go, we’ll have you boarded very soon.”

“Okay, thanks.” I pulled my little shopping bag over to the table and waited my turn.

“Where are the people with all the kids?” I asked the grandfatherly looking man in front of me.

“There’s a Mylos in each of the elevators,” the man explained. “They’re having them get off on the next two levels below us so they can check their bags, then come up in groups to get on a shuttle.”

As he spoke, a large saucer landed, one much bigger than I’d ever seen before. It took up all of the space reserved for it to land, it was that big. As if on cue, a stream of parents and children poured out of the stairwell I’d just come from, with a Mylos at the head of them. A ramp lowered and they all filed in. There had to have been over a hundred people, I reckoned, and by the time they were all aboard, it was my turn to have my bag checked.

“Apologies for this,” the warrior said. “But after recent events, we are taking no chances.”

I waved a hand dismissively. “Makes sense. Luggage gets scanned at the airports or you don’t get to go through either.”

He smiled as he waved a device over my bag. “Thank you for your understanding. You’re free to move on to the other half of the line.”

A vibration that was even more intense than the one that had heralded the arrival of the shuttle shook the concrete beneath my feet. The sensation only lasted a few seconds and was gone as soon as the ship lifted off.

“They said ours is next,” The man I’d been speaking with earlier said. “I’m Jeff, by the way. I’m a puppeteer.”

He gestured towards a case at his feet, next to a small suitcase. “My puppet is in there. Seeing you’ve only got the one bag, I’m guessing you’re auditioning?”

“Tom, and yup, I’m hoping for one of the adult roles,” I replied.

“Well, break a leg, kid,” he replied with a smile.

“Thanks. You too.”

Then a second shuttle descended. Our ride was here. As it touched down, I felt a flutter of momentary panic. Was I really doing this? Going into space? Applying for a husband as well as a steady job? A career long role, potentially, at that. What was I thinking? Cheryl was right! It was nuts! Then I thought about what awaited me if I didn’t. Ugh. Lonely nights, poverty, a possible hospital bill after I got the crapola beat out of me, and a move back to my folks. I took a deep breath and let it out, my nerves now made of steel. I was doing the most sensible thing! Even if I was solvent, this was the chance of a lifetime. One only had to look around and see how many people had shown up to do what I was about to do in order to see how not wacky an idea it was. The chance of meeting Mr. Right without any more missteps and the chance of landing a role in a series that was bound to become not only popular, but award winning. Not to mention, galaxy wide distribution. I’d be interstellar famous!

So why was I panicking? It was the shuttle, I realized. I’d felt this exact same way when I got on the plane to fly to New York. It had been fine then and the Mylos were even more advanced with their craft than we were, I reminded myself. Plus, there had been absolutely zero Mylos crashes. ZERO! I took that bit of mental freak out, mentally rolled it into a ball, and shoved it in a box in the corner of my mind, right next to my childhood fear of balloons.

Now I was standing before the ramp. It was only a few steps, but they felt momentous in themselves.

“Just take any empty seat,” a smiling Mylos told me. “There’s a storage compartment overhead where you can place your bag. If it won’t fit, just let me know and I’ll put it in one of the larger compartments.”

“Thank you,” I replied, placing one foot in front of the other, and going inside. I looked around, gawking. I’d expected a lot of blinking lights and stuff, not what looked like first class airline seating on steroids. Well, if the airline seats had full body harnesses, that is, and staggered seating set far enough apart that even the gargantuan Mylos had plenty of leg room.

Jeff waved at me. “There’s a seat here, Tom!” he called out.

I grinned back, making my way to him as I was more than happy to sit next to my new friend. I hoped we both got the jobs we were after. It would be awesome to have a friend there from the start.

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CHAPTER 7

REDONDO

It didn't take long for me to recognize my parents as the shuttle disembarked. Papa waved excitedly as he spotted me.

"There's our handsome son!" he cried out as he reached me, throwing his arms around to hug me tight. He took a half step back, keeping his hands on my shoulders. "What are they feeding you? Look, Lethin, he's even taller than he was before."

"Or you're smaller," Father teased him.

"I think it is my boots," I told them both. "The sole is thicker."

Father hummed in acknowledgment as he glanced down at my feet. "Very nice! They issued you with the magnetically locking soles."

"See? So he is taller, even if it is the boots," Papa said, not to be outdone.

Father pressed a kiss against his temple. "You're ridiculous," he said fondly. "Come on, let's go eat. As soon as we got off the comm with you, I called to see if I could get a table somewhere that served human food."

"You did?" I hadn't known there was any place like that near the academy, but I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised.

“Yes. It’s someplace called The Waffle House and it’s here within the spaceport. Apparently, they are famous on Earth.”

“They said they didn’t usually do reservations, but made an exception,” Papa beamed. “The pictures of the food on the menu looked interesting and the customer reviews were quite promising.” Papa let go of me at last, his cheeks flushing a bit as he realized he’d still been holding me all this time.

Father consulted his kunnarskyn, looking for directions.

“Where’s Yllip?” Papa asked.

“His family aren’t arriving until mid-afternoon,” I explained, “so he decided to oversee the packing up of both our rooms as the movers arrived just before I left.”

He pursed his lips. “You should call and have him meet us. He needs to eat, too.”

Father glanced up. “Our reservation isn’t for another half an hour,” he grinned. “The restaurant uses earth time and it never closes!”

“Really?”

Father nodded. “Best get used to it, the Bride Fleets always use local time measurements and sync to a central location on the planet.”

I nodded. Yllip and I had read up on our new duty station late into the night. “Hawaii,” I said. “They’ve got a special cultural sharing and preservation deal going on with the indigenous people there. Hawaii is a chain of islands in the middle of one of their vast oceans.”

“That sounds interesting. I can’t wait to see it!”

I blinked. “You would travel the three days to get there?” The thought made me feel happy.

“We will be traveling with you there,” Father replied. I stared at him in surprise.

“You will?”

Papa nodded, his huge grin nearly splitting his face in two.

“Yes! While your father was busy making breakfast arrangements, I was looking into getting us housing. Surprise! We’re being allowed to retire there and remain aboard as family.”

I was stunned. I hadn’t expected anything remotely like this to happen.

“I think I broke him,” Papa whispered to Father.

“I think you did.”

“I just can’t believe it!”

“In a good way or a bad way?” Papa asked, looking worried now.

“Definitely a good way,” I replied. “I’ve missed you both.”

Father patted my arm. “Well, no need to miss us any longer. You’ll probably see us so much you’ll wish we moved to another ship. As it is, they are housing us all in the same quarters in the family section.”

“I can’t wait to tell Yllip!” I tapped my kunnarskyn to open a comm to do just that.

“It’s me,” he replied, “Yllip!”

“Papa and Father said you should come down to the spaceport to meet us for breakfast. They made reservations at an Earth restaurant that opened up here. It’s called The Waffle House.”

“Um, okay. It didn’t take them long at all to finish, so I was just headed to the mess hall, but your offer sounds better. Consider me on my way. Meet you there!” He ended the comm. I knew it wouldn’t take long for him to arrive as the academy shared part of the spaceport with the local authorities so that we could practice piloting skills.

“Excellent! It’s this way, apparently,” he said, turning to lead us where his kunnarskyn had directed him. We wove through the crowds, exiting the shuttle bay area to the main concourse filled with shops and eateries. Huge letters in black on a glowing yellow background spelled out the name, with a smaller black sign with lit up yellow lettering spelling it out phonetically in Galactic Standard.

“I’m going to have to get my implant upgraded,” I said, referring to the translation nanites synced with my brain’s language center.

“We all will,” Father reminded me.

“It just seems like so much to do when I first arrive,” I said. “I hope I don’t mess up and make my section chief mad.”

Father pulled the glass door open. Immediately, all talk ceased as everyone took in the big, scary, scarred Dragonii wearing a Mylos military uniform. They eyed me, then curiosity satisfied, returned to their previous conversations. I was used to it. I was large, even by Mylos standards, standing a full head taller than most. That didn’t mean I liked it, though.

“Easy,” Papa said softly, squeezing my arm in support.

I threw him a grateful smile. “I’m fine.”

“Hi!” a human waitress said, bouncing over to us. “You guys must be the ones who reserved a table.”

“Yes, we are,” Father replied. “Our son and his best friend are graduating tonight and received keys to their assignment at Earth.”

“How exciting!” she exclaimed. “We’re all the way out here because my husband and I read about franchise opportunities that came with grants. We thought, well, we always wanted to travel and are big sci fi nerds, so why not?”

She showed us to a booth in a corner.

“My son’s friend will be arriving in a moment to join us,” Father said as we took our seats.

“That’s fine, Would you like to order drinks and look at the menu while you wait?”

“Yes, please,” Papa replied. “What is traditional?”

“How about some orange juice and coffee? That’s two drinks, but totally a thing people do at breakfast.”

Papa looked at me and Father.

“If it’s traditional, why not?” Father grinned back at her.

“For me as well, and I know Yllip will also want to try the same,” I said.

“Make that four, then,” Papa said brightly.

“Aren’t you all the sweetest,” she cooed, sashaying off.

“What’s this?” I asked, looking at a curious box on the side of the table, against a window looking out onto the concourse.

Father peered at it. “I don’t know. Here are words next to the buttons and a payment reader. Select some buttons and I’ll pay so we can see what it does.”

Papa and I randomly selected some buttons and Father paid. Immediately music began to play and a male’s voice to croon. It was some sort of music machine.

“How interesting,” Father said.

“I like it.”

Our waitress pranced over with a brown tray holding four glasses filled with thick liquid that was indeed orange and four handled mugs. She sat it down on the table, threw her arms wide and sang out, “Uh huh, uh huh, woo ooo,” along with the singer while jiggling side to side. “Sorry,” she said, dropping her arms and setting the beverages out. “We’re from Memphis and find Elvis irresistible.” She pursed her lips. “Dolly too, for that matter.”

“Is that who is singing?” Father asked her.

“Yup. He’s known as the King of Rock-n-Roll, one of the most popular kinds of music there is,” she replied, picking up the now empty tray. “I’ll be right back with your coffee, but I won’t fill your friend’s before he gets here so it won’t get cold.”

She pranced back over to behind the counter.

Papa chuckled. "I have a feeling Earth is going to be interesting indeed and quite a lot of fun."

I nodded. If this was any example to go by, life within the Earth Bride Fleet would be interesting indeed. As for fun, while with Yllip and my fathers sure. The rest depended on if I managed to make good on my promise to myself and make friends. As for a mate, I wasn't certain I would be so lucky. Not with a first Bride Fleet posting anyway. My mate would have to be truly exceptional to see past the ugly scarring and my other differences. I was not the Mylos a human mate would be expecting. Not only was I not genetically Mylos, I was a hideous example of a Dragonii.

CHAPTER 8

THOMAS

It was strangely easy to pretend that we were indeed on a super fancy chartered jet. There weren't any windows, though a bulkhead became a screen that began playing an informational film about life aboard the Bride Fleet. I stared as they showed parks with actual trees and grass, lined with indoor 'streets' filled with cafes and shops.

"Their ships must be absolutely gargantuan," I said.

"Definitely bigger than the Enterprise," a woman who'd introduced herself to us as Sandy replied. "Bigger than the Galactica too."

"Let's just hope their AI doesn't go all Cylon on us," Jeff joked.

The informational film paused. "Oh, no worries there," a voice piped. "Sorry, I was talking to your pilot and overheard. I'm Xeranos, Xero for short. If you need anything, just holler my name! I'll let you get back to your film now." It resumed playing as others glanced around confused as to who the AI had been addressing.

"Okay, that wasn't kind of creepy at all," Jeff said.

"Nah, I'm used to my Alexa thinking I've called for her and saying stuff," Sandy replied. "So, do you think we'll get matched?"

Jeff chuckled. "I'm already married. My wife is visiting our daughter and grandkids

in Cincinnati. If I get this job, she'll join me once our lease is up."

"I heard they'd pay off our leases and mortgages," I said.

"Yeah, I heard that too," Sandy said. "I hope I get matched. Have you seen how yummy these guys all are?" She fanned herself. "It's like they all came out of a hotness factory."

I laughed. "They are all pretty buff," I agreed.

"And tall. I've never felt so short in my life. Now I know how my wife feels. She's five two and always gripes about how tall cabinets are and stuff, and having to always look up at people. I totally get it now."

We nodded at him sympathetically. I was five foot six, so not super tall myself, more about average, but damn, I felt tiny next to the seven foot something Mylos. Their tight leather pants left nothing to the imagination, either. They certainly appeared to be proportional all over. My ass clenched at the thought of riding on one of their dicks. I did love a good fucking down, but those would certainly be a stretch. Give me some stretching and plenty of lube and I'd certainly be game to give it a spin, though.

The informational film came to an end and the bulkhead returned to looking a creamy white.

"Xero, display our approach," the pilot said loud enough for us all to hear. As if by magic, the outside view came to panoramic life around us. Stars, stars, and more stars, though if I turned my head, I could see the moon and Earth. It was breathtaking. Some of the stars grew ever larger and became identifiable as ships. I tugged out my phone as others were doing and began snapping pictures.

“Shuttle 26 Omicron, you are cleared for landing in your usual bay,” a voice said.

“Understood.” We banked slightly left and one of the ships got larger and larger. And then I saw it, an open bay yawning wide for us to fly into. Then we were going in through a faint shimmer as we entered an area filled with other craft, slowing to a stop. The “windows” disappeared and there was a faint bump as the saucer settled on its cushion of air. We’d arrived.

“We have arrived at our destination,” our pilot said. “Please remain seated while I come and assist you with removing yourselves from your harnesses and getting out your bags. Do not stand up and try to do this yourselves as you will only cause disruption. Thank you for your patience.”

He unhooked himself and went to the closest seat, helping them as promised. They were towards the center of the saucer, so their bags were in a storage compartment off to one side. He instructed the passengers he was helping to exit and that once everyone had de-saucered, he would pass out the baggage in it. He worked his way around, reaching overhead for those of us seated closest to a wall.

“Here you are,” he said, handing me mine. “Just follow him out and wait for your guide to take you to your temporary lodging.”

I followed Jeff out, Sandy not far behind me.

“This really is something,” she enthused, her head swiveling around to take everything in.

We stared open mouthed as another shuttle came in, this one smaller.

“It’s amazing,” I replied, feeling like I had stepped onto a very expensive movie set with some physical special effects going on.

“My wife is going to be sorry she missed this,” Jeff said, then shrugged. “Though I suppose if I get this job, she’ll see it for herself soon enough.”

“Yeah,” I replied softly.

“Okay,” a cheerful looking Mylos said, clapping his hands together. “That looks like everyone, and you all have your bags?”

A murmur of agreement rolled through the group, no one dissenting. “Excellent! I’m Ritl, one of the main assistants to Kailirex, the Fleet’s Chief Public Relations Officer. If you’ll just follow me, I’ll get you to your temporary quarters. Once there, if you’re unsure how to operate anything, just call for Xeranos and he’ll be happy to assist you. Or, if you are in the bathing and elimination chamber, simply say what you need out loud and the voice only AI assigned to there will. We ask that you remain courteous at all times, including to our AI, as they are fully sentient, much like the Commander Data from your Star Trek series.”

