



Testing the Kot'oll Officer (Dating the Kot'olls #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When the most annoying patron arrives by the bar counter, I run for the big kotoll guy, inviting myself into his arms, all four of those. We may not have been mates, but maybe we can be that for an evening, just long enough until the annoyance is gone.

And boy does he take me under his arms and then some. It doesn't take long before the evening stretches into days and weeks. Where do I draw the line again? What's real and what's not?

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Chapter 1

Julie

The bar hums with life, a swirl of colors and sounds dancing around me as I wipe down the polished surface of the counter. Neon lights dance overhead, illuminating the faces of my eclectic clientele—from gravity-defying feathered beings to the shimmering, gelatinous blobs that somehow possess the ability to order cocktails.

I take a moment to scan the room, grinning at the chaos—a cluster of four-eyed beings arguing over who ordered the most exotic drink while a group of charmingly weird humanoids fan their large, ornate wings to impress the cocktail waiters.

Being a bartender is my calling. The pulse of the crowd fuels me, the bass of the music vibrates through my bones, and the new faces each night thrill me. It's not just about pouring drinks; it's about the stories that unfold before me and the beings I can read.

As I prepare another round of vibrant fluorescent cocktails, I spot a familiar face slipping through the crowd, and my heart skips a beat. A four-armed kot'oll glides into the bar with a seriousness that contrasts sharply with the chaotic energy around him. He's here from time to time and always catches my eye. He is a big guy, making him hard to miss. Even though there are quite a lot of big patrons in the bar, he feels different. Maybe that has to do with the light frown on his face that shouts how serious he is even when he's in a bar. He has never even tried to blend in with the crowd.

I can't help but snicker at the thought; he's all business, but there's something inherently magnetic about the way he carries himself.

I pull my eyes away from him to the drink I'm preparing. Even though he's pretty attention-grabbing, I have my patrons to serve. With a quick flick of the wrist, I slide a drink down the bar, aiming for the eager hands of a guy who almost knocks it over, his multi-colored tentacles slipping. I chuckle, mouthing a silent cheer, only to catch the kot'oll watching me. His brows arch slightly in disapproval, the corner of his mouth twitching with the ghost of a smile. Maybe, just maybe, he's starting to see the fun in this delightful chaos.

I don't know his name. I don't ask patrons about their personal information, so usually, I don't know what to call them, not that I have to. But I remember faces and keep them in my head for a long time. This kot'oll spikes my curiosity, but I know to remain professional.

A few empty glasses find their way back to my counter as the robot puts them down. I move on to putting them into the cleaning machine. In theory, the robots can mix drinks too, but most beings still prefer to have someone here to chat with them.

As I set the last glass into the cleaning machine, I catch the kot'oll's gaze again. His molten bronze eyes narrow slightly, assessing me like he's dissecting the crowd and trying to find the best approach to interact. Sometimes, he takes his time before he puts in an order. What's going through that serious mind of his? Does he ever loosen up?

He looks away when I glance at him, pretty much saying out loud that he has been looking at me. I don't mind, I'm the bartender, and beings look at me all the time. but there's something in the way he looks at me that tempts me.

When he's in the bar, he's always alone. But how can someone like him not have

friends? Or maybe he's into an aura of mystery.

When he walks off, I turn to my patrons, having more on my hands.

The night rolls on, and the energy intensifies. The music pumps louder, and laughter screams over the harmonizing sounds of conversations. That's when I spot a group of flamboyant alien creatures trying to impress a particularly glamorous figure in a shimmering gown. Their exaggerated gestures and wild attempts at dancing make me shake my head, laughing as I mix a fresh round of drinks.

"Hello." That kot'oll's deep voice cuts through the air as he approaches the bar. I can't help but smile at the way everyone else parts like the Red Sea for the kot'oll. "I'll have a Sakanol Highball," he states, his tone flat yet somehow commanding. He takes a seat, his four strong arms casually resting on the counter, but looks steady enough. For a big guy like him to be mere inches away from me, it should be pretty intimidating, but somehow, it feels like he's not going to hurt me, and that's not because the bouncer's nearby. His arms are... comforting, in a way.

What do those arms feel like?

I feign mock seriousness, raising an eyebrow. "You know, for a guy who looks like he could grapple with a Space Kraken, you sure do have refined tastes. Is a Highball enough to satisfy a being from the bravest of galactic ancestry?"

He pauses, looking genuinely amused, and for a brief moment, there's the tiniest crack in his stoic face. "I prefer to keep my drinks as uncomplicated as the rules of the city. Besides, it maintains my focus during these... unpredictable times."

"Unpredictable is the name of the game here." I start with his drink. "Just wait until you get a taste of the Interstellar Splasher. It's known to make even the most serious kot'oll want to dance on tables."

His lips twitch again, and I want to believe he's stifling a laugh, but he quickly regains composure, his gaze steady, as though we're locked in a playful duel. "I shall respectfully decline; dancing is not in my daily protocol."

"Ah, a male of discipline," I tease, garnishing his drink with a sprig of fruit I know he hasn't tasted yet. "Perhaps we can arrange a time to spice up that protocol. I bet I could shock you into loosening up a bit."

His expression softens, confusion flickering behind those intense eyes. "Shock? I believe you have misjudged the nature of my... wiring. But should you wish to initiate a protocol revision, I may consider an experiment."

I can't help the giggle that escapes as I slide his drink toward him. His honesty is refreshing amidst the chaos. And to be honest, what kind of being talks like that? Does he always talk like that? Or is he playing along? "Just keep the Highball on standby because tonight, you may find your protocols are about to get a wild upgrade."

"Is 'wild' a recommended addition to my standard operating procedures?" he asks, dead serious like always, but there's a hint of warmth in his eyes.

If he has no plan to relax, why even go to a bar after all?

What's his job? He talks like... maybe a guard of some sort. It's hard not to think of kot'olls as the species that do the fighting and physical jobs with those strong arms. I have yet to meet a kot'oll without muscles almost bursting out of their clothes. This one looks even stronger than the average kot'oll. Despite the stereotype, there are as many jobs for them as there are for humans, so the possibilities are endless.

This kot'oll waits for his drink, sitting completely straight with shoulders poised. Maybe he really is a security guard or the like, someone who works a very rigid job

with a ton of rules to follow. Standard operating procedures, huh?

He takes a sip of his drink, and I watch as he processes the taste, his expression a curious mix of intrigue and mild surprise. He's not one to show much emotion, but I can see the wheels turning in his head. "It is... unexpectedly pleasant," he says, almost reluctantly, as though admitting he enjoys it is a breach of some rule.

"See? Who knew the serious kot'oll has a taste for the finer things in life?" I can't help but tease, emboldened by the spark of humor in the air between us.

He straightens again, the stoic mask returning. "It is merely a beverage. But it may appear that I've been led astray by your insistence on 'spicing up' my protocols." He looks at me, and I swear there's something in his gaze that makes my heart race—a mixture of challenge and something else I can't quite name.

"You can call me a guide to the reckless side of life." I lean forward just enough for my auburn hair to cascade over my shoulder, inviting him into my world, even if just for a moment. "I promise you, one taste of chaos won't dismantle your operating system."

I would have added that this isn't the first time he's been here, but I'm not supposed to mention that unless he starts. That is also considered a patron's privacy, which I shall not talk about. That's the one and only rule for the bar and as a bartender.

He tilts his head to the side, seemingly deep in thought. He swipes his card and pays for his drink, then walks off with the glass in his hand without another word.

Now, he's gone with his back against me.

This is usually how our interaction ends. I'll try to get him to talk, which may or may not be successful depending on which side the wind blows. Then, at some point, he'll

give that solid nod and leave, usually before I'm done with talking to him. Maybe that's his way of keeping a hint of mystery around him, which he has been successful.

Sometimes, I imagine a hug from him. Those arms and muscles are going to make him a good hugger. But I almost can't see him being someone like that. He may have to pull out a list of rules and check against every single one of them before he knows whether he can hug me, which is probably a no.

Knowing him, he's going to stay in a corner, as far away from the banging music in the bar as possible as he sips his drink, probably staring at an empty wall.

Weird.

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Chapter 2

Vatok

I tap my foot on the skater robot as I glide down the dark streets. This is a smaller road that isn't as busy as the others, but some spaceships go here, too, and today, this is my patrol route. I'd much rather be up in the sky with the regular program, but a fellow is sick today, and the leader reassigned me.

There's a surge of warmth building in my stomach as I think about the bartender from last night. Somehow, she always does things to me when I meet her. Her laughter dances in my mind. Maybe, one day, I'll gather the courage to ask for her name. It isn't like she has it clipped onto her clothes like a server does in a restaurant, so...

Maybe that's for her to dodge weird beings out there with her name a bit better hidden away. As a police officer, I understand that, but as a semi-regular bar-goer, I want to know her name.

She has good hands too, effortlessly navigates the chaotic bar like a good traffic police officer in the midst of crazy traffic during peak hours. I can still picture her teasing smile and the way her bright eyes sparkled with mischief when she tossed playful jabs at her patrons. It's an enchanting chaos that calls to me, even though it has never been my thing.

Tonight, the streets are quieter, the distant hum of spaceships leaving behind their trails of light in a blurry glow. I can't shake the image of her leaning over the bar, mixing drinks, a whirlwind of colors and laughter. For a moment, her life seems to be

more interesting than mine.

I lift my brows at two spaceships parked on the streets, where that's not allowed. I pull out the scanning machine that will search up the registered number of these and send them a fine. Getting fined sucks, but that's the only way some will learn a lesson.

I swipe the machine at the two ships, tapping for their information on the screen.

The cute human bartender...

Sometimes, I wonder whether I'm in the bar for a drink after a shift or some jokes from her. She seems to find me silly, for some reason. I don't get it. Maybe I'm too serious for the bar. That'd make sense.