That generated some excited buzzing between members of the group. “If this makes you uncomfortable, please remain here at the shuttle and you will be taken back.”

Three people picked up their bags and went to stand closer to the shuttle. He took their names, presumably removing them from the list as he tapped away on his datapad.

“Very well. Let’s go. Please try to stay more or less in a single line.”

The rest of us followed him across the busy hangar to a set of double doors which he opened by pressing his palm against a plate set in the wall. The doors swished open, revealing a corridor, which then led to a rather large elevator where another three Mylos stood.

“We will have to split up here,” our guide said. “I’ll call out your names. If I don’t call you, please remain here with Demain, Jakar, and Pulrit. They will in turn call out names and take you where you need to go.”

Sandy wasn’t in the same group as I was, but Jeff was, which was a relief.

“Looks like it’s me and you again, eh?” he joked as we got onto the elevator.

“I should warn you that this moves sideways as well as up and down. Please do not be disconcerted.”

It was already too late for that. I had already moved straight into discombobulated territory, along with everyone else from their expressions.

CHAPTER 9

REDONDO

A bell jingled as the door opened, and I realized that this was most likely the true reason why the patrons had all turned as we entered. Seeing it was Yllip, I waved to get his attention and he sauntered on over.

“We ordered you beverages,” Papa told him. “Ondo was certain that you’d want the same as we are having.”

“Thank you,” he said, settling in across from me and taking a cautious sip of the tart juice. “Not bad,” he pronounced.

“I’ve got your coffee,” our waitress said, pouring him a cup.

“It’s very bitter,” Father warned him.

“Oh, that’s what the sugar is there for, if you want it sweeter. I’d start with just two sugars though unless you like things super sweet. And those little pots? They’re creamer to add to it. Helps mellow the coffee out. I should have told you earlier,” she apologized as another song came on. “Oh! I like this one too! Gotta love Buddy Holly!” she informed us. Yllip looked at her in amusement as she swayed in place as she spoke. “I’ll let you boys look over the menu now that your friend is here. Be back in a few to get your orders!”

She hurried off to refill the mugs of other patrons.

“Well, she’s bubbly,” Yllip laughed, holding his hand out for one of the laminated picture menus.

We all decided that as it was called the Waffle House and not the Scrambled Egg Place or Hamburger Shack or some such thing, that waffles were probably our best bet. When in doubt, stick to their specialty.

“Made up your minds?” she asked, coming back, this time with a paper notepad and a writing instrument in her hand.

“We have,” Father replied. “We all want the waffle platter in the photo.”

“Okay. Do you want your waffles plain or with chocolate chips?”

“Which is the best?”

“Oh,” she said, pursing her lips. “Now, that depends. If you really like chocolate, the ones with chips in. I like those on occasion, but I gotta admit, I really like the regular ones best, with lots of syrup.”

Father looked around the table. Seeing us all nod, he replied, “The regular, then, with the syrup.”

“White or wheat toast?”

We all looked down at the picture.

“How about I just get you exactly what’s in the picture?” she offered.

“Yes,” Father replied and we all heaved a sigh of relief.

“Alrighty. Be ready in about fifteen minutes.”

“Why is the box on the table playing music?” Yllip asked.

“We were curious about what it was and tried it. We found out afterward that the buttons correspond to song names and singers printed by them.”

He glanced around. “If everyone played theirs, it would get quite loud with all the different songs.”

“Yes, that does make it seem a bit odd they’d put them on every table then, doesn’t it?” Papa said.

“How is your family? We’ve not seen them since your father took that job on Orinico Station.”

“They’re good. He’s starting to talk about retirement, but my mother is adamant that she’s far too young to be old enough to be a retiree.”

We all laughed at that. Yllip then began telling us about his older sister’s oldest son gaining admission to a Fleet preparatory school.

“She says it’s all my fault because he wants to attend one of the official academies and become commissioned,” he informed us. “She’s trying to talk him into becoming a civilian pilot instead, for a cruise line. Father says it’s because she has her eye on getting a huge discount.”

We laughed and talked some more, reminiscing about childhood antics. In seemingly no time at all our food was brought to us.

“Now, the white stuff in the bowls is called grits. They can be kinda bland, but I’ve

got some Tabasco sauce if you'd like to add a bit of fire to it. The spicy goes real good with the sweet of the syrupy pancakes," she informed us and so, I decided to follow her expert advice. I wasn't very impressed by the result, but it did take the edge off the sweet. So did the orange juice, which suddenly tasted very, very sour.

Papa picked up a small packet off the small plate holding toasted triangles bread. "Grape jelly. Look, it's purple."

"So why is not called purple jelly?" Father asked. "If the juice is orange so is orange juice, surely the jelly should be purple jelly because it is purple."

We all nodded as this made perfect sense.

"I like this coffee," Yllip said. "It's horrible without the cream and sugar, though."

"I bet there will be plenty of coffee where we're going," Father said before taking a long, slow sip.

"We?"

"Papa and Father are taking their retirement and joining me as part of my household," I explained.

He grinned. "Really?"

"Really," Papa confirmed. "They are giving us shared quarters in the family area."

"I wish I could live with you," Yllip said. "Maybe I'll get matched and they'll find quarters near yours so we can hang out together as always without my having to traipse across the ship," he frowned. "That's if we're quartered on the same vessel within the Fleet."

Father grunted. "It's a buddy assignment, so you will be. As for the other, we and your parents have always half expected you two to declare yourselves a family unit."

"You mean like a Dragonii Clutch?" I asked, surprised.

"Or a Sanguinii clan," Papa said.

"A Dragonii Clutch! That would be something!" Yllip replied, looking at me hopefully.

With everyone's gaze now upon me, looking at me expectantly for some sort of answer, I found myself at a loss.

"I'm Mylos," I began.

"A Dragonii Mylos," Papa reminded me. "And there are Sanguinii Mylos within the Fleet. Clan Drani is in charge of weapons training. "

Papa was a fan of Oshar and Korah of Clan Drani, having followed them in the tournaments they participated in and nearly always won, so I was not surprised to discover he knew this.

"Actually," Father said, "Papa is being a bit disingenuous as am I," he sighed, looking at Papa. "It's time."

He nodded and Yllip and I looked at them both wearing near identical expressions of perplexion.

"Explain what?"

"The moment Papa found you, huddled behind those crates, exhausted, hungry, and

dehydrated, he felt a deep connection to you. You were out of your mind with terror, swiping at him with your tiny claws despite your wounds and everything else,” he chuckled. “I had to help catch you as you tried to run and despite being fevered from the dehydration and infection setting into your wounds, you were fast. But I caught you and when you looked into my eyes and suddenly threw those small arms around my neck as the promises of safety that we were making to you registered, I knew you were meant to be ours. We already knew there were no other survivors as the bio scan only alerted us to you, local wildlife, and a handful of domesticated animals”

Papa nodded. “The Council was happy to agree to us adopting you, but first, your survival had to be reported to the Dragonii authorities. You were in Sickbay aboard the ship we served on, crying without ceasing unless your father or I were there holding your hand. The medics had to sedate you to get you to sleep peacefully, due to the nightmares that plagued you. The Dragonii keep no genetic database of their citizenry so there was no one to easily match you to. Nor did anyone who came forward as a possibility prove to be a match. Several Dragonii wished to claim you for their clutch, but our ambassador pleaded with theirs to come meet you in person. He agreed, on the condition that only the Fleet Commander and our captain knew of his impending arrival and that he was allowed to bring a vid crew.”

“I remember that,” I said slowly. “They came and you were sitting on the bed with me, reading me a story.”

“That’s right. You were clutching my hair tightly in your fist, needing to hold onto me. It pulled a bit, but I knew it wasn’t intentional and I didn’t mind.”

“You were wearing one of my vests,” Father reminisced, “and every so often, you’d bend your head to sniff it, seeking my scent as additional comfort.”

“He took one look and realized we’d already imprinted as family and that we were your security. The footage prompted outcries for us to get to keep you, in order to not

traumatize you any further. What really clinched it, though, was when the ambassador asked you if you knew who your Clutch was.”

“I can’t remember,” I replied. “I can only sort of see their faces and almost recall their voices, but I never knew my parent’s actual names, nor do I remember any Clan arms being on display. None other than the one that stood for the colony as a whole.”

“That’s because the colony eschewed those trappings, apparently,” Papa replied.

“So, you were allowed to adopt me because I told the entire universe that I couldn’t remember who my Clutch was?”

“No,” Father answered me soberly. “It was because you told them we were.”

Papa placed his hand on mine. “We were required to register as a Dargonii Clutch so as to not sever you completely from your people. We always knew that one day, it could become more than a technical formality.”

“We,” I gestured between the three of us, “are an official Dragonii Clutch?”

“Wow!” Yllip exclaimed. “So you are all Dragonii Mylos!”

The implications of what that meant in relation to what my best friend had said earlier struck me. “And a Clutch can add members by declaration of fealty.”

“I accept,” Yllip said. “I’m not joking. We’ve always claimed each other as brothers in all but blood.”

“If you’re serious, talk it over with your family first. If you still wish for it to be so, I’ll file the paperwork.”

Yllip and I looked at each other stunned.

“I’d like that,” I admitted.

“I’m going to have to treat my parents to a really, really nice lunch.”

Our waitress reappeared. “Lunch? I can really recommend the fried pork chops. Pair it with cheesy grits and two fried eggs and toast, and it should be enough even for one of you Mylos as long as you also have some pie.”

“Maybe for the evening meal,” he sighed. “We can all meet here for that and you can help reassure them that I’m not renouncing them as my family, I’m just also joining yours.”

“Done,” Father said. Looking at the waitress he said, “Could we reserve the big corner booth?”

“Yeah, go on then,” she replied. “What time?”

Happiness suffused me. This morning’s nightmare seemed distant now, only the faintest ghost of a memory that held no power over me. I was going to the Bride Fleet, one stationed at a world where I probably did not have a mate, but that was okay. My family was with me and best of all, Yllip was going to become my Clutch brother. I was already surrounded by love of a sort. It would be enough.

CHAPTER 10

THOMAS

I glanced around the quarters they'd given me. There was a very comfortable extra long twin bed with not one, but two nightstands. One held a lamp and the other a charging station with various ports. A closet was between the bed and a seating area consisting of a small loveseat, a coffee and side table, and an armchair, as well as what my information pack said was a replicator. It looked suspiciously like the one on Star Trek, only with a door on it which bore a notice in English saying the door would not open while the replicator was in operation. Another door on the opposite side of the bedroom area turned out to be a rather nice bathroom, with some pretty fancy looking shower controls that I suspected I'd have to ask the bathroom AI mentioned in the film about.

Alrighty then. I didn't want to think of what mishap had led them to put the warning on the replicator. Nope. Totally not imagining anything freaky and stomach turning. Instead, I pondered the lack of a window or a TV and debated whether or not I should unpack my clothes. I decided that was a definite yes, as it would look terrible if I showed up in wrinkled clothing tomorrow for my audition. That was if my audition was actually tomorrow, as there were a lot of people to get through and only so many Mylos to do it, so as we were being shown our rooms, we'd been informed that it could take up to a week for us to be called in, with those of us being tested going first. Which, apparently, was roughly half of the adult applicants. Apologies were made, and the sting taken out of only having the clothes on our backs and one or two outfits by letting us know we were free to choose anything we wished from the ship's stores to remedy our clothing shortage issues. We were also free to either replicate

whatever we wished to eat or avail ourselves of the many eateries in the recreation zone. All free! That was hard to wrap my head around, but apparently that's how shit worked within the Fleet. When it came time to 'pay', each person merely presented their Fleet ID, one ID per family unit, no matter if it was just one or a whole gaggle, and it was noted purely to keep track of general consumption.

It took me less than five minutes to put away what I'd brought.

"Xeranos?" I called out, only half expecting a reply.

"Hello, Thomas! Or should I call you Tom? You may call me Xero, if you prefer, as my human friends all do."

"Sure, Tom is fine. Um," I rubbed a hand along the back of my neck. "I have a couple questions, but they might seem kinda dumb."

"There are no stupid questions, just stupid answers," he replied.

I laughed. "My granny used to say that. Okay, well, first, I was wondering why you guys don't seem to do windows? There weren't any on the shuttle, and I don't see any in here. Or a TV."

"We don't like compromising hull integrity with the introduction of glass or glass like materials," he explained. "However, just as with the shuttle, the nanites within the walls can configure themselves into a viewing screen. You can use it to watch vids or have them simulate a window with nearly any view you desire."

Wow. Okay. "So, if I asked for a window I could look out on the side walls by the bed, how do I do that?"

"Simply ask me, indicating precisely where and what sort of view you would like.

“Okay, so if I asked to see what was outside the ship, it would show me that, even if that’s not what’s on the other side of those particular walls?”

“I would select a view that was outward from this side of the ship and one from the opposite side. Ones with especially pleasant views, of course.”

“Of course. And the TV?”

“Simply let me know what you’d like to watch. If uncertain, I can place a menu up for you to view.”

I had a pretty good idea that the list would be even bigger than my Netflix back home. Well, back when I’d had Netflix. I’d cancelled all my paid streaming services as soon as I realized I wasn’t going to be able to pay for them. See? I could be fiscally responsible!

“And I just need to tell you where I want the TV screen?”

“Yes. Just say, I’d like to watch it in bed, or I’m sitting in the living room, and I’ll put it in the most optimal location.”

“You know where everything is in here?”

“I can see if I look,” he admitted. “When you call me, I open my eyes and ears in here. I am as present here as I can be without having a physical body beyond the cameras and comm system.”

“But only if I call you?”

“Yes, unless I need to because of a perceived emergency, and you need to be checked on for your safety.”

Okay, that made me feel better. If it had been a human corporation's AI saying that, I'd have been suspicious. But they used everything they captured to offer us services they thought we'd pay for, products they wanted us to buy, and to train their AIs to be smarter. Xero was like Commander Data, only without an android body to physically walk about, and he was Mylos. As the Mylos had proven themselves thus far to be above reproach and honest almost to a fault, my gut said I could trust Xero to not creep on me.

"Cool. My second question was, am I understanding it correctly when I say that if I go to one of the restaurants, I just need to tap the little icon on the tablet you guys gave me, and it will sync with the cafe's system so I'm marked as paid?"

"That is correct. Were you thinking of going out? You are not only limited to the places aboard this ship. If an eatery on one of the others appeals, you may take a shuttle over and avail yourself."

My eyebrows shot up to the top of my hairline. "And I don't have to pay for the ride?"

"You do not indeed."

"So, if I asked where I could get the most killer bibimbap, there'd be a Korean place to get it, and I could just fly over to it if it's on another ship?" I fished.

"Yes. And if that is what you wish to eat, I can tell you that Seoul Food on the promenade here aboard this ship is highly regarded. It's run by Seo-yun Park, who is mated to Kilnar, one of our junior medics."

I'd plucked that menu choice out of thin air, but now that I knew I really could have it, I had a hankering for some. It was past the time I usually had lunch, though the tablet they gave me showed that it was only just after seven in the morning ship's

time.

“When do they open?”

“1200 ship’s time,” came the reply.

“Replicator it is,” I said, also eager to try that out. I’d wait and go to Seoul Food for dinner.