I know bars are somewhere where rules don't apply and one has to use their quick wit to deal with things that can pop up without a warning. I try not to look at most things that don't involve me, not wanting to get into trouble. I'm not in the stores and bars compliance department, so I'm not in charge of making sure everyone behaves. More importantly, I don't think other beings will want to know that I'm a police officer. My job doesn't sound like fun to most, let alone bar-goers.

I go down another street after I scan these spaceships. If the road were wider, there might have been parking slots for them, but this isn't. Spaceships that descend from the sky may not be able to stop or slow down in time to avoid hitting these, causing extra risk on the road, which is good for no one.

This street looks better, but there is one lone spaceship randomly parked to the side, too.

It's so badly parked that... It's a diagonal against the side of the street, almost blocking

half of the road. Even if this place is good to park, this is no way to park a spaceship. How did this being get their permit to even drive? If they don't know how to drive, they should attend lessons and figure themselves out, not cause problems with others.

I look around. There are a few barks from stray animals, but other than that, there's no being in sight.

Frustratingly, I want to shout at that being. This is one of the worst parked spaceships I've ever seen.

I pull the machine when someone shouts behind me.

"Wait! Don't fine my spaceship!"

There are barks following.

I turn around to...

My heart skips a beat at the wavy hair of the being. That's the cute bartender. She looks tall for a human female. She has... a zebaba in her hands. What's this thing doing there?

Part of me wants to take the zebaba's place and have her hug me, but that's such a silly idea. I'm a bigger being. There's no way she can hold me up like she can with zebabas.

She says, "Sir, please. I'm leaving."

I clear my throat. "But you should know that your spaceship shouldn't be here, like ever."

"I know, but I heard this poor guy, and his leg's stuck. I have to save him."

While I appreciate that, if she's honest about it, I can't make an exception just because. I point at how poorly parked the spaceship is. "This kind of parking..."

Despite the dim lighting in the streets, her cheeks turn red. "So... Like I said, I was in a hurry."

I roll my eyes at that. But she lifts the zebaba to my face and that thing licks me. I wince and turn away, not expecting that. When I turn back, she's already inside her spaceship. I hiss. "What are you doing? I haven't done—"

"Do you remember this ship model? Have you scanned it?"

I check my scanning machine. The screen is off since it was inactive as I talked to her. "No."

There's a hum of an engine starting. "Then don't remember that, please!"

She zooms into the sky, leaving me on the street, holding the machine that's just ready to be scanning.

Even that take-off is too sloppy for her good. She almost runs into a lamppost.

I stare at her spaceship, which gets smaller and smaller into the sky as seconds pass. So... If I insist on trying, stopping her and making sure I fine her won't be a problem and can be achieved easily.

There's a flutter in my stomach. I... The spot where the zebaba licked me heats up. I...

I suppose I should keep patrolling the streets instead of standing here like an idiot.

But I can't tear my mind from her. She always comes with a ball of vibrant energy, so much so I find it hard to talk to her like a normal being. It's like I can't even form words in my head.

It must be stupid to have to wander in the bar for so long to come up with what drinks I want for the day and to even make an order with her, even though I want to talk to her.

I find myself moving, almost instinctively, down the streets. My feet set the wheels in motion before my mind catches up.

Do I just let her go and pretend not to see that?

I know where to find her, but...

I look around, even though I'm in another street already. There's apparently no one around, not when she and I talked either.

So...

I tap the controls of the skater robot, sending it into a swift glide, my heart racing as I navigate the narrow streets. As I fumble through my head, replaying our brief encounter, a mix of irritation and fascination brew within me.

She is for sure one of a kind.

And pure chaos energy.

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Chapter 3

Julie

The music in the bar hums with joy. I'm on my feet again, busy serving patrons. I love it when the bar is buzzing with joy. Slinging drinks may not be the most glamorous job for some, but I sure enjoy it all the time. The crowd ebbs and flows like the waves of the ocean, and just as I place a colorful cocktail in front of a gleeful customer, I spot him. My heart sinks. There he is, Targoth, a scrawny, overly ambitious zylion with a penchant for trying to woo women like me with his peculiar brand of charm—mostly based on exaggerated tales of his supposed intergalactic conquests. Tonight, he's got his sights set on me, again, and I can feel his gaze like a creeping vine, slowly wrapping around my resolve.

I want to leave, or let the bouncer know about this, but...

"Good day, my sweetheart." Targoth has the most obnoxious grin on his face, which he probably thinks makes him look good.

I force a smile, hoping I look professional. This is a business, after all, and before he causes trouble, I have to bear with that.

The cost of doing business...

"I've been thinking about you." Targoth leans over the bar, his iridescent scales shimmering under the neon lights. "Your smile lights up the cosmos brighter than a supernova."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "What are you having for the evening?" I ask, keeping it professional while scanning the room for an escape route.

"I'd say you." He winks, imagining himself to be a lot more handsome than he actually is. Maybe he's the one for someone, but I'm certain that I'm not that special someone. I just want to be slinging drinks... not to engage with stupidity.

I clear my throat. "How about a drink? Fancy a cocktail?"

"Only if you'll share it with me," he purrs, or at least attempts to. It sounds more like a malfunctioning air filter. "I've got a spaceship that could take us to the most romantic spots on the planet."

As if I don't have a spaceship myself... I'd fly myself to somewhere he can't find me, but that's if I care that much about him. He doesn't have such an impact on me. "That's very... generous. But I should mention—"

"Your beauty transcends species," he continues, oblivious to my discomfort. "And I've heard zylions and humans are very compatible—"

I rub the silver ring on my finger, pretending that's an unintentional thing. I'm single, but I usually have the ring on just so I can deter crazy beings. Also, I'm not looking to date any of my patrons, so that has been working, except there are some beings who are apparently blind, like this fucking dumbass standing right in front of me. "I mean, that's generous of you. But trust me, maybe you want to have a drink and enjoy the evening. I have a line to serve."

"But do they have what you deserve to get? Your pull is even stronger than the moon of—"

Someone clears his throat, sounding like a strong male.

I look up, and there stands the big kot'oll, that kot'oll, all his four arms crossed over his chest. He isn't in his uniform, but he is a buff dude regardless. I've always thought that he should buy clothes that are a size larger, but for now, he looks perfect. I've never been so happy to see a traffic officer in my life, especially right after I ran from him mere days ago.

"Is there a problem here?" His deep voice carries that official tone that makes most beings straighten up instinctively.

Before Targoth can respond, I seize my chance. "Oh, you're here! Do you know how much I miss you?" I'm perhaps a bit too enthusiastic. "I was wondering when you'd show up!"

The kot'oll's bronze eyes widen slightly, but to his credit, he catches on quickly. One of his hands moves to rest on the bar counter, closer to where mine is, while another adjusts his belt in what I hope passes for a possessive gesture.

He grunts. "I miss you, too, but apparently, there's some trouble waiting to be solved."

In order to be more convincing, I get out of the counter and invite myself into the kot'oll's arms. I pick the one that's closer to me. He wraps that arm around me, flexes the two upper arms, and rests the remaining one on his waist.

He sends a lot more warmth to me than I expected. His muscles are a bit too comfortable. Imagine if he holds me with all four arms... I may melt.

Targoth's scales seem to lose some of their shine. "You... you two are...?"

"Together. For a while now, actually. Right?" I give kot'oll what should work as a charming smile that's filled with love.

Fuck... I'm so bad at this. I'm only good at flirting with patrons, and...

Even though, in theory, the kot'oll and Targoth are both strangers to me who I don't plan on getting close to, Vatok seems to be a much better choice, that's imagining if I have to date either.

Wait... is that an insult to the kot'oll when he's clearly the winner, so much so there shouldn't even be consideration?

The kot'oll's mouth twitches, fighting what might be either amusement or discomfort. "Indeed. Is there something you need from my mate past a drink for the evening?"

The word 'mate' in his official-sounding voice nearly makes me laugh, but I manage to keep it together. Targoth, meanwhile, looks like he's swallowed something particularly unpleasant.

"I... no, I was just..." His previous swagger evaporates faster than spilled alcohol on a hot day. "I'll have a Nebula Fizz."

I nod and get back to the counter. "Sure, I can get that for you."

As I mix the drink, I catch the kot'oll watching with an expression I can't quite read. His gaze follows my movements, and I find myself putting extra flair into my bartending, letting the liquid arc through the air between shakers.

"Here you go," I slide the drink across to Targoth, who grabs it without meeting my eyes. He practically scurries away, his scales dulled to a matte finish.

I kind of feel bad for him, but not really. Maybe there's someone out there who will enjoy his terrible flirting skills.

Once he's safely lost in the crowd, I let out a long breath. "Thank you," I tell the kot'oll, meaning it. "I owe you one."

"It was... interesting." He's about to say something more when there are other patrons.

I move to make him a drink before the crowd gets too close. "Here you go, my perfect boy."

He snorts. "Is that me? Boy? Come on..."

I give a nervous chuckle. Now, it feels like I have to keep this going, otherwise... If Targoth finds out that I'm lying about having a mate, he's going to go twice as hard with his flirts and...

He takes a sip of his drink, his bronze eyes twinkling with something that might be amusement. "Your 'perfect boy' needs a stronger drink than this."

I lean in closer, keeping my voice low. "Listen, I know this is awkward, but... could you maybe stick around for a bit? Just until he's gone? Targoth has a habit of lurking, and if he realizes this was all an act—"

"He'll be twice as persistent," he finishes my thought, nodding. One of his lower hands drums a pattern on the counter while an upper one fixes his hair. "I suppose I could spare some time. For public safety, of course. You can have me until closing."

For some reason, 'I can have him' sounds good. I know that's not what he means, but I won't mind.

"That'll be amazing, thank you. You're perfect."