“Xero,” I called out, “I’d like...” Shit. What did I want? Oh! “I’d like a bowl of nabeyaki udon.”

I stared as the interior of the replicator lit up and a bowl of the delectable dish materialized. Damn. If I didn’t get one of the roles, I was going to miss just being able to ask for whatever my stomach decided it wanted. I walked over to it, opening the door to remove the bowl. It even came with chopsticks on a rest and one of those porcelain flat bottomed spoons you sometimes saw in restaurants, all of it on a small tray.

“Would you care for a drink?”

“Um, Ramune?”

“Which flavor?”

“Melon?”

“Someone will stock your chiller with some. Is there anything I can replicate for you while you wait?”

“Wait! No one needs to bring me just one soda!” I protested.

“I am ordering an assortment, including the requested Ramune, so you may have a selection during your stay. The request is already being fulfilled.”

Well, crap. I needed to be a bit more careful about what I asked for.

“Can you make some tea?”

“Variety?”

“Just some regular sweet tea, like they drink down south. I grew up in Georgia.”

A glass materialized.

“Thanks. Um, I’m going to go stretch out on the little sofa to eat. Could you put on a movie for me?”

“What would you like to watch?”

I had a lot of time to kill, and I’d missed the sequel to *Knives Out* thanks to being too broke to go to the movies and then having to cancel my services. “The Glass Onion, please.”

The wall shimmered, and then the ratings information for the film appeared.

“Thanks.”

“You’re most welcome.”

I smiled as I noticed he’d given me the space view we’d discussed hypothetically, too, the ‘windows’ right where I’d said. I settled down and began to eat, losing myself quickly within the movie’s narrative.

CHAPTER 11

REDONDO

“Hey,” Yllip said, walking into the clinic.

I craned my neck to look around him. “Your parents didn’t come?”

“No,” he replied breezily, waving a hand dismissively. “They knew this was just a routine language acquisition, so they decided to settle in the rooms and freshen up before lunch.”

I nodded. “Papa’s already gone in. Father is with him and is due to go next.”

“Okay, well, I best go check in so they know I’ve shown up.”

He left me to walk up to the desk to speak with the assistant medic manning the station. He returned several moments later.

“Looks like I’m right after you,” he grinned. “And it also appears they’ve noted my pending request to join your Clutch.”

I stared at him in surprise. “You talked it over with them already?”

He shook his head. “I don’t need their permission. I’m joining a family unit, not abandoning one. They are still my parents, and my siblings are my siblings.”

“But you are going to talk to them about it, so they understand it, right?”

“I will, but even if they don’t like it, it’s done. I’ve applied, and all it needs is your approval.”

“Mine? I thought they needed my father’s!”

“Apparently not. Your fathers applied for the designation of the family unit to be recognized as a Clutch, but as you are the only Dragonii by blood...”

“I’m head of the household,” I finished, closing my eyes as it sank in. I reopened them, gusting out a sigh. “It makes sense.”

“You just need to reply to the message they sent you and it’s complete,” he said.

I checked my kunnarskyn. It had vibrated a few times while I sat here waiting for Papa to come out, but after seeing the requests from the press to set up an interview to tell everyone how it felt to be the first Dragonii to graduate from the Fleet Academy, I’d ignored it, thinking they were more of the same. They were, except one from Fleet Legal and another from the Academy’s Office of Events, reminding us all of what time our ceremony was, as if we could possibly forget. I opened the one from Fleet Legal, and it was just as Yllip had said, a request for me to verify via reply that Yllip was being accepted into my Clutch as a brother. I took a deep breath and quickly tapped out a confirmation, pressed my thumb against the screen, and hit send. I hoped I hadn’t just made a terrible mistake that would cost my best friend in all the universe his family.

“It will be okay,” Yllip reassured me.

“But what if they are opposed to the idea?”

He shrugged. “Then they’ll get mad and get over it.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then they don’t. Listen, I’m fond of them all, but this is my life and I get to choose how I want to live it. Not my parents. Not my siblings. Me.”

“Well, now, also me,” I said, pointing at my face. “Head of the Clutch,” I deadpanned.

He laughed. “Tell that to your fathers.”

I shook my head side to side vigorously. “No way. I’ll just make sure they think everything is their own idea.”

“Yeah, that probably would be the smart thing to do.”

The door leading to the treatment rooms opened, and both Papa and Father came out.

“Ugh, the headache as they integrated was the worst,” Papa complained.

“But you’re okay, right?” I asked him.

“Well, yeah. It didn’t last long. Only enough time that you sit there thinking how much it hurts, and then BAM! All gone. Then they make you drink some electrolytes and test your language acquisition.”

“While they were jabbering away in English, I had my nanites injected,” Father said. “It felt like I’d been stabbed in the head, but passed after several breaths. You’ll be fine.”

“Redondo?” The assistant medic called out, looking around.

I stood up and went to the desk. “I’m Redondo.”

She smiled and pointed. “If you’ll go back through there, they are waiting for you in the room whose door is second on the right.”

I gave her a nod, then turned to make my way to the door. I’d had language nanites before, back when I was five. Usually, children weren’t given them as they soaked up new information like a sponge, new languages included. But my terror and their need to communicate with me saw the decision made to give them to me. I’d been asleep when it happened, though, so I hadn’t felt any of the side effects. I simply woke up fluent in both Mylos and Galactic Standard. I did remember what came after, though - the language test where they held up objects and pictures and asked me what they were, and I had to answer first in Mylos, then in Galactic Standard. An extended version of the test followed, as a linguist came to record my answers in Dragonii. They used the results to extrapolate a working translator, and with that, they approached the Dragonii. The rest is history.

The Mylos medic in the room I was sent to looked startled when I came in. He quickly schooled his features, however. I was used to that reaction. Many Mylos were not used to being so much shorter, and indeed, even among the rest of the Galactic citizenry, we Dragonii easily loomed over nearly all of them. This Mylos smiled ruefully as he gestured for me to climb onto the medi-bed.

“If you’ll lie down for me, I’ll make this quick. I’m afraid your feet are probably going to hang off a bit, most likely, but I promise to have a word with Supply so they get us some larger beds. I’m sure you won’t be the last Dragonii we get through here.”

I smile at him, careful to not flash too much fang. “Probably not. I heard that the

recruiting posters featuring me in the lab and piloting a shuttle have gathered the interest of at least five more who will start at one of the campuses next term.”

His smile grew. “How exciting! I was thrilled when we opened our Fleet Academies to other species within the Council. It’s an easy way to expand our cultural reach and gain a better understanding of that of others.”

I nodded, climbing up onto the bed. He hummed to himself as he read my vital signs on the monitor above the bed.

“Your heart rate is slightly elevated, but that’s to be expected. It’s been a very exciting few days for you, which I’m sure you’re very happy about. That and the fact that your fathers no doubt told you about the terrible headaches they experienced for several moments.” He grimaced. “Unavoidable, I’m afraid, but thankfully extremely brief.”

“I have to admit I’m not looking forward to that part,” I admitted as he lifted the hypo towards my neck.

“If you’ll turn your head, please, so I may inject them at the base of your skull.”

I complied and felt the cool press of the metal against my skin, followed by the cold feeling of the nanites entering my body after a small sting from the injector spray.

Headache was too small a word to describe the agony that followed a few heartbeats later. My vision seared white, and I closed my eyes as the light became too much to bear. Every small sound I could discern was suddenly far too loud. My brain felt as if someone was trying to turn it into mush. All this as I panted for several breaths as I tried to survive it. Then, the bliss of nothing as the pain suddenly ceased, and the world went back to normal around me.

I blinked. “That’s it?” I croaked.

He chuckled. “Yes.”

“Thank the stars,” I replied fervently. “I was beginning to wish I could scoop my brains out just so I could make it stop.”

“That’s a common reaction, I’m afraid. Unfortunately, no one has yet figured out a way to have the patient not feel the pain, at least not while conscious.”

“I’m glad I was asleep when they gave me my first lot as a youngling,” I admitted. “So, now we do the test to see if it took?”

“No need,” the medic chuckled once more. “We’ve both been speaking English this entire time.”

I barked out a laugh as I sat up, realizing he was right. “Well, that worked, then,” I said, this time in Mylos.

He handed me an electrolyte drink from a small tray. “Drink this, and then as long as you feel steady on your feet, you may go. Some require a short recovery time, others find they are good to go immediately.”

I swigged down the liquid, ignoring the slightly oily, too sweet taste. I handed him the empty container, which he put into the recycler. Then I counted to ten, decided I felt like I normally did, and swung my legs over the side of the bed. So far, so good. I stood up. I was steady on my feet as expected.

“Thanks.”

He grinned up at me.

“Always good to have another happy customer,” he quipped. “Please let them know out front to send in the next one.”

I took a step and came to the conclusion that going a bit slower than usual was a good idea. I was out the door and down the short stretch of hall before my brain caught up with quite where the floor was for my feet while moving. I opened the door and made my way to the desk.

The assistant medic there looked up with a smile. “He asked for the next one, huh?”

“He did,” I smiled back.

I returned to my seat beside Papa.

“Was it as bad as they said?” Yllip asked, his turquoise scales flaring along his jaw as he psyched himself up to face what was coming next.

“Worse, but over in a flash,” I admitted.

“Yllip,” the assistant medic called, and he stood up, a look of resignation on his face.

Papa laughed as he walked past.

“You look like a male on his way to his doom,” he teased him, causing Yllip to square his shoulders.

‘I’ve got this,’ he muttered, stalking towards first the desk, then the door.

I didn’t envy him one bit. If I never had another set of language nanites again, it would be too soon.

CHAPTER 12

THOMAS

I wasn't on tomorrow's list when it was sent out at 4:30 p.m. ship's time. Not for an audition nor for the mate matching test. I headed out to eat at Seoul Food, immediately feeling like I'd wandered into a futuristic neighborhood film set that was supposed to represent Somewhere Urban, USA. The main recreation deck had an absolutely enormous park in the middle, filled with real grass, trees, shrubs, and flowers. There was an honest to goodness sectioned off "paved" area divided into three parts - one for pedestrians, one for bicycles and scooters, and one for people on skates and boards. It ran the entire perimeter of the park as well as down the center, both horizontally and vertically. There was a large pool with a water fountain that had some fish in it that at first glance I thought were koi until I took a closer look and saw they were all Easter egg pastel colors, with either bright blue or purple eyes, and more closely resembled angelfish crossed with a koi. Very pretty and I knew they'd do well if sold on Earth, which they definitely wouldn't be given the Mylos' stance on introducing invasive species. Their policies on exporting non native plant and animal life to Earth famously made Australia's rules look positively lax.

I didn't see anyone I recognized during my wander around the park, nor among the throng of humans and Mylos that milled around and in and out of the various venues. I was a little disappointed, hoping to run into at least one familiar face, but I was out of luck. That didn't put me off, however, as I was used to living in New York, and unless you were going into a place you'd made a regular haunt, you were just as likely to not run into anyone you knew as you were to.

Seoul Food was easy enough to locate, thanks to the signage in both English and Hangul. The seating area was “outdoors” in an area surrounded by a short fence, facing the park. The counter and cooking areas were under a sort of lean-to. It had a distinct local street food vibe, and I was really digging it. The scent of the food beckoned deliciously, and I was tickled to see they had Korean beer and other alcoholic drinks on offer in addition to water and various soft drinks. I got into line, ordered my food, and quickly found a seat once I realized that we were expected to simply find an empty spot at any table and take it.

“Hi, I hope you don’t mind if I sit here,” I said nervously, despite the small signs dotted around instructing everyone to do just this.

The woman and her friends smiled. “Not at all. I’m Amy, and these are my friends Marisol, Jun, and Nancy. We’re on our weekly girls’ night out. Our mates are at their evening hula class, same day each week, so we come out to have dinner together.”

“And take them a doggie bag for when they get back,” Nancy giggled.

“Hula class?” Surely I had misheard that.

But no, I hadn’t. The four women all nodded.

“Yes. It’s part of the cultural exchange program and forms part of their physical training, too. Hula takes a lot of strength and stamina,” Nancy said.

“Yup, sure does,” Marisol agreed. “The deal with the Native Hawaiian people is a really big deal. There’s even a Kamehameha school where the children take their lessons in Hawaiian, and they run language classes for adults on the weekends.”

“All the children on board go to this school?” I asked.

Amy shook her head. “No. The Hawaiian children do, and the remaining spaces are then allocated as space permits to non native Hawaiian children.”

“Wait - you’re saying there are enough native Hawaiians aboard that they have enough kids to have their own school?” That sounded incredible, and also rather awesome.

The women smiled. “They sure do, but not just Hawaiian. A lot of other Pacific Islanders and Micronesians send their kids there. They get the next highest priority and their own languages are taught interactively alongside Galactic Standard and Mylos using computer games. Children at the regular Mylos school are taught in Mylos and practice English and Galactic Standard as a subject, and can learn Hawaiian as part of a kids’ weekend club where they also learn hula.”

“But what about children whose human parent comes from a non English speaking country?” I asked.

“Their parents can sign them up for a class for that, privately. For free, of course,” Jun replied.

“Wow.” It was the only thing I could think of to say.

“So, what’s your story?” Amy asked. “You didn’t know about hula class and all, plus you’re alone, so I’m guessing you’re not visiting anyone and aren’t mated to a Mylos. Are you a veteran just arrived for the training and employment scheme?”

“What? Me, military? Gosh no. I’m an actor and I haven’t even so much as played a buck private,” I chuckled. “I’m here to audition for Playtime Fleet.”

“That’s awesome!” Amy said, and the rest of the women agreed with her, making various ohs and ahs at my being an actor.

“I hope you get the part you’re after,” Nancy gushed as they finished their meal and got up to leave.

“Thank you,” I said, turning my attention back to the remainder of my meal. “Well, that was nice,” I said to myself softly before taking another bite of the Seoul Kitchen self-made kimchi. It was as delicious as the rest of my meal, which was very, very good indeed. Xero had been spot on the nose recommending this place, and I made a mental note to tell him so, too. Great food, an amazing public space, and really nice people. I definitely wouldn’t mind calling this home. Not one little bit.

Two Mylos warriors sat down in the space the women had just vacated. They smiled and nodded at me in greeting before tucking into their food.

Mylos men, yet another plus in the ‘reasons to want to stay’ column. They were all seriously fucking hot. Even if I wasn’t matched to anyone here, there was eye candy for days, no years, if not decades even. Plus, there were always the veterans and other actors and production staff to go fishing for a potential boyfriend among.

The two males’ voices were deep and sonorous, the tones going straight to my balls. I pressed my legs together and stared down at my food, not wanting to draw attention to myself. What a time to get a boner! Gah! Why hadn’t I thought to bring my backpack and do some shopping while I was out? I could have held it in front of me as I walked out. Note to self: do not leave the room without camouflage tomorrow. I slipped my hand down under the table and prayed no one noticed me adjusting myself. When no one tapped me on the shoulder or cried out in outrage, I figured I’d gotten away with it. At least until I looked up and caught both males glancing at me in mild amusement, their nostrils flaring. Shit! These guys had super duper scent capabilities, didn’t they? I blushed and stood up, grabbing my trash to throw away. I probably broke a galactic record getting from there to the farthest end of the park. And my boner? That was the one good thing. Embarrassment totally killed my erection, so at least I didn’t have to run around with my pants tented. Yay, me.