"Exactly." He takes the drink that I just prepared and takes a sip. I swear there's a

smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

The crowd is a bit too close by now, which... Now, I have to have this dialed in.

My cheeks warm. "You should've been here earlier."

"I can't be here all the time." His voice drops lower as other patrons press closer. "Traffic violations don't stop themselves."

I lean in, playing up our fake intimacy for the benefit of any watching eyes. "Oh right, my brave defender of parking laws. How many scans did you make today?"

"Seventeen. But there's that one from a bit ago..." He takes another sip, "Almost one for a particularly stubborn human who left her ship in a no-parking zone while rescuing strays."

"That human sounds delightful," I say, wiping down the counter to hide my grin. "And heroic."

"Reckless," he corrects, but there's no real bite to it. All four of his arms shift slightly as he repositions himself on the stool. "Though I suppose some might find that... appealing."

A group of rowdy Centaurians waves for service, and I hold up a finger to signal I'll be right there. "Well, stick around, traffic cop. Your 'mate' might need more defending before the night's over."

"Is that an order?" His bronze eyes glitter with something that makes my stomach do a little flip.

"Consider it a strongly worded suggestion." I head over to serve the Centaurians.

"From your mate."

The word feels strange on my tongue, but not entirely unpleasant. As I move down the bar, the kot'oll's keen eyes are locked onto me, all four arms now relaxed against the counter. For a fake boyfriend, he's doing a surprisingly convincing job.

I suppose that's something a police officer is good at — guarding something. I'm definitely not an item, but I can use some guarding, at least for now when creepers loom.

The night wears on, and the bar's energy shifts from cheerful to rowdy as the patrons indulge in more rounds, I keep one eye on the crowd and the other on my kot'oll, who seems to be taking his role as my protective partner quite seriously. He doesn't drink much, nursing his single beverage while surveying the room with an air of quiet authority. It's comforting to have him there.

Every so often, our eyes meet, and there's a spark that passes between us, which warms me. It's all passing moments that'll end soon, but there's a part of me that enjoys it. It's not every day you get to have a four-armed traffic officer playing the part of your mate.

As I pour another round for the Centaurians, I catch my guy stifling a yawn. It's getting late. Maybe he's been on duty for hours before coming here. Yet, he hasn't complained once about staying to help me out.

I slide a fresh drink his way, a special concoction I reserve for favored customers. "On the house," I say with a wink. "For my 'heroic' mate."

He raises an eyebrow, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards. "I thought I was your 'perfect boy.'"

I laugh, the sound mingling with the din of the bar. "You can be both, can't you?"

He chuckles, the deep sound resonating pleasantly. "I suppose I can manage that."

The Centaurians leave with a boisterous cheer, their order settled, and I take the opportunity to lean on the counter across from the kot'oll. "So, tell me, is traffic duty really as thrilling as it sounds?"

He grins, revealing a row of sharp, white teeth. "Every day is an adventure. You wouldn't believe the things people will do to avoid a parking ticket."

"I bet," I reply, genuinely interested. "I've seen some creative excuses in my time, too."

I think I enjoyed talking with him more than I expected. This time around, even though I still poke around at him and he jabs back, he doesn't leave, not like before. Maybe he used to think that he'd be taking up space and stopping me from serving others even when there was usually plenty of room around the bar table, as most got their drinks and walked off to enjoy the night.

It... Maybe it will be amazing to be doing this every day... The thought lights a flame in my stomach. He looks over, and I'm not sure whether that's a coincidence. I look away, for the first time that evening.

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Chapter 4

Vatok

Something has to be wrong with me.

I've never been a big fan of noisy music and chatterers, even when they have nothing to do with me. I know it's crazy to think that there'll be tranquility and peace in a bar, but that's what I prefer, so I usually move to the corner, where it will be quieter compared to staying close to the bar counter.

But the bar counter is where this cute bartender is. Even though she makes my heart race, I still don't even know her name. maybe I should have asked, but...

It is going to be dumb if I'm asked and don't even know what my pretended mate's name is.

My... beautiful mate, who is so good at talking to others and making everyone happy. I'm not built like that and I'm not sure whether I want to be a bit more like her.

Well... Maybe not. It seems tiring just watching her interacting and making drinks.

My arms twitch to get to work and help her, even though I don't know the formula of most drinks. Maybe she has made so many drinks that she doesn't even have to think about that anymore, making that all about muscle memory.

And... I feel my cock. I want to take her into my arms for longer. It felt right when I

had her in my arms, well, arm, one arm. I want to wrap all my arms around her.

Is there something special about human females? Or women? I think that's how they are called, or at least that's what my brothers tell me. Two of them are with female mates.

This isn't the first time I've met a woman, but... she's special.

Maybe I should have used some of my police power and dug up her name. Just the name probably won't be too bad, but I'll look like a creep.

I rub my chin. Maybe I won't look like a creep since I almost scanned her spaceship that night.

Hm...

Now I remember that. Maybe she has a way to get into my head and distract me. I'm here to get mad at her and warn her about what she did. But when that real creep hovered around, I couldn't just sit around, and... now I'm supposed to be her mate... Not that I'm complaining. It's just... different from the plan.

The way she moves with grace between beings and makes drinks is mesmerizing. Her laughter is a melody that somehow pierces through the noisy music in the bar, becoming the only voice I can hear. The weight of her in my arms as I helped her with the creepy one was... I want more of that. I've never felt that before, not that I've hugged a lot of females, though.

When the bar slows down and patrons are finally leaving, I fight to stifle a yawn. I glance at the bar, not seeing the creepy, scaley one anymore. Maybe he has left, finally knowing that she isn't interested.

Other than me, no one's at the bar counter anymore. She's cleaning the glasses, probably getting ready for the next day.

"Hey," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, but she hears me. Her eyes light up, and that smile — it's like a punch to the gut, knocking the air out of lungs, all in a good way.

"Hey, yourself," she replies, leaning on the bar, her gaze never leaving mine. "Are you looking for another round of drinks?"

I chuckle, the sound foreign to my own ears. "I think I'll pass on the drink. I want something else."

Her eyebrow arches in curiosity, and a rush of courage surges in me, fueled by the strange new heat coursing through me. "I don't know your name." The corners of my mouth lift into what I hope is a charming smile.

She looks around, probably trying to make sure the creeper's no longer around and won't hear us. If we are mates, we should know each other's names.

"Julie." She reaches her hand across the counter to me.

I take it, her skin warm and soft against my rougher palm. "Julie," I repeat, savoring the feel of her name on my lips. "I'm Vatok."

"Nice to officially meet you, Vatok. Thanks for playing along earlier."

"It was... interesting. I think it is important to make sure our purpose is served."

Her eyes spark with mischief, and I can tell she's intrigued. "And what are we thinking about, Officer?"

"I thought I shall drive you home." The offer hangs in the air between us, thick with unspoken possibilities. Her smile widens, and there's a glimmer of excitement in her eyes that makes my heart thrum even harder against my chest.

"Driving me home?" she teases, a playful lilt in her voice. "Are you sure you can handle that, big guy?"

"Let's say I've had enough practice to at least not crash." I attempt to match her lightheartedness. The tension between us crackles like static electricity, and I find myself leaning closer, a pull I can't resist.

She laughs, a sound that sends ripples of warmth through me. "But, my dear Officer, you should know that there should be no driving after you drink." She sways a finger from side to side in front of me with a smirk, as if she has caught me.

I roll my eyes and kiss the tip of her finger before she can pull her finger back. She pauses as if my kiss is a shot of electricity. I snicker at that. "Don't be silly. Of course, I know the rules. Spaceships can drive themselves, and I bet they can park themselves better than some."

She chuckles, and her smile makes my heart flutter. Is this how my brothers feel when they are with their mates? And this is how they know?

But... she's not my mate. We are just pretending to be that. It means that she's good at this and I better do better so that she'll be safe from creepy ones.

Carefully, I lift her hand to my lips, but...

She has a ring... Does that mean she's with someone already?

And...

Maybe I should steer clear. Maybe she just needed some help and her real mate would be here soon.

I glance at the door, but other than a few who are leaving, no one's coming into the bar.

She squeezes my hand which is still holding her, weirdly stopping midair. "What's on your mind?"

"The ring..."

She blinks. "You love seeing that on me, right?"

I take a breath, not knowing what to say. There are still patrons around, albeit far away from us. Do I kiss her regardless? Because we are still pretending to be mates? And... I should pretend that I was the one putting the ring on her?

This feels wrong.

Screw that, I may not have another chance. I brush a gentle kiss against her knuckles before releasing it, her skin lingering in my memory like a warm imprint. I stand. "If your shift is over, let's get going."

She finishes up before we leave together; her soft hand in mine.

My heart races as I walk beside her, each step echoing the rhythm of my pulse. The laughter and chatter of the bar fade behind us, replaced by the cool night air that wraps around us like the fresh breath I need away from the noisy bar.

I lead her to my spaceship. She can be on mine as I get her home.

She chuckles and nudges the other side. "Here, I can go home on my own."

"A good mate won't let his mate go home alone."

"You sound drunk."

"Am I?" I shake my head. "No, I'm not too drunk to talk."

She muses. "If you insist. But I don't want to risk breaking any rules with Mr. Rule-follower. I'll be behind the engine, just in case the system has errors."

Technically, she's right. She didn't drink anything and would be the better choice for our circumstances.

We get inside my spaceship. She sits behind the controller. "Here we go!"

"Wait..."

"Yes?"

"Now, there are only the two of us."

"I suppose unless you're seeing—"

"I'm serious."

"It's hard to—"

I hiss at her. "No one can hear us when we're in the spaceship. What's the deal with the ring?"

"Oh..." She lifts it and checks it against the faint light from the outside. "It's just a ring."

"Are you with someone already?" I hate having to ask that when I know the answer. The ring is pretty telling. But... She and her mate can't blame me for trying to help. I didn't start pretending to be her mate and I didn't invite myself over. She started it and—

"Vatok, are you listening?"