CHAPTER 13

REDONDO

The music was a lot more entertaining now that we could understand the words. Unfortunately, while the singers sang mostly about love, or for some reason, about blue shoes made of a soft leather, Yllip's parents were feeling more adversarial.

"This is what passes for a restaurant worthy of a celebration on earth?" his mother said with a sniff.

"A casual meal out to mark the day, yes," Yllip replied. "Everything doesn't have to be fancy, you know. The exoticness of the food alone is worthy."

"Hmm," she said, gingerly taking her seat as if the booth would bite her.

"We had lunch at a fine establishment, Lorprah," his father said, his tone mildly chastising. "It's good to enjoy the simpler things in life too, with long time friends. Especially when what's on offer is simple, yet also exotic, as he's pointed out."

"I suppose," she grumbled.

Yllip's father, Jurt, slid in across from his mate. "I'm far more concerned, actually, about this whole Clutch business."

"That's nothing to be overly concerned about," Father replied, handing them both a plastic laminated menu.

“Not be overly concerned about? It seems to me that our son joining another family is very much something to be concerned over. A buddy assignment is one thing, but to join households? Especially one that’s a non Mylos configuration?” Lorprah insisted.

“Our son is a Mylos,” Papa hissed, suddenly angry. “He may be Dragonii as well, but up until now, he was Mylos enough that you didn’t care. And even if he wasn’t, it shouldn’t make a difference.”

“Mother, you and Father are sounding far too speciesist for my tastes,” Yllip added.

“Did you just call us prejudiced?” Lorprah’s hand flew to her throat.

“If the label seems to apply,” he replied.

Jurt had the good grace to look discomfited. “My personal concerns only extend as to what the Dragonii might expect of our son and any repercussions thereof.”

“The Dragonii as a people?” Father asked, “They have nothing at all to do with it. Joining Ondo’s Clutch only adds him to Ondo’s household. It doesn’t make him a Dragonii citizen.”

“Why not?” Loprah demanded. “Isn’t Ondo a citizen? As are you, since they had you form a Clutch with him all those years ago.”

“Ondo is, yes. We are not. It’s why now that he is of age, he is head of the Clutch and I am not,” Father explained.

“It seems very complicated,” Lorprah huffed.

“Seems clear enough now that it’s been explained,” Jurt disagreed. He sighed. “My apologies for how rude we must have come off. We could have broached the subject

much, much better.”

“So you’re okay with it now?” Yllip asked, looking surprised. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Jurt reassured us.

“Well, I’m not sure -,” Lorprah began, only for Jurt to interrupt her.

“For star’s sake, Lorprah. They’ve just explained it’s not changing anything except who they live with and how the household gets moved when they get reassigned within the Fleet.”

“Oh. Well, they could have said just that.”

“They did. You were too busy finding fault with the restaurant while looking around instead of paying full attention.”

An awkward silence descended upon the table at Jurt’s words, only to be broken by a perky human voice saying, “Hi! Welcome back. I see you brought the rest of your friends. What can I get y’all to drink?”

“What would you recommend?” I asked. “Since we are not here to eat breakfast foods this time.”

“How about some sweet tea?”

“I don’t like sweets,” Lorprah muttered.

“I can bring yours unsweetened,” our waitress offered, and Lorprah nodded.

“So, sweet tea for everyone else?” she asked for clarification.

We all stated our agreement, and she hurried off.

“She’ll want our food order when she returns.”

“I have no idea what any of these things actually are,” Lorprah complained once more.

“This morning we all just selected one of the pictured meals as they appear to be specialties,” Papa said.

“Good idea,” Jurt replied. “The one with the ‘pork chop’ looks inviting.”

It was agreed. When she returned and gave us our drinks, we all ordered the pictured Pork Chop dinner.

“Just like in the picture?” she asked. “With Texas toast and a double order of hash browns?”

“Yes,” Father said as we all nodded.

“Would you like any extra sides? Biscuits, maybe?”

“I’ll try some if you say they are good,” Lorprah said, surprising us all. She shrugged as we looked at her. “What? Enjoy a casual meal, you said, so here I am, trying to do just that.”

“They are the best,” our waitress assured her.

“And how about some gravy on your pork chops?”

We all decided against that.

“Okie dokie. I’ll get this to the cook. Be sure to save room for some pie for dessert!” She gestured towards two glass domes on the counter. One held a pastry filled with nuts of some kind, and the other had a billowy dark brown and white creamy confection sort of filling.

They did look delicious.

“Those look very sweet,” Lorprah said.

“They are,” the waitress replied sympathetically before hurrying away.

“You would probably enjoy one of their coffees instead. Just do not add any sugar, but do add some creamer. It is a bitter drink.”

She perked up at that. “Perhaps I will.”

Thankfully, the rest of the meal went much more amicably.

“I could eat two of those pork chops easily,” Jurt said, pushing his empty plate away.

“It was very good,” Papa agreed.

“Much better than I expected,” Lorprah admitted. “I wouldn’t mind eating at this establishment again, if we had a reason to be here.”

“It’s a chain back on earth, so if you come visit us, you’ll have a chance to,” Yllip informed her.

“Oh! Well, I suppose then we shall, at some point.”

“All done?” Our waitress began clearing our plates.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Will you be wanting some dessert?”

“I’d like a coffee,” Lorporah said.

“And a piece of each pie for the rest of us, I think,” Papa added.

Our waitress laughed. “Coming right up.”

“We can’t take too long over dessert,” Lorpah said. “We need to be at the auditorium for the ceremony soon.”

“We’ll be there on time,” Jurt reassured her as our waitress reappeared with a tray full of our pies.

“Just the one coffee?” she asked as she handed the pies out. “Or would you like a tea refill?”

“What is usual?” Papa asked her once more.

Her smile widened. “People often have coffee with dessert, but it’s pretty flexible. It does take the edge off of the sweet, though.”

“True,” Father said. “Remember how sour the orange juice became? Before, it was merely tart.”

We all decided on having coffee. It turned out to be a great choice as the pecan pie was tooth achingly sweet. So much so, we all struggled to fish the slices we’d ordered.

“Good, but perhaps best nibbled slowly and in small slices,” Yllip said as he doggedly lifted up another forkful.

Our waitress boxed up the remainder of our pie when it became obvious we would otherwise be late.

“Congratulations on graduating,” she called out to us as we left.

Yllip bumped his shoulder against my arm

“Told you it would be fine.”

I gave him a mock glare. “It almost wasn’t.”

He grinned unrepentantly. “But it was.”

He was incorrigible.

CHAPTER 14

THOMAS

After three days of exploring the public areas of the ship and eating each meal of the day at a different restaurant, I was thrilled to finally see my name on the audition list for the next day.

I'd ordered some new clothes and shoes on my third day aboard ship, including a new outfit to wear for my audition. I'd also gotten my shaggy hair trimmed, because while everything was free, why the hell not? I was in love with life within the Fleet, so I intended to enjoy it as much as I could and hope for the best.

I followed the light guide Xero provided, panels on the wall that lit up for me to follow when I asked for directions. They led me to a set that looked like a mockup of the main recreation deck, only lined with house doors on one side of the park and a "window" filled with stars and a view of the Earth and its moon on the other long side. A few old fashioned looking shops lined one short end, while an enormous "Spaceport" sign was in front of a "paved" area filled with rainbow hued shuttle mockups. Instead of the fountain in the middle of the park, there was an enormous playground with water sprinklers set up in one section.

"Okay," a Mylos said. "I'm Ritl, and if you're here to audition for one of Playtime Fleet's adult roles, you're in the right place. If you're here to interview and do a presentation for one of the other positions, you want the door across the hall from here."

One man turned and left.

“Right, then. Now that we have made sure everyone is in the correct place, let’s make sure we have the right people.” Ritl began to read off our names. We were all who we were supposed to be, so next he handed out sheets.

“Okay, as your name is called by one of my crew, go over. They’ll run through different scenes with you, with you playing different characters after they’ve been described to you.”

This was definitely most unlike any audition I’d ever been to, but oh, man, given the complexity of the set design, I knew the whole production was definitely going to be top notch. I wanted in now more than ever. My name ended up being called by a Mylos with long blue hair.

“Okay, first, I want you to read for Mr. Chumly,” he said. “He’s a human who works as security for the Playtime Fleet, along with his friend, Jibbit, who is Mylos. Chumly and Jibbit will explain safety issues and also be included in segments where they talk about things such as right and wrong, what a law is, and the basics of how they came to exist, and even about good sportsmanship. They will help organize some of the games the children will play, as well.”

I nodded my understanding, and he began to read Jibbit’s lines.

An hour later, we took a break, and I was glad of it. I’d run through several scenes, and my throat was dry. We were all provided with refreshments while the Mylos all huddled away from us on the far end of the set, and had an animated discussion in their language. Then they rejoined us, and Ritl clapped his hands.

“Thank you very much. Everyone except Thomas and Laura may go. Please enjoy the rest of your day. Arrangements for your flight home will be sent to you later this

evening.” Looks of dejection crossed everyone’s faces except for mine and the woman who turned out to be Laura. I felt bad for them, but also elated as I’d made it through to another round.

Ritl gestured for Laura and me to follow him. This time, we were in a little shop with a small lunch counter, and a large, red furry puppet wearing a shopkeeper’s apron was on the hand of a woman crouched behind it.

Ritl handed us each a new sheet.

“Okay, Laura, please read Linda’s lines and Thomas, you read Amos’.”

The first line belonged to the puppet, who asked us what we wanted to buy. Laura seemed to struggle with reacting as if the puppet was a real person, her eyes continuously peering as if trying to see behind the counter. I, on the other hand, knew I was crushing it. I’d loved playing games with my stuffies as a kid, each and every one of them real to me. Sesame Street? Big Bird was real to me, too. I used to wish he’d come walking down our street so we could play. This was a piece of cake. It was also far too short, over sooner than I was ready for.

“Thank you, Laura. You can expect to hear from us about arrangements to return you home tomorrow as well.”

Ritl then turned his attention to me as the puppeteer stood up and left, taking the puppet with her.

“Thomas, would you mind remaining on board for the rest of the week while we conclude auditions?”

“Not at all!” I could barely contain my excitement.

“That’s great. We may want to call you back for another reading, along with a few others, before making our final decision. Have you taken your matching test yet?”

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“Okay, well, no worries. I’ll ask them to fit you in tomorrow.”

Oh, my gawd! That had to be a good sign, right? Making sure I’d taken my required matching test and wanting me to stay to the end of the week and all that jazz?

“Thank you,” I said, thrilled to bits when my voice didn’t come out as an excited squeak.

“You’re most welcome. Please enjoy the rest of your week.”

I went out the door each of us candidates had come in through, barely registering where I was going, I was floating so high on Cloud 9.

I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere as I suddenly found myself with several surprised Mylos looking at me.

“Um, oops. I think I passed the elevator I was looking for. I, ah, had some good news at the audition I was here for.”

“Ah, one of the actors,” one of the Mylos said. “Come, I will take you where you want to go.”

“Thanks.”

As he walked me back to the elevator, I asked, “I didn’t accidentally walk into a secure area, did I?”

He laughed. “It wasn’t an area for non Fleet personnel, but no, it was not one of the highly restricted areas.”

He didn’t elaborate any further, and I sure as hell didn’t ask. A moment later, we were at the elevator I’d wandered right past.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No problem.” He stood and watched as I got into it. Yep, not restricted, but definitely not a place I should be going, for sure.

“Hi, Xero, can you take me to the main recreation level? I think I want some bubble tea.”

“Certainly. That sounds as if you had a good result.”

I shared what happened at the audition skipping my boo boo afterwards.

“I bet you get the shop assistant’s role,” he said when I finished.

“You think?”

“I really do.”

A bubble tea and lunch at Seoul Food was in order, I decided.

CHAPTER 15

ONDO

I carefully examined the young pseudo tree. The aphids in its enclosure had been all over it and the other musa plants in the sealed unit. This was the fifth trial, and so far, it looked as if I'd cracked it. There were no signs of the bunchy top virus outwardly. I carefully took a sample and placed it within the bioscanner for analysis. Now, if only the results were as I hoped, it would show no signs of the virus. I'd even settle for the virus to be present but dead or dying.

In the six months I'd been aboard ship, I'd had one singular focus - to save the musa, or as humans more commonly called them, bananas. Not just the clones of the variety grown for supermarket bananas in most of the western hemisphere, but the lesser known cultivars popular in the Hawaiian islands and grown by homesteaders and the university. Admittedly, I'd become interested after sampling banana pancakes made by my hula instructor's wife and sister, who told me all about the bunchy top virus. My first goal was to examine the plants that failed to develop the virus while others around them did. Then I examined their immune response, and went from there. Our advanced science was able to go in directions theirs couldn't. Not that the credit was entirely mine - I had the advantage of all the work the human scientists had done up to this point to build upon.

Ping!

I turned my attention to the bioscanner and read its report, grinning. The plant had broken strands of the virus in its DNA, showing it had fought it off successfully. My

tail swayed happily behind me as I realized what this meant - I'd successfully created viable breeding samples of each of the varieties I'd attempted immune system boosters with. Now I just needed to expand it to plantains and I'd be ready to share my research with my Chief, so it could be replicated with all the rest of the varieties around the world. Then I could look at their vulnerability to nematodes and move on from there.

I placed the ice cream banana plant back into its sealed unit, closing it and beginning the cycle that would gently simulate rain for the optimum period of time.

"Hey, Ondo, have you finished up in here yet?" Yllip asked, poking his head inside my lab.

"Just wrapping up," I said.

"Great! I'm taking you out tonight, and I'm not accepting no for an answer."

I cringed. After the friendliness of the waitresses at the Waffle House the day of our graduation, I'd been full of confidence that most of the humans I met would be like them, and our former classmate, who'd offered to introduce us to his parents. The stunned, almost fearful looks I received from the moment I disembarked our shuttle revealed the sad truth to me. I looked downright frightening to humans. My general appearance, even without the scars, would have been bad enough, it seemed. But add my scars and the name of my species? It turns out 'Dragonii' sounded a lot like 'dragon' to them, a mythical killing machine of an animal that breathed fire and ate people, especially if they were princesses. How did they know they were princesses? It seems they were sentient and planned heists to steal gold and jewels from kings while kidnapping their snack of choice.

I was reassured that they were imaginary, but given the visceral reaction, I was leaning more towards racial memory of something that morphed into an exaggerated

legend. Not that this helped me at all.

“Don’t give me that look! People were just surprised, as they’d never seen one of your species before. If you don’t hang out in public with the rest of us, they’ll never become accustomed to you or get to know the real you.”

His sentiments were valid, but it still hurt when I experienced those reactions.

“Come on,” he wheedled. “The guys are all keen to try out this new bowling alley place. Apparently, you roll heavy balls down a polished wooden surface with two ditches on either side and try to knock down wooden pins at the end of it. It’s supposed to be quite fun.” Then he played the card that he knew would get me. “They serve pizza, so we can have dinner there too.”

I’d had pizza my second night aboard, and it immediately became my favorite food.

“Pepperoni?” I asked hopefully.

“And Spam and pineapple,” he replied.

“Fine, I’ll come.”

“That’s the spirit,” he cheered. “Do this with me tonight, and this weekend we can invite them over for a game night. Ralph and Terry are wanting to start up something called ‘an old school D and D’ group. For some reason, they told me they thought you’d not be interested.”

”Ralph and Terry from hula class?” And there was that hollow feeling again. I’d thought that they’d gotten over the shock of seeing me and that we’d started a tenuous friendship. They loved talking to Yllip and had come over to watch some vids with us a few times.

“Yeah. They said they’d explain what the game was about tonight so you could make up your own mind.”

I wasn't certain what to make of that. Were they trying to be considerate of my feelings for some unknown reason only they fathomed as of yet, or were they trying to push me away so I would be excluded from their friend group? I guess only going tonight and hearing them out would answer that question.

I finished logging out of the lab’s systems, turning control over to the lab AI, Tribin.

“Goodnight, Tribin,” I called out as I hung up my lab coat.

“Enjoy your evening,” the sentient AI replied. “Excellent work today.”

“Yes. I think we’ve solved the buncy top problem, at least in these varieties.”

I palmed the door open, ushering Yllip out ahead of me. As we exited, the lights began to dim, simulating twilight for the plants.

“I heard they are finally almost finished testing the people coming to work on the children’s vid program,” Yllip said as we walked to the elevator.

“We’ve only been here six months,” I reminded him. “The odds that one of them is our mate is astronomical.”

“The odds are the odds, no matter how long we’re here,” he argued. “A match could happen!”

I sighed. “I suppose. Just promise me you won’t get all mopey if it doesn't happen this time.”

We reached the elevator and palmed the panel to call for a compartment.

“I won’t,” he said. “Every day comes with multiple chances, after all, as every day, humans go to the Scholarship Center and take the test.”

I knew that, but how long could that sense of optimism last? Besides, I knew what would happen if I was matched to a human. They’d take one look and wish I wasn’t Dragonii and scarred. If he was, I’d ask to move out so his mate wouldn’t have to see me and be afraid of me. Not the happy ending Yllip dreamed of, or my fathers, but the reality I was finding I’d have to accept.

CHAPTER 16

THOMAS

“Bowling?” I looked at my roommate in disbelief.

“Yeah, bowling,” Terry replied. “A brand new bowling alley opened on the second promenade deck three weeks ago.”

“The last time I went bowling, I was in high school.”

Having heard your story, I’m going to guess that has more to do with you being broke until you got here than it does with you not liking bowling.”

“Maybe,” I allowed. Times like this, I regretted getting drunk with him as we both celebrated scoring positions with the production of Playtime Fleet. I’d spilled my guts, telling him just how dumb I’d been and desperate. In turn, he’d confessed to applying solely because he wanted to live out his sci-fi fantasies aboard a starship.

He raised an eyebrow at me.

“Okay, fine, you’re right. I did enjoy it when I got to go, and my broke ass couldn’t afford it once I moved to New York. In fact, I couldn’t afford to do anything.”

He smirked. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“I never liked the stinky shoes, though,” I said, having to have the last word.

“No one likes the used shoes. But they ask us our size and replicate new ones for us and recycle them unless you buy them before you go.”

That did sound much better.

“How long before we have to be there?”

“About half an hour.”

I had just enough time to jump in the shower before we left, then. I made quick work of it and changed into a pair of relaxed fit charcoal colored jeans and a teal polo that brought out the red and dark blond natural highlights in my brown hair. And by natural, I mean created with lemon juice applied before spending time at the artificial beach, or if it was closed for hula practice or surf lessons, one of the parks where it was always summer.

“Okay, I’m ready!” I called out, looking at my friend critically. Ah, well, he’d at least changed his shirt and combed his hair.

He opened the door, and I followed him out.

“Um, not to be a downer, but have they noticed yet they didn’t schedule your test?” he asked me, keeping his voice soft to avoid the chance of us being overheard.

“No, why?”

“Well, it’s just that I was thinking about it. Xero knows everything and has subroutines and other AI who report to him. It feels weird that he wouldn’t notice that you haven’t.”

I shrugged.

“Let’s not talk about it here,” I said, looking around uneasily in case mentioning his name acted as a wake up word and caught his attention.

“Okay,” he replied simply, and we got into the elevator.”

“Where to, gentleman?” Xero asked.

“The second promenade deck,” Terry replied. “We’re going bowling.”

“That sounds wonderful. And I do hear everything said in the corridors, you know. To answer your question, I am well aware that Thomas has not been mate tested.”

“Then why haven’t you scheduled me?” I blurted out.

“Quite honestly, it was because you answered most of the same questions during your final vetting, to be certain your personality was a good fit with the rest of the cast and crew for a harmonious working relationship. The results intrigued me, and after careful analysis, I decided it was best to wait.”

“Is it because there is something wrong with me?”

“Not at all. I felt it best to allow you and the one I believe to be your potential mate a chance to settle in.”

Terry stared at me open mouthed. “Tom has a mate?”

“Potentially, yes. I won’t know until he takes the rest of the test, but if my hypothesis is correct, letting them both get used to the shipboard environment is the best way forward.”

“Well, I feel pretty damned at home. Who is he? Is he hot?”

“He is not like the other Mylos.”

“Why, is he green like Tom’s boss, Kailirex?”

“No.”

“Well, then, is a vampire sort of one, like the weapons guys?” I asked. They’d been all over social media after getting married in a double ceremony in Hawaii.

“No, he is not Sanguinii.”

“Maybe he’s Dragonii,” Terry said.

“A what?”

“A dragon dude, seriously. There’s one in my hula class. Only one in the Fleet so far. Fangs, claws, little horns, a tail, and wings that like, go into his back somehow.”

“You’re telling me there is a flying lizard, Mylos?” Surely this had to be one of Terry’s jokes.

“No. He looks like a man. A really big man, bigger than a regular Mylos, and looks kinda like a dragon. Sort of,” he huffed in annoyance. “I’m explaining it badly, but you’ll see him. His brother is a regular Mylos and is bringing him tonight. He’s a really cool guy, just very shy. You’ll see.”

“Is it him?” I asked Xero.

“I must ask both of you to keep that hypothesis to yourselves for now. But given that you two will be meeting, tomorrow please report to Sickbay and have them take your DNA sample and finish the questionnaire.”

I was possibly the mate of an alien dragon man? I didn't know if I was scared because, whoa - dragons are predators and his people sounded as if they were too, originally at least, or excited because he sounded like he might be even hotter than the Mylos I was used to seeing.

"Promise!" Xeros demanded, and we both gave our solemn word.

"And I'll be there bright and early. I'm off tomorrow anyway."

"Good. Just remember, do not be afraid. He would never hurt you, even if you are not his mate."

"He's got some kinda gnarly scars, but they look good on him," Terry said helpfully.

"Gotcha," I told them both faintly, wondering just how the hell an evening of bowling and pizza, beer, and hot dogs turned into 'meet your possible secret mate who is a Mylos dragon. This wouldn't have happened even in New York. I was certain of it.

CHAPTER 17

REDONDO

Coming had been a mistake. I knew it the moment we stopped inside and the stares and whispering started.

“That’s the guy I told you I saw,” I heard someone say.

“Wow, he’s huge.” This time a female voice, coming from the area marked “Snack Bar”.

The human male behind the counter stared at me. Yllip snapped his fingers in front of his eyes. “You okay there? You seem stunned.”

The man startled, turning a deep red. “Oh! Yeah, sorry.” He looked back at me. “I apologize if I was staring. It’s just you look like this action figure I had as a kid, from the Dragon Warriors cartoon show. I loved that damned thing. My brother stole it and traded it for some pogs, can you believe it?”

I blinked. “You are not afraid of me?”

His brows knit together. “Should I be? I mean, you’re here within the Fleet, so I presume you’ve been cleared as a safe person to be around.”

Yllip nudged my side with his elbow. “See? What did I tell you?”

“I am. Safe to be around, I mean.”

“I figured. I’m Sam and welcome to my bowling alley.”

He looked back at Yllip. “Sit down on the bench and take your boots off. Then stand in the circle, where the picture of two feet are. Put each foot on one of the feet. It will then scan and make your shoes and a pair of socks.”

Yllip did as he was bid and true to his word, a replicator behind the counter then created a pair of white socks and multicoloured shoes in Yllip’s size. Sam handed them over, and Yllip sat back down on the bench to put them on. I toed off my boots, mine a simple slip on style approved as they were designed to not allow water ingress should I need to wade into any as part of my duties. I moved to stand over on the scanner icon.

“Hey, man!”

“Ralph,” I replied, inclining my head as I stepped off and accepted the proffered footwear.

“Oh yeah!” he cheered. “No stinky shoes sprayed with air freshener!”

Sam grinned. “Yeah, thanks to the replicator system they rigged up for me. Pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“Very,” Ralph agreed, leaning off the counter as he began tugging off his footwear.

“There’s a bench,” Yllip told him, joining us.

“Nah, I’m alright.”

“I’ll take it,” I said. I ended up having to angle my body sideways a bit to accommodate my tail.

“Do you think he can fuck with that?” I heard a female say, from a group of players seated and eating the delicacy known as “hot dogs”, which were usually neither especially warm nor made from dogs, but possibly named after the long bodied dogs known as ‘wiener dogs’. Hot dogs were also known as wieners, as I discovered one day when Ralph sang about his Oscar Meyer weiner as he replicated one to eat one movie night. Strangely, cocks were also known as wieners. It was all very confusing, but the wiener dogs were very, very cute. I was considering seeing if any were available for adoption.

Tying my second shoe, I glanced around, trying to see if I could spot who asked that question. It was time that some humans realized that other species often had much more acute hearing than they did. Also, that they should think before they speak. Bingo. It had to be the one in the blue tank top and denim shorts who was now looking at me wearing an “oh shit, did he hear me?” expression.

Yes, I certainly did, I thought to myself, feeling an unusual sense of boldness as I slowly stood up, and then pointed my tail straight at her and made it coil and pump twice in her direction. She turned so red, I was afraid all the blood in her body had rushed to her neck and head.

Following my gaze, Yllip laughed.

“I’m not even going to ask what you did to make her blush like that.”

“She asked her friends if they thought I could fuck with my tail, so I gave a small demonstration.”

Ralph guffawed as his feet were scanned. “You dirty, dirty boy! I had no idea you

had that in you.”

The doors opened, and a tantalizing scent wafted towards me. I stood still. What was that scent? It reminded me of something, but what?

“Cool! We’re not late!” Terry said, bringing the source of that exquisite smell closer. I eyed the unknown male. Who was he?

He gifted me with a brilliant smile. “My, my,” he purred. “Terry wasn’t lying. You are one tall, delicious, dragon man.” He held out his hand, and I stared at it, my mind blanking for a moment before I recalled the human greeting custom. I took his hand in mine, loving the way mine engulfed his, but he still held mine firmly. “It’s awfully nice to meet you. I’m Tom.”

“He plays the shop assistant on Playtime Fleet,” Terry said.

Ah, so that’s how Terry knew him. Terry played Mr. Re-Use in an interactive craft show that the schools on board used. Mr. Re-Use’s Craft Shop was revealed to be on the Playtime Fleet mothership during the initial episode of the new program.

“That’s wonderful,” I said, pulling back my hand and feeling bereft at its loss. “Education is very important.”

“Agreed,” Tom said, beaming as he plopped down on the bench next to Terry and began unlacing his shoes. “I think when kids are introduced to education as something fun as well as useful, it helps set them down the path of having a lifelong love of learning. So, what do you do?”

“I work in environmental science, with plants.”

“He means he helps maintain the ship’s oxygen levels and CO2 levels, as well as

supply fresh foodstuffs by helping maintain the green spaces,” Yllip said. “Not to mention working to save the banana.”

His scent carried notes of confusion, as well as interest. In me! No fear at all. If only my mate was as open as he was...no, I dared not hope. Besides, he wasn't really interested in me, but my work.

“I’ve been working with the University of Hawaii, as well as Jakarta, and Udayana to try to stop the decline of musa, or bananas and plantains,” I explained.

“I’d heard somewhere that bananas were in danger of dying out,” he said. “I figured that’s why they kept going up in price.”

I nodded. “I think I actually might have made a breakthrough,” I confided, “at least as far as the bunchy top virus is concerned.”

“Oh, wow,” he said, looking impressed as he stood on the two feet and activated the scan. “I don’t know what that is, but it sounds mega important.”

I smiled at him, realizing too late that my fangs were on display.

He didn’t seem to mind. Instead, his eyes widened, and he darted out a hand, his finger tracing the length of one canine. A rumble started in my chest in response.

“Are you...purring?” he asked, looking delighted.

Yllip’s eyes were bouncing now between me and Tom.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Tom withdrew his hand, shaking his head to indicate he didn’t know. I didn’t either,

other than we both seemed drawn to each other. It was just a shame he wasn't my mate. If he was, we'd have been matched already.

CHAPTER 18

THOMAS

As soon as I saw him, I knew deep within my very bones that Xero was right. Even without the DNA and the remaining few questions yet to be answered, as corny as it might sound to someone else, my soul knew his. He was definitely more alien looking than the rest of the Mylos I'd met, and much taller. I wasn't a shorty in particular, being a fairly respectable five foot eight inches. Respectable for a human, short for a Mylos, and positively petite next to the dragon man with the gentle eyes.

I couldn't help myself. My inner flirt came out, eager to show him I was interested. I knew he'd think I was just being friendly, in an overly familiar way, and I mentally kicked myself until I saw the way his nostrils flared, his eyes tracking my every movement. My dick had chubbed right up, my hole clenching as I immediately imagined the girth and length he was definitely sporting, as evidenced by the large bulge becoming ever more defined by the second. Could he smell my arousal as well as see it? I blushed, hoping it was so. It would make things go so much smoother tomorrow after I finished that damned test to make our match official. We'd already know each other, having spent an evening together on a friends' night out that unwittingly was actually our first date. And we'd both know that we had a most definite spark.

"Come on, you two," Ralph said, "You bowling or what?"

"Yeah," I replied, tearing my eyes away from my mate. My mate! Oh, gawd! I thought I'd understood what finding a guy to settle down with would be like, but the

feelings I was experiencing, it was beyond anything I'd ever thought real.

"Lane 5," the guy whose name tag read Sam said. "Play as many games as you want as long as we don't get too many people wanting a go, but after every two, we ask you come back to let us know you're continuing so we can see if we need you to take a break so someone else can play two before you go again."

"That sounds fair," Terry agreed. "We can always sit in the snack bar and eat if that happens, instead of having our food at our lane."

We all nodded in agreement and walked over to Lane 5. Here more Mylos ingenuity was on display, as we each in turn presented our hand to be scanned. A replicator then materialized a selection of balls that would fit our hands for us to choose from. That was just as well, as I was pretty sure that otherwise, my gorgeous dragon warrior would have been hard pressed to find one to fit those beautifully made but very large hands.

"Okay," Ralph said, inputting our names on the electronic scorecard. "We'll go alphabetically. So, me first, then Redondo next, followed by Terry, then Tom, with Yllip last."

Redondo?

"Like the beach?" I blurted out without thinking.

They all stared at me.