I blink. "What?"

"Look, I was saying, there's no meaning to this ring other than hoping it'll deter others. I want to sling drinks and make sure everyone's having a good time in the bar, not to find my mate. Most know that when they see the ring and won't bother me, but there are also a few loose ones out there who can't get a hint."

Somehow, the knot in my stomach eases. But she's attractive, it would make more sense for her to already be with someone.

I nod. "Is that all about that? I hope I didn't overstep. I was trying to help and didn't want to cause issues."

She squeezes my hand and starts the spaceship. "All's good. The ring really is just there to hopefully gain peace, and that works until it isn't. I'm single, not with anyone."

I grit my teeth to stop myself from talking. Maybe her pretense to be my mate is so good that she's fooling me even when I know clearly that this is just an act. But... she's still single, and that may mean I stand a chance.

The thought sends my heart racing and my gut agrees.

Yet... she also said she isn't looking for a mate in the bar. Is that a problem with bar-goers? Or is she referring to looking for a mate as a whole?

Regardless... I'm both of that, so...

She nudges me with her elbow as she drives. "Look, don't let it get to your head, okay? I know you're a nice and dependable one, so... I hope you don't mind. I really could use help."

"I don't mind for sure, don't be silly. It's my pleasure to help, even when I'm no longer in uniform."

She hums but remains silent. I've never been good at words, so I keep my mouth shut.

The ride is quiet, but comfortable. I stare out of the window, my mind still clear despite the drinks. What I had wasn't that strong after all. I enjoy a sip or two, but not getting drunk and waiting for the hangover that may catch up with me.

When we finally pull up outside her apartment, the silence between us pulses with sparks. She turns to me, her breath hitching slightly as she looks deep into my eyes. "This is my place."

As I take a second to absorb the moment, my heart thrumming louder in my chest, I find myself saying, "I had a great time tonight, Julie."

"Me too, Vatok. You're... different," she whispers, her voice almost reverent. The air around us feels heavy. Even though everything's fleeting, I... I can't help but imagine something more between us.

But none of this is real...

Yet, it feels like this may be a chance and I should grab it. How bad can it be after all?

In that electric moment, something snaps within me, an instinct that pulls me closer to her—an urge to bridge the gap between us that seems both thrilling and terrifying. We drift toward one another, our breaths mingling, the world around us disappearing into the background, leaving just the two of us.

What do I do?

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Chapter 5

Julie

I remain in the driver's seat, not wanting to get out. Vatok isn't moving either. It feels like if I say something or move, this will just end like a balloon that's popped.

Maybe both of us want to spend more time with each other, yet...

He's pretty good at pretending to be my mate. But this feels different, and I can't shake the sense that something significant is brewing between us. My heart thuds against my ribs as I glance sideways at him. The evening has unveiled something I didn't expect, and it's both exhilarating and terrifying. He is a big guy, and he has been trying to keep those arms close to him so we aren't touching each other. He looks... to be trying hard with how strong and big he is. It's considerate of him but he doesn't look too comfortable.

"Uh, well... This is it," I say, gesturing toward the door of my apartment even though I've said that already. "Not much to look at, but at least it's got a killer view of the city skyline."

As our gazes lock, I find that Vatok's bronze eyes blend with the dim glow of the dashboard lights. He seems to be contemplating something more profound than my casual comment. I force myself to break the tension. "You, uh, wanna come in for a second? Just, you know... for a small break before you head home?" My voice barely stifles the nervous thrill coursing through me.

“A break, you say? I’m curious, what do you have in mind?”

The corners of my mouth lift at the playful challenge in his tone, and even more heat creeps to my cheeks. “Well, just have some water after your drinks. That can deter hangovers.” Except he didn’t drink strong ones and should be fine regardless.

He chuckles. “Sounds good. Lead the way.”

I swallow hard, forcing myself to open the door and step out of the spaceship, the cool night air embraces me as I jog up the few steps to the main entrance of the apartment building. Am I ready for this?

Turns out, I’m ready to lead him to the unit and open the door for him, but... my living room surely isn’t ready for visitors, let alone... the handsome kot’oll who has been setting fires in my stomach without even knowing.

As I push open the door to my apartment, a twinge of embarrassment swims in my stomach at the state of my living room. It’s not exactly a disaster, but it’s... lived-in. Clothes draped over the couch, a few empty glasses on the coffee table, and my shoes by the door are messy. I’m usually more organized, but the day got away from me, and honestly, I didn’t expect to be bringing anyone home — especially not Vatok.

"Excuse the mess." I quickly scoop up the clothes and toss them into the nearest closet. "I wasn't exactly planning on having company."

His eyes linger on a framed photo of me in the animal shelter, my smile wide and genuine with different species of pets around me. "You look happy in this picture."