"Redondo Beach," I said lamely. "It's a city near Santa Monica in California."

Yllip tilted his head. "Say the name of the place again, slowly, please?"

“Re-don-do Beach.”

“Ah, close, but not the same,” he shrugged. “Still pretty cool. It makes it sound like they named a city after you, Ondo!”

Okay, so he was Ondo for short. Noted. He gave a small shy smile, eyes not quite meeting mine. “My name is pronounced red-ONDO,” he explained, adding stress on the second syllable.

“Red-ONDO,” I parroted, then unable to resist, I winked. “Or Ondo for short, with your friends.”

His eyes flicked up to mine, and danged if the reddish orange hue of his skin didn’t deepen. He was blushing! Dang, he was too cute for words!

“Yes,” he rasped, his voice suddenly sounding rough.

Yllip sniffed the air, looking between the two of us. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you two were mates. But that can’t be, or you’d have been notified of the mate match.”

I couldn’t keep up the pretense any longer. “Ah, about that...”

I looked helplessly over at Terry.

“Xero told him he has to report into Sickbay first thing in the morning. Apparently his DNA sample still needs to be done and he didn’t finish answering all the questions needed for the test,” he told everyone.

“What?” Ralph said, “How did that happen?”

“Something about so many applicants for the show’s production, my having taken the crew compatibility test, and stuff,” I replied, relieved to have a way to not drop neither Xero or myself into it for not having done it.

Yllip looked thoughtful. “But surely Xero should have noticed.”

I swallowed. “Um, he did, but there were a few factors relating to, uh, personal circumstances, that made him decide to let me settle in a bit first.”

“Ah. In case you changed your mind,” Ondo murmured.

I shrugged. “Maybe? But we wrapped up filming a couple episodes now with me in it, so I’m definitely here to stay.”

“Do you think we are mates?” Ondo asked me, hope lighting up his eyes.

“If what I am feeling for you already is any indication, I’d say yeah.”

His nostrils quivered as he leaned towards me, taking a deep breath. “Your scent calls to me and I can smell your arousal.”

“Well, I think you’re crazy hot. Like capital h-a-w-t. I kinda felt like we already knew each other somehow. Sorry if that sounds stupid.”

“Dude - you guys totally must be soul mates!” Ralph exclaimed.

Yllip looked at me, hope shining in his eyes. “Tomorrow feels such a long time off to find out if my brother has found his other.”

I licked my lips. “You know what? You’re right. You think they’d do the rest of the test right now?”

“You truly wish to know now?”

“Yeh, I really fucking do. We can come back another time to bowl.”

Yllip tapped his kunnarskyn. “Xero?”

“Yes, Yllip?”

“There’s been a rather, shall we say, exceptional reaction to Tom and Ondo meeting. Could the sickbay complete the test he was to do tomorrow now instead?”

A heartbeat. “Oh. He told you, huh?”

“He did. That was nice of you to make sure his personal situation didn’t require him to feel as if he should back out of his role first.”

“Well, yes. Exceptional circumstances and all that. Please keep that highly confidential.”

“But of course,” Yllip’s lips twitched as he cottoned onto the fact that Xero had not gotten permission to make the exception.

“Yes. Sickbay is currently not experiencing a large number of walk-ins. In fact, they have none at the moment. I’ll message to let them know they are coming.”

“Great!” Terry said brightly, a huge grin on his face. “We’ll all go with you, right now. We can’t miss seeing two of our best buds get hitched!”

My mouth went dry. He was right. As soon as we got matched, we were as good as married, under Mylos law.

“You really want to go now?” my cutie pie asked me, searching my eyes. He gestured at his scars. “Despite me looking like this? I know I am not the Mylos you expected, and I am disfigured.”

I placed my hands on my hips. “You get this through your ferociously cute head right now, Ondo! You are hotter than any other Mylos I’ve ever seen! And those scars? They are proof you survived something that probably would have had me pissing my pants right before whoever or whatever made those killed me.”

He growled. “No one will harm a hair on your head!” His eyes flashed a deeper molten gold, his canines lengthening. Holy shit, he was even hotter when angry. I couldn’t wait to see him when his blood was sending him wild with passion as he fucked me into the nearest surface as he claimed me.

“Ferociously cute?” Terry muttered, chuckling softly. “Is that like Grumpy Cat?”

I punched him in the arm lightly. “Shut up!”

“I hate to interrupt this tender moment,” Ralph said, “but didn’t Xero say they were expecting you like right now at sickbay?”

“I’ll have him charge us for the shoes,” Yllip said, as we left Lane 5. “Hi, please charge all the shoes to my account. We’ll be back soon!” he told Sam, presenting his kunnarskyn to the scanner that Sam held out.

“See you soon!” Sam called after us, looking quite confused as we hurried away.

“What if we’re wrong?” Ondo asked as we got into the elevator.

“As if,” Yllip scoffed. “This has to be what the stars ordained for you, just as the Galactic Council foresaw when they had the Fleet send us to the Bride Fleet.”

I stared in amazement at them both as the elevator began to move and the words sank in.

“For real? They saw some sort of destiny written for him in the stars?”

Consider my mind well and truly boggled.

CHAPTER 19

REDONDO

I felt myself flush with embarrassment. “After my brother here,” I tilted my head to indicate Yllip, “decided to request a buddy posting, the AIs in charge of assignments decided it best to send us to the Bride Fleet. Which, by the way, is unheard of for a first posting straight out of the Academy. The Supreme Fleet Commander was notified, which led to the Council discussing its merit. In essence, they decided the AI was correct. That my against all odds childhood survival of the massacre that killed everyone else at the fledgling Dragonii colony I was born at, the discovery of me by my adoptive Mylos fathers, and the subsequent joining of the Alliance by the reclusive Dragonii Empire was all proof that the universe had favored me, that there are great plans, all that stuff.” I swiped a hand down my face. “I thought they were ridiculous, that there couldn’t possibly be a mate just waiting here for me.”

“Well, here I am!” he said, waving at me as if we were just now meeting. ”And geesh, that’s a lot to unpack. You survived a massacre as a little kid?” He stepped closer, throwing his arms around me, folding me into a tight embrace. “I wish I could go back in time and give that little kid you were a big hug,” he said softly. “You must have been so scared.”

I swallowed thickly. “I was.”

A sniffle caught my attention and I saw Ralph surreptitiously wiping his eyes.

“Damn dude. I thought you’d gotten those in a training accident or some shit.”

“No, it was marauders,” Yllip replied grimly. “They burned everything they didn’t blow up, except for the main spaceport building for some reason. And the few they didn’t kill, they took with them, presumably to use or sell as slaves. Neither the Mylos who responded to the distress call, nor the Dragonii ever found out who they were or where they went.”

“Fuck,” Terry swore.

The elevator came to a standstill, and the doors swished open, right into the waiting area of the walk-in clinic portion of Sickbay.

“Awkward,” Tom muttered, as we took in the curious eyes of the four members of staff all staring in at us. He released me, taking a half step back before reaching for my hand and lacing our fingers together. He fixed a bright smile back onto his face. “Come on, babe. Let’s do this. The sooner they finish the test, the sooner we end up alien married and can go back to yours to do the horizontal tango.”

Yllip laughed. “You have absolutely no filter on your mouth, do you?” he asked him.

He shook his head as two of the medics tittered. “Nope,” he replied, popping the ‘p’. “Not unless I have to. I spend so much of my life pretending to be someone else with scripted lines, that I refuse to live unauthentically. If there are little kids or it’s a formal occasion, or some other reason it would be really bad manners to say whatever pops into my head, then yeah, I can keep it low-key.” He gave my hand a squeeze and we stepped out together.

The assistant junior medic came out from behind the counter, meeting us halfway. He held out a tablet to Thomas. “You have to be Thomas,” he chuckled, staring pointedly at our clasped hands.

“Yep, that’s me,” he quipped in reply, taking the tablet.

“There’s a series of ten questions left, so if I can just take a cheek swab as soon as you’re done, we’ll know almost immediately after. Good luck to you both.”

Tom tugged me over to a set of chairs. I sat down in one and then feeling as if I would die unless I could breathe him in, I tugged him onto my lap.

“Hey!” he laughed. “Easy there, big guy!”

That earned us some more giggles. For perhaps the first time in my life, I didn’t care. Test or no test, I knew I had to have him, and I was going to make that abundantly clear right now. I nuzzled my nose against his neck, inhaling deeply.

Tom let out an adorable squeak that made me want to slap his ass and chase him around the room before pouncing on him.

“Okay, okay, I’m hurrying. Um, okay, next question. What is my favorite plant?” He looked thoughtful, and I rested my cheek against his, reading his responses.

Purple azaleas? I made a mental note to look up what they were and how to grow them.

“A walk on the beach, a stroll through a forest, or blank,” he read out loud softly. “Describe your idea of the perfect romantic stroll. Well, fuck. Um...” He looked lost.

“There are no wrong answers,” I reminded him.

He twisted around to look at me. “But what if my answer makes us not a match?”

“Mates don’t have to like all the same things,” Yllip pointed out.

“Yeah,” Ralph piped up. “My grandparents have been married almost fifty years, all

happily, and my grandpops could eat Ragu spaghetti sauce over his linguini seven days a week. My grandma though? She thinks sauces of any kind out of a jar is cheating, but she knows the jarred sauce has something her homemade one doesn't, memories of his mom cooking for him after he came home from football practice. She died in a car accident his first year of college. So, after every football game on the TV, she makes him a big bowl of linguine with Ragu sauce."

"That is both one of the saddest as well as the most romantic things I've ever heard you say," Terry said, looking at our friend in surprise.

"He's got a good point," Tom observed. "And that is so sweet of your grandma. Wish mine was still around." He typed furiously. Ah. A walk through the park followed by a meal at The Seoul Kitchen if onboard, or anything similar somewhere else.

I filed that away. This was perfect fodder to fill up our time together, especially during the honeymoon celebration period after our human wedding.

"And done!" he said, pushing my hands off of him to stand up. He walked over to the counter quickly and the staff who were obviously here wishing to witness the event in case it was a true match, all crowded around. I got up and followed him, unwilling to have any sort of real distance, no matter how small, between us.

"Wait!" Yllip said as the medic took his cheek swab. "I messaged our fathers and they are on their way."

"I'll wait to put in the analyzer then," the medic replied with a small smile.

"You called your fathers?" Tom asked, eyes round. "My future in-laws are right here, on this ship?"

"We live as a single Clutch, yes," I replied.

“That’s like a multigenerational household,” Terry explained.

“Right. Just give me a minute. I wasn’t expecting to not only get alien married today, but meet my in-laws.” He looked at Yllip curiously. “Are these your dads, who adopted him? Is that how you’re brothers?”

He shook his head. “No, we met in childhood, during a hospital stay. We became more than best friends then, becoming brothers as we got closer as we spent all our available time together once we were discharged. I joined Ondo’s Clutch formally upon graduation from the Academy.”

The door opened, my fathers spilling out in excitement.

“Are we too late?” Papa blurted out.

The medic laughed. “No. We were waiting for you before I submitted the DNA sample.”

“Oh, thank the stars. We didn’t want to miss the chance of being here when it happened. We never expected to be able to be present as his match occurred.”

“I’ll take it back now.” The medic changed places with one of the female human staff and went through a door into the back.

“Hi, I’m Lyssa. If it’s as fast as my test was, you’ll know in less than a minute or two once he’s set the analyzer going.”

“Thanks,” Tom told her, then still looking decidedly nervous. “I’m Tom, the guy hoping he really is Ondo’s match.”

“You’re mine no matter what they say,” I decided out loud, pulling his back against

me. I bent my head, burying my nose into his hair, breathing him in. A soft rumble started up in my chest once more.

“Oh, that test is definitely going to be positive,” Father said quietly.

My kunnarskyn vibrated with a message. I opened my eyes, letting go of Tom only enough to allow myself to tap itn to accept the message. Then, lifting my wrist, I saw the words that every fiber of my being already knew.

“Well?” Tom squeaked.

“I told you, you’re mine.”

The door to the back burst open, the assistant junior medic followed by a couple more who must have been busy in the back.

“Congratulations!” he cheered unnecessarily. “You’re mates!”

The room erupted into congratulations as Tom turned to rest his head against my lower chest, arms around me.

“Let’s blow this taco stand,” he said. “Right now, I want to go find us a place for a private,” his hands fell onto my ass, giving it a gentle squeeze, “celebration if you catch my drift.”

I didn’t know what a taco stand that didn’t exist or why he’d want to blow it up had to do with anything, but the rest of his meaning was clear.

“We’ve got to go. I’m taking him home,” I blurted out, as I all but dragged him to the elevator.

“We’ll find something to do elsewhere, don’t worry!” Papa snickered as the doors opened.

That was definitely a good idea, I thought before bending down to capture my mate’s mouth with mine, the way I’d seen humans do with their mates. What we were about to do, I didn’t want my fathers or Yllip or anyone else to see. Tom’s body was mine, and only mine, to see when in the throes of passion.

CHAPTER 20

THOMAS

I probably should have felt self conscious about getting macked on while standing in what was basically a hospital, and in front of my two in-laws who'd I'd literally just met. That, however, was not the case.

Breaking the kiss, he said, "Come," in that deliciously rumble of his and damn it, I nearly did just that right there and then.

That, of course, was not what he meant, as he was tugging me to follow him into the elevator, whose doors had started to close. Would have, in fact, if not for his tail hovering in the opening while we were busy trying to suck each other's lips off our faces.

I followed him inside and waved dazedly at our amused audience. It was only once the doors closed and the elevator began to move that what we'd just done fully hit me. I'd met my in-laws, but hadn't learned their names or given them mine. Then, I'd made out with their son and, I realized in horror, faced them to give a probably far too jaunty wave with an obvious raging boner tenting my pants. A boner with a not unnoticeable wet spot.

"I need to find a hole to hide in," I said and Ondo looked at me, his brows beetled together in confusion.

"Is this a mating ritual I am unaware of?"

I bit back a laugh.

“No. I just don’t think I can ever face your parents again. I didn’t introduce myself properly or learn their names and then I ate your face and,” I gestured towards my pants. My dick was still busy imitating a steel rod, not phased at all by my embarrassment.

He chuckled, a gravelly sound that sent shivers along my spine, making me go tingly in all the right places. Straight to my cock, that is, which now was so hard it was starting to hurt. He reached over, giving it a stroke through the fabric and I let out a strangled groan.

“Do not be concerned,” he replied. “They did not introduce themselves properly to you, either, and I am certain that by now, they are more than aware that your name is Tom. They weren’t expecting us to stand around being social. Mylos, remember?”

He had a point. Mylos were famous for meeting their mate, going into a mating rut of sorts with a mating plumage making an appearance.

“Thanks, that does make me feel a bit better.”

“Mm,” he said, bending down to nuzzle my hair again.

“You really like smelling me, huh?” I chuckled.

“You smell very, very good,” he hummed in agreement, his tail snaking around to fondle me.

I gasped as my back arched, “D..don’t. I don’t wanna cum in my pants.”

His tail retreated. “I wouldn’t mind, but I would much prefer you coming down my

throat,” he growled.

The shy Ondo I’d first met was definitely gone. In his place was an unabashedly sensual sex demon. I was a very lucky boy, as only I got to see this side of him because he was mine, all mine. My mate! And now I sounded like a caveman in my own damned head.

The elevator came to a stop and the doors swooshed open. Before I could parse what was even happening, I found myself hefted up into the air in a fireman’s carry as my equally desperate mate pounded down the ship’s corridor past several bemused people, including a family with a small child getting a piggyback ride from its father.

He skidded to a stop before a door, slapped his hand against the palm scanner, and brought us inside, barely waiting for it open all the way. Then we were in and he still wasn’t putting me down, instead carrying me through the apartment towards what I presumed was his bedroom. I wasn’t looking around to find out though, my attention now focused on the interesting folds running down either side of his back. I reached over to stroke along one, and his skin rippled as he gave a low groan.

“Sensitive,” I mused aloud.

“Yes, my wings are very sensitive,” he ground out.

I stared in awe. “You have wings inside there?”

We’d gone through another doorway and now I found myself placed on a bed. I stared up at him and he gave me a wickedly coy smile as his pecs flexed the tiniest bit and two gorgeous sunset red wings fanned out.

“Woah,” I said, one hand moving of its own volition, wanting to discover how they felt.

Ondo had other ideas though. He knelt down on the floor between my legs which were hanging off the end of the bed, retracting them.

“They’re in the way,” he explained and I thought he meant his wings but maybe my pants because, yep, he lifted his hand, popped out some scary ass looking finger daggers, and started cutting my pants off me. I didn’t have it in me to object and I damn sure wasn’t going to move in case I caused him to accidentally slice me instead of the fabric. Then there was cool air and blessed freedom as he yanked the remnants away, undies and all, and my cock leapt for joy so hard it smacked my belly.

He eyed it, both his gaze and the way his tongue darted out to lick one fang revealing him as the predator his species had evolved to be. He knelt, retracting his claws so they were only the admittedly sharp tips that they normally were, and grasped my dick by the root.

He licked his lips and without further warning engulfed me within his mouth. I cried out, the wet heat and the suction too much on my already over-sensitive dick. I exploded in his mouth, right then and there.

I stared at him in horrified remorse as he sputtered and swallowed. Then he pulled off, only for his tongue to lick me clean before releasing me.

“Oh, man! I’m sorry! I should have warned you that I felt as if I could go off like a rocket!” I babbled, shame staining my cheeks as his hand wiped drips from around his mouth and chin.

He tilted his head, regarding me in amusement. “No need to feel sorrow. I am honored that I have made your body so eager for my touch.” He stood, taking off his pull on boots and flicked open his own pants, quickly shucking them off to reveal the python he’d been hiding.

Whoa! Now that was one interesting looking trouser snake indeed. The flared head wasn't mushroom shaped at all, but kind of triangular almost. And it didn't have a single slit with one opening either, but several smaller ones. Holy shit!! His dick had a luxury rain head on it!

"Go on, you can take a closer look at it," he teased and yep, I was taking him up on that alright. First though, I was taking this shirt off. Thankfully I was wearing my new pair of slip-on Vans, so they were easy to get off without becoming a whole thing.

Now that we were both equally naked as jaybirds, I was ready to get back up close and personal. I leaned forward, taking him in hand.

"Does my wiener please you?"

I choked back a surprised laugh.

"Okay, I don't know where you learned that, but that's not a sexy word for this. Dick, or cock, or even penis is better at times like now. Wiener, or peter, or trouser snake are for more, ah, casual talk. Trouser snake for lewd casual talk. Wiener and peter are more, um, child friendly. Now, to answer your question, yes, it does."

It really did too. It felt heavy in my hand, and was long but not too thick. It was also slick, with raised ridges in a swirling pattern that wrapped around its girth like a ribbon. Small nodules were more or less evenly spaced between them, and it was these that were leaking a slippery, viscous fluid.

"You make your own lube," I said in awe.

He wagged his fingers, indicating his talons. "We cannot finger our mates loose, so Dragonii secrete a mild local relaxant that also lubricates the way."

I gave him a few pumps, letting his fluid coat my fingers. Then, I let go, scooted back a bit, and leaned back while planting my feet wide apart on the bed.

Without further ado, I reached down and smeared my hole, slipping a wet finger inside as he watched, mesmerized.

CHAPTER 21

REDONDO

“Okay, I don’t know where you learned that, but that’s not a sexy word for this. Dick, or cock, or even penis is better at times like now. Wiener, or peter, or trouser snake are for more, ah, casual talk. Trouser snake for lewd casual talk. Wiener and peter are more, um, child friendly. Now, to answer your question, yes, it does.”

I nodded, mentally filing away a note to myself of a question I wished to ask later. There was a male named Peter in my weapons training class, and I wished to discover if more male names were such expressions of virility. I found it interesting that humans named their young after genitalia.

That question could wait however, as my mate was definitely not shy about exploring my body. He had my cock cradled in his hand as he examined it, taking note of our anatomical differences. I did not mind. My cock was one of the physical attributes I possessed that was worthy of admiration.

He lifted his gaze to meet mine. “You make your own lube,” he said, astonished.

I held up my hands to wiggle my fingers, in order to remind him of thor clawed tips. “We cannot finger our mates loose, so Dragonii secrete a mild local relaxant that also lubricates the way.”

He gave a small nod of understanding, closing his hand as he did so. He proceeded to stroke my cock, causing it to jerk and increase the lubricant output. Soon, his fingers

and palm were coated with it. That appeared to have been his aim all along, to collect it in order to taunt me, as he moved further up the bed, placing his feet wide apart in order to bare his hole to my gaze. I could do nothing but watch hungrily as he smeared my fluids around his dusky pucker, then slid one digit inside and began to pump.

“Like what you see?”

I nodded.

He slipped in a second finger.

“Well, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to stand there and watch me or are you going to come give me that big Dragonii cock and make me scream your name?”

I shuffled forward, pulling his hand out of the way so I could rub my length up and down over his hole and scrotum. He let out a breathy moan and his cock, already plump once more, jerked in response as the perfume of his desire filled my nose. He definitely wanted this, with me. I notched my head against his quivering rosebud and asked, “Will you let me claim you? Once I begin, I do not think I will be able to stop until you are completely mine.”

He wound his legs around my waist. “Make me yours, hot stuff.” He punctuated his reply by using his heels to dig into my buttocks, urging me to surge forward. I needed no further invitation, I thrust forward until my cockhead popped through his ring of muscle, then waited a breath as my fluids wet his insides.

“Oh, that kinda tingles. Why didn’t it tingle before?” he asked.

“You didn’t have enough inside,” I replied, “and it takes a moment.”

“It feels good,” he replied, his eyes at half mast. He grabbed his dick and began lazily pumping it. “Gimme more. I can take it.”

I began to move once more, pushing in slowly. Once my hip rested against his butt, I paused again, leaning over to gently rake the front of my fangs down his neck. He shivered.

“Fuck, that feels even better, but I need more,” he gasped. “Move!”

I gripped his hips, pulled back out almost all the way, then thrust back in. In, out, in, out. The sounds of our skin slapping and the obscenely wet sounds I was making as I moved within his body filled the room. His hand began to move faster, and I started a relentless pace. I had to have him, mark him deep within with my seed. I needed anyone near enough to smell him to know he was mine, thanks to the combined smell of us and our lovemaking.

His back bowed as he came with a shout, ropes of white cum arcing to splash his abs. The sight of him was beautifully erotic, it tumbled me over the edge. I threw my head back and roared my release before moving to strike at his neck. I bit down, and he screamed once more, the initial pain filled part of the cry morphing into a needy moan as my venom pumped itself into the wound. I carefully removed my teeth, licking the area clean of blood, and laid down, rolling him so he was cradled face first against my chest.

“”That...what’s happening down there now?” he asked, his words slurred from the after effects of my venom.

“My ridges have swollen and my cockhead has inflated. We’re locked together until it goes down,” I explained.

“A knot!” he grinned loopily up at me. “Wow, just like in a shifter book.”

I snorted in amusement. I did not have a knot, but the effect was the same - there was no moving us apart until the engorgement receded.

“You claimed me. Like, you went ‘Grrr!’” he said, curling the fingers of one hand in imitation of claws as he lifted it for me to see.

“I did. You told me to,” I reminded him.

“Hell yeah. You are all mine.”

I kissed the tip of his nose. “As you are mine.”

“Mmhmm.” His eyes closed then, then his mouth fell open a few breaths later, as he fell asleep, still impaled on my cock.

I mentally preened. I’d seen to his needs so well that he’d become so completely sated that he could do nothing else. I watched him sleep, admiring the puncture wound on his neck which my venom would ensure healed as a scar for all to see. I pondered the unexpected way my day had turned out, still in awe of how I had indeed found and been matched with such a perfect mate. I nuzzled his neck and hair, closing my eyes to breathe him in deep.

CHAPTER 22

THOMAS

I woke up feeling sore in the best possible ways. I was tucked under a knitted soft blanket that looked suspiciously handmade. I lifted it, peering underneath. Yup, at some point, Ondo had gotten up and wiped me clean. How I had slept through that, I didn't know. My neck twinged and I got up, padding over to the mirror I saw Whohanging over a dresser. Two large puncture wounds with two smaller ones beneath were starting to scab over.

“Aha, I totally did not dream that claiming bite,” I said aloud. The edges weren't red or angry looking, so I decided to leave them alone.

“The venom contains something that keeps the bite from becoming infected,” Ondo said, coming in. He'd gotten dressed again, which was disappointing but probably was for the best. Any more wham bam thank you Sam and I'd be more than pleasantly sore and that would be no fun for either of us.

“Venom?” I asked. “Like a poison?”

He smiled tightly. “When I'm biting during one of our matings, no. My venom sacs then produce a serum that keeps bacteria at bay, speeds healing of the wound, and gives you a mild euphoria.”

“Oh, so more like a vampy chomp.”

He looked adorably confused. I was definitely going to have to introduce him to my preferred reading material.

“More yummy and less ouchie,” I clarified.

His expression cleared. “Ah. Yes, exactly.”

“And if it’s not a mating bite?”

“If it’s an accidental one, it’s just a normal wound. If it’s a bite inflicted while battling, the venom is mildly paralytic. I can also inject the paralytic version at will by stimulating my venom sacs.”

I stared at him in horror. “If my tongue is all up in your mouth sliding around while we kiss, you mean I could accidentally cause your fangs to produce something that will paralyse me?”

“No,” he chuckled. “It has to be done with intent. For example, if I was tasked to take out a guard while infiltrating an enemy base, my focus on that task would cause my hormonal response to change to be ready for battle.”

“Ohhhh! Gotcha! That would then make the freeze potion version of your venom happen when you stimulate your ah, venom sacs.” Just saying those two words felt a bit weird, but then this was my new normal. I was alien-married to a dragon-y Mylos dude, after all. The only one in the entire Mylos Fleet, at the moment, even.

I felt myself swell with pride at the thought. He survived a brutal childhood massacre to grow up to be this shy, sweet male who tried to save the banana trees of the world and fucked like a demon. And he was mine. I’d cut a bitch if they so much as even thought about trying to make a play for him. Not that they’d have any luck, because they only get one mate.

“Wait - you work with plants. They aren’t likely to ask you to go infiltrate some secret bad guy base, are they?”

“No,” he admitted. “Though like all Mylos warriors, I am trained for battle. I will protect you and this ship with my life.”

“Let’s hope it never comes to that, okay?” I kissed him on the underside of his jaw and he inclined his head to capture my lips with his.

“I like this mouth mating humans do,” he said as we parted.

“You mean it’s not something Mylos do?”

“Not with the tongues the way you do. I don’t think the Dragonii do either. At least, not that I remember and it wasn’t in the information I received during my schooling.”

Ah. During his sex class, I guessed he meant. His teachers and fathers must have made sure that they got what he needed to know about his body from the Dragonii. I got the impression that they were rather reclusive even though they’d joined the Galactic Alliance.

He stepped back, dropping his hands to his side. Clearing his throat, he said, “Terry brought you a change of clothes over. I placed them in the bathing room for you. You probably should put them on before we end up mating once more.”

My cheeks reddened. Terry had to have known. Who was I kidding? Everyone knew - the medical staff, his parents, our friends, his brother. Neither of us had been exactly subtle.

A horrible thought suddenly occurred to me.

“I was practically climbing you like a tree in the Sickbay, elevator and hallways! Am I going to get fired for conduct unbecoming? Ah! Are you going to get a reprimand?”

I wracked my brain. Had there been a morality clause of some kind in the contract? I didn't recall seeing one but I was working on a children's TV show for crying out loud!

I ran into the bathroom to go find the clothes he mentioned. Terry had brought over a pair of navy blue straight leg sweatpants and a t-shirt with an exploding taco stand depicted on it. I certainly did own a shirt like this - oh. That asshole! He must have had it replicated for me after what I'd said to Ondo! I snickered. It actually was pretty funny, but that didn't mean I wouldn't get him back later. Just wait. My face fell, remembering that I might get fired, though I supposed they wouldn't make me leave the ship, unless they transferred Ondo off. Did they have someplace like Antarctica they sent their warriors to? In the old TV shows, soldiers and airmen who got into trouble were always getting reassigned to the Antarctic.

Ondo stood in the open door of the bathroom, which in my haste I hadn't bothered to close. Not that it mattered, it was the ensuite to his bedroom, or rather our bedroom now, and we'd both seen each other well and truly nekkid.

“You didn't do anything overly lewd in public, nor did I,” he said. And our behavior was quite normal for couples in the early stages of building their mating bond. It's one of the reasons the Mylos automatically provide two weeks off as soon as one is matched.

“Two weeks? But we have a shooting schedule!”

“And I am sure they will have anticipated at least one cast member getting matched,” he replied reasonably.

“And what about your bananas?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “I will have to arrange for their care and finish writing up my report, but the report can wait until I return. The plants themselves just need nurturing to thrive.”

I nodded at him. “Yeah, okay. Um, so I guess I should call my director and see what he says, huh?”

“Xeranos will have notified them right after we received our match confirmation. You probably have a message on your tablet.”

“Which is at my old place.” My shoulders slumped. “I don’t suppose I can log into my comms here without it, huh?”

“Terry also brought your tablet. It’s on the bedside table.”

“It is,” I peered past him, looking at the one he was pointing to.

“Thank you!”

He smiled as if my thanks was the best thing ever, his face lighting up like a kid’s on Christmas as he stepped aside to let me pass. I hurried over, picked it up and looked. Sure enough, I had a message from the producer’s office. I opened it and quickly scanned it.

“Huh. Looks like you’re right. They’re congratulating us and this says to not worry, they’ll film the stuff that doesn’t require me first and do the ones I’m in once we get back.” I laughed. “Apparently the luau at the Hilton in Waikiki is fabulous if we’re considering getting married or honeymooning there.” I looked over at him. “I’ve never been to Hawaii, but do you want to do a human style wedding or honeymoon?”

He took in a deep breath. “I do not wish to miss out on anything with you.”

Aw. At this rate, his sweetness was going to end up giving me cavities and I didn’t mind one single bit. I’d been with enough jerks. It was fabulous being with a guy who was considerate and full of romantic gestures that were heartfelt instead of going through the motions.

“Well, the only person I’d have to invite would be my agent, Cheryl. She’s the one who suggested I apply for a role on playtime Fleet. Of course, Terry and Ralph too, but they are also your friends, so that goes without saying.”

“Three guests for you and three for me,” he relied. The ticking them off his fingers, “Father, Papa, and Yllip.”

“Sounds perfect to me! And is it true we can pick anywhere?”

He nodded. “We can get married in one place and honeymoon in another, or split your honeymoon time between different places.”

“Do you have a preference? Where to get married or go visit for our honeymoon?”

He shook his head. “I never thought I’d actually find a match.” He looked down, shuffling his feet. “I thought if I got a match, they’d see me and be afraid because I am not like the Mylos they are used to, I am a Dragonii and scarred. Many are uncomfortable when they see me.”

“Then that’s their problem!” I was enraged thinking how terrible people made him feel. “Did they actually say stuff?”

“Just things like, ‘He’s huge’ and ‘What kind of Mylos is that?’ or ‘he looks like a dragon alright.’”

“So thoughtless things you overheard, but not meant to be mean.”

He got a thoughtful look on his face. “Yes. Yllip says if I come out more, it will stop because I will not be a surprise anymore.”

“I think Yllip is right, but maybe we should have a small ceremony where you’ll be more comfortable.”

CHAPTER 23

REDONDO

“I will be fine with wherever you’d like to be.” I needed him to understand that his happiness was one of the things that now gave me joy.

He ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t know where would be good, either, if I’m honest. I kinda always thought if it happened, it’d be at the courthouse. No ceremony, just the two of us in front of a judge and a witness. Though I always thought it would be fun to do one of those tacky Vegas weddings. You know, so tacky that they’re kinda cool and a good laugh.”

“We can do Vegas then.” I beamed at him.

“Maybe we should ask your parents. They might have some suggestions.”

I nodded. “Since arriving here, they have gone down to the surface at least once a week and spent the day sightseeing.”

He pointed at me. “See! They’ll probably know some great places. Are they home?”

“They are in the living room, drinking chala tea. Come, we can ask them now.” The sooner we did this wedding, the sooner we could get to the honeymoon part.

He swallowed nervously, clutched his tablet to his chest, and followed me out as I led him by the hand.

“Papa, Father, may we speak with you?”

They stopped conversing and Papa patted the space next to him on the long sectional couch. “Come sit and tell us what’s on your mind.”

I led Tom over and expected him to sit down. Instead, he stood before my fathers.

“I’m so sorry for the last time we met. I was so caught up in everything that I didn’t stop to remember my manners. “I’m -”

“Thomas, Tom for short. Yes, we know,” Father said in amusement. “Just call me Father.”

“And I’m Papa,” Papa added. “It’s what Yllip and Ondo both call us and we are so pleased to include you as our son.”

Tom stared at them, tears welling in his eyes. “You think of me as your son? Already?”

“Yes. Surely that is normal?”

Tom shook his head. “It should be, but it isn’t always. My own pa-pa-parents w..wouldn’t like Ondo at all!” he sobbed. “Not because he...he’s Mylos. Just ‘cuz he’s a man!”

“Ah. Homophobia,” Papa said, his lips curled in distaste.

Tom sniffled. “Yeah. If my agent hadn’t found Playtime Fleet for me or I hadn’t gotten the job, I’d have had to move back home to live with them. They always try to get me to date some young woman or other they meet at their church.”

I pulled him tightly against my side. “You’re mine.”

He laughed weakly. “Yeah, I am, huh.” He looked at my fathers with watery eyes. “That’s what Ondo and I came to talk to you about. Ondo wants to decide where to have our human wedding ceremony. He said you guys have visited a lot of places and might have some ideas for a location for it or our honeymoon.”

Father smiled, turned to Papa and said, “Remember that day we were at the park and a couple were having their wedding photos taken by that lake?”

Papa clapped his hands together. “Yes!” He looked over at us and continued. “The female at the coffee cart said it was a popular spot for weddings and photoshoots.”

Tom grinned. “What if we got married at the park here?” He looked up at me. “It would be perfect! We wouldn’t have to go anywhere, just find someone who can say the words because it’s just a ceremony since we’re already Mylos married.”

“Would that be okay?”

He nodded. “We could have our photos taken by the fountain.”

Papa smiled. “That does sound nice.” His face clouded over. “Your parents won’t come and spoil it, will they?”

Tom shook his head. “I’m not inviting them, not that they’d come anyway. They’d get their invitation and just tell me how terrible I’m being and all, so I’m not bothering. Honestly, Mama blocked me on social media after I told her I was applying for the role. She knew it meant I’d be tested for a mate match and what that would mean. Anyway, we want to keep it small.”

“Six guests,” I confirmed. “His agent, Ralph, Terry, Yllip, and both of you.”

“That should be simple enough to arrange,” Father said. “What about the honeymoon?”

“I think it would be nice to split it. Maybe go two places. Also, I think after the ceremony, we should all go eat somewhere fun.”

“We could all go bowling and eat the pizza,” I suggested. “That’s supposed to be fun.”

“You know, that’s brilliant! It’s where we first met and we said we’d be back. Yeah, let’s say our vows in the park, wearing matching bowling shirts, and all go bowling.”

“Matching bowling shirts?” Papa asked.

“Yeah. Teams wear shirts with their team name on the back and their first names on the front.”

“And what would be our team name?” I asked.

“Redondo’s Clutch.”

“Oh, I like that,” Papa said.

“But Ralph and Terry are not members of our Clutch,” I reminded them.

“They’re your friends, though, and mine, so they are kinda clutch adjacent,” Tom insisted.

“It isn’t anything official,” Father added. “It’s just for fun, marking them as part of the wedding party. Like the females who all wore the same color dresses that day. The coffee lady said it was because they were something called bridesmaids.”

“Yeah, big weddings have those and best men and all that jazz,” Tom replied.

I decided they were right. It was just shirts after all. “Okay. We can all wear the shirts, but we’re only supposed to wear the shoes we got at the bowling alley.”

“Yeah. I forgot we had those. We ran out with them on and all sorta changed out of them in the elevator.”

“When would you like to do it?”

Tom shrugged. “As soon as possible, I think. That way we get more days to visit wherever we decide to go.”

“I would like to see Redondo Beach,” I said, causing Tom to giggle.

“They have a beach with your name?” Father asked, looking surprised.

“Well, it’s ruh-DON-do rather than red-ONDO, but yeah. It’s a small beach city close to Santa Monica.” He giggled again before looking up at me once more. “I should have guessed you’d say that. Anywhere else?”

“You should pick the second place.”

Well, Hawaii does sound fun, but how about Tahiti?”

“Xeranos,” I called out.

“Yes, Redondo?” the AI replied.

“We have some arrangements we need made.” I quickly explained our wishes.

“As soon as possible, truly?” he asked for clarification.

“Yeah, why?” Tom asked.

“First, may I ask if you have a preference for the type of officiant?”

“Just someone who can say the words. It’s not like it’s anything but ceremonial, right?” Tom answered.

“Correct. Okay, how about this evening, at four-thirty?”

“So soon?” Tom gasped.

“You did say as soon as possible. Commander Gundar has a free slot in his schedule and I can have him marry you. As he’s captain of this ship, it seems fitting. And I can have the shirts replicated as soon as I know the color you’d like them in and the sizes.”

“Purple,” I said immediately, thinking of Tom’s favorite flower.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Purple with white embroidery.”

“You won’t need a reservation for the bowling alley afterwards and after a good night’s sleep, you can catch the shuttle to Santa Monica and take a rental car to Redondo Beach. I’m arranging for you to go there first as there is a last minute booking available at the Shade Hotel’s penthouse suite.”

“Whoa! We don’t need anything that fancy!” Tom protested. “That sounds mega expensive.”

“It’s your honeymoon, and it’s done,” Xeranos told him. “Six days there, then you’ll

shuttle to Tahiti. You're booked into a bungalow at the Intercontinental."

The front door opened and Yllip came in. Seeing us, he asked, "Did I miss something important?"

"Not yet," I replied. "The wedding isn't until this afternoon."

He grinned. "Cool! Where?"

"At the park on the main promenade," Xeranos replied. "Now, I'd like your shirt sizes please."

CHAPTER 24

THOMAS

Someone, and I suspected Ondo, had arranged for pots of blooming purple azaleas to be set out around the fountain. How did he know that was my favorite flower? Had he read the answer to that question over my shoulder or had it been a lucky guess? Whatever. It was sweet, just like him.

Ondo and I stood in front of Commander Gundar, who'd put on a bright blue aloha shirt for the occasion. His heavily pregnant mate Darla was sitting on a nearby bench resting as she watched the proceedings. A cake carrier sat next to her, filled with homemade cupcakes with purple and white frosting she'd baked as soon as she'd heard from the Commander about the wedding.

Ondo and I stood before the Commander, the fountain at his back, and our guests fanned out to either side of us for a good view.

"We are gathered here today to make promises of love and fidelity. Do you, Thomas, accept Redondo as your husband and mate, to love with all your heart, and to care for him in health or in sickness, cherishing him always?"

"I do," I replied.

"And do you, Redondo -"

Yes."

“You’re supposed to let him finish,” Terry whispered at him as I laughed at Ondo’s overeagerness.”

“I’ll try again,” Gundar said. “Do you, Redondo, accept Thomas as your husband and mate, to love with all your heart, and to care for him in health or in sickness, cherishing him always?”

“Yes.”

“Then as Commander of the Earth Bride Fleet, I pronounce you not only true mates, but husbands. You may kiss now to seal your promise.”

Mindful of people passing by pausing to watch us in interest, we kept the kiss to a fairly chaste peck on the lips.

“Congratulations,” Gundar said and several onlookers cheered.

Ondo ducked his head, a faint blush staining his cheeks.

“Is he this shy in bed too?” Ralph asked.

Terry smacked him up the back of his head. “You can’t ask him that!”

I laughed. “No, he’s pretty dominant there, actually.”

“Okay, not fair. Now I want details,” Terry complained.

“What you’re going to get is those cupcakes from Darla,” Ralph told him. “You can carry them to the bowling alley and we’ll have them after the pizza.”

“Congrats, kiddo,” Cheryl rasped. “Don’t forget, first kid is named after me.”

Redondo looked at me questioningly and I laughed. “Tell you later, but she’s joking.”

“That’s what he thinks,” she replied with a wink, making Redodo look even more confused. Terry walked over to get the cupcakes,

CHAPTER 25

REDONDO

The shirts were indeed silly. Purple with white collars and sleeves, which were thankfully the short kind, with enormous white wedding bells with little eggs under them centered on the back. In large white embroidered script above the image was the words 'Redondo's Clutch'. On the front left breast, in script, was the first name of the wearer.

Sam chortled as soon as they came through the door. "Me likey! Old school bowling league shirts!" Xeranos notified me you'd be here after your wedding, and I gotta tell you, after you boys all get your shoes on, we're gonna have to take a picture to put on the wall. You'll get a copy of course."

"Of course," Tom replied, looking amused.

My fathers quickly got their feet scanned and socks and shoes issued while the rest of us changed into the shoes we'd ended up buying only yesterday.

Yesterday! It seemed unbelievable, but here they all were. It absolutely had to be stars fated, though quite why the cosmos had chosen him for all of this good fortune, I did not know. I was glad it did, though, as it gave me my family as well as my mate.

"Say cheese!" Sam said as we posed for his picture and a flash of light went off as he used what Tom oohed and ahed over as it was a camera that used physical film.

“I gotta friend with a dark room. He’ll develop these sometime in the next couple of days and I’ll have a copy of the best one sent to your quarters. There will be a copy for each of ya.”

“Thank you,” Papa said, delighted.

“You’ve got lane 5 for old times’ sake,” Sam said with a wink and we crossed over to it.

“Okay, in alphabetical order once more,” Ralph said, looking at my fathers expectantly.

Yllip laughed, knowing that Ralph was not going to get their names out of them. To me and my friends, they were Father and Papa. That was it. It was an endearing quirk, and one they refused to budge on.

“That would make me first if using English,” Father said. “F comes in their alphabet before the first letter of any of your names.”

“Then me, as P for Papa comes before Ralph.”

Ralph threw up his hands. “Okay, fine, Father, Papa, me, Redondo, Terry and Yllip.” He hurriedly entered our names on the electronic score pad. “Do you know how to play?”

“I’ve been watching,” Father said, looking around at the other lanes. “The object seems to be that I roll a ball down the path to the pins and make them all fall down. And I get up to two turns at a time to try to do so.”

“That’s right,” Tom told him as we all walked over to let the ball machine scan our hands to receive our initial ball selection.

After a first 8-2 split, Father got nothing but strikes, which were when all the pins fell down at the same time. Papa got a 6-4 and managed more strikes than splits, but always got all of the pins as well. I managed a 7-3, then mostly splits, though a few times I was left with a single pin standing.

Tom did pretty respectable as well, managing a strike and the rest a mixture similar to mine. Ralph and Terry were dreadful, though good natured about it. They hit only a few pins, mostly because their balls got all the way down the lane and clipped a few as they fell into the gutter. Yllip 'wiped the floor with us' as Tom put it, scoring strike after strike.

We played two rounds or whatever they were called, then called it quits until after we had some food at the snack bar. We ordered pizza, fries, and some beers, and somehow, the topic came around to dogs.

"Yeah, I really love golden retrievers myself," Ralph said. "Smart, easy going dogs who are like a hug wrapped in fur."

"If I get a dog, it would be a mutt. Adopt don't shop," Terry replied.

"Even purebreds end up in shelters," Ralph told him. "I'd look for one there. And get him a buddy too, breed not important."

"I'd want a wiener dog," I said. "And I'd name him Peter."

Tom buried his face in his hands. "I should never have told you that, huh?"

Once the laughter at our table died down, Tom said, "I should hold you to that. Before we get back, we shall have Xero find a dachshund rescue who will let us visit and adopt one of their pups. Then you'll have years of getting looks from people when you tell them his name is Peter."

More laughter around the table and I realized something. This really was my family, and it included two very real friends. No, make that three, I decided as I looked around and saw Sam notice me. He gave me a thumbs up and a smile and after the picture business, it was obvious he was a really nice male who deserved to be in the friends column. Taking the time to glance around some more, I saw after our initial appearance, no one was openly staring at me. In fact, the comments and looks when we first came in were more focused on our shirts than me. Further proof that I had more potential friends out there. People just needed to satisfy their curiosity after their initial surprise and I needed to give them a chance. Our honeymoon was the perfect chance for me to put that into practice, and the humans whose reactions were ones of fear? I'd just have to try to reassure them.

First though, I wanted that last fry. I snaked my tail out to grab it.

"Hey!" Ralph complained and I grinned.

He snorted. "Go on, man. It's your wedding day so I'll let you have it."

"Good," I said, popping it into my mouth, "because it's gone."

"We should do this once a week," Terry said. "Make a regular bowling night out of it."

"Sure, why not?" Father said.

"A bowling night and a game night and a movie night. How exciting," Papa beamed.

"That gives us four days to still do other things."

I looked over at Tom who waggled his eyebrows suggestively while responding with,

"Oh, I think we can figure out how to spend those evenings."

Oh, I definitely could too.

The end (for now)