I pick up the frame, dusting off a layer of neglect. "Yeah, I think this is back on the anniversary celebration for the shelter. Sometimes, I don't know whether that should be celebrated. if no one leaves their pet, there won't be a need for shelters, but the

shelter gives a home to the animals until they are ready for a new and hopefully permanent home."

Vatok nods, stepping closer to examine the photo. "It sounds interesting. I've never been one for pets. It has not been a thing with kot'olls. Beings keeping animals in their homes, huh?"

"Yeah, some do. Imagine a fluff ball greeting you after a rough day at work."

He blinks, seemingly giving that thought. "I suppose it will be enjoyable."

Enjoyable is such a... weird word in this situation, it should be 'awesome', or 'amazing.' Poor Vatok has never known fun.

He asks, "Do you have a pet?"

I shake my head. "I'm too busy to be able to take care of one. I get my fix from helping out in the shelter."

He muses and looks even closer at the photo as if he's trying to make out which animal is which.

His proximity is doing things to my insides, twisting them into knots of anticipation. He stands a step away from me, leaving enough room for me to feel safe even though... compared to me, he really is a tall and strong guy, which isn't as obvious when he's sitting on a stool in the bar and I'm standing and serving drinks. But his warmth makes its way to me, heating me...

I clear my throat, gesturing toward the small kitchen area. "Let me grab us something. Some water for you after your drinks?"

"Sure. Thank you. Where do I... I think I'll be on the couch."

"Yes, you can obviously be there." I head to the kitchen. "If there are things in your way, just toss them to the side."

"Okay."

I pour water for us. It is getting late by now, he has to be tired from his work and staying in the bar with me. The problem is, I don't know what I can give or do to thank him. I can make him extra drinks next time he's there, and tell him that I'm thankful, but that doesn't feel enough.

I pick up the cups and head to the living room. Vatok's sitting on the couch with a straight back and everything that screams how he's a serious guy.

Handing Vatok his water, I can't help but notice how his eyes follow my every move. It's like he's trying to figure out a puzzle, and I'm not sure if I'm the puzzle or just a piece of it. I sit down next to him, leaving a polite amount of space between us, but the magnetic pull of his presence makes the distance feel ridiculously small.

"Thank." He takes the cup from me. His fingers graze mine, sending a jolt of electricity up my arm. I withdraw my hand, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"No problem."

He takes a sip of his water and stares ahead, examining my home, which is.... unsettling to some extent, but when I invited him over, I should have expected that. He is a police officer and probably is trained to examine everything.

Silence lingers between us again. What do I do?

I don't mind the silence, he makes for pretty good company, which I know from our interaction in the bar, long before we pretend to be mates.

Is the pretend over now that we're away from anyone else's eyes?

I clear my throat, taking a sip of my water to buy some time. "So, Vatok, how long have you been a traffic officer?"

He leans back against the couch, the tension in his shoulders easing a bit. "About five years now. It's... methodical, which I like. There's a certain satisfaction in bringing order to the chaos of the streets."

I chuckle. "I can imagine. My bar is pretty organized, but I've seen the traffic outside during rush hour, it's chaos everywhere."

He laughs, a deep, resonant sound that fills the room and makes me feel lighter. "Do you call the bar organized? But just like in your bar, you get all kinds of characters. It keeps things interesting." He lifts his brows at me. "By the way, I haven't told you this. Do you know that it's wrong to be flying away when you're under inspection?"

Is that referring to how... "Hey! I've explained myself."

"But I wasn't done with you." He folds those arms and looks scary again.

I roll my eyes. "Come on... Are you here to arrest me or something?"

He takes my wrists, still folding his other two arms. "I don't understand you. So bold."

There are tingles from our touches. His hands are hot, which makes me wonder about the rest of his body. "When you work in the bar for a bit longer, you'd know about

street smart."

He grunts and gently squeezes my wrists. "With the wrong officer, you'd be in trouble."

I sneak closer to him, resting on his side. "Are you saying that you're the right officer?"

The words hang between us, heavy with an implication I hadn't fully intended. But as I look up into Vatok's amber-flecked eyes, I realize I don't entirely mind the possibility of him being the right officer for me. I have to be out of my mind to want someone like this, barely knowing him. But...

Fuck... Maybe I just got smacked over the head with this handsome and muscular guy... I really should put myself together.

His gaze softens, and one of his hands releases my wrist to gently brush a strand of hair behind my ear, a gesture so unexpectedly tender that it sends a shiver down my spine. "I'm saying that I'm glad it was me that night."

I... I know he didn't fine my spaceship, probably shrugged it off, pretending that he didn't see my traffic violation. But in the moment, the air seems to be charged and I don't know what to do.

I've never been this... restless. I've never been stuck like this without having a comeback or something to say to ease the tension in the room. One would think I've had plenty of training from serving patrons in the bar. Yet... with Vatok...

Vatok's eyes flicker to my lips, and for a moment, I think he might lean in, closing the space between us. My breath hitches, my heart pounding a wild rhythm in my chest. I've flirted with countless customers, exchanged playful banter, and deflected

advances with ease. But none of that prepared me for this.

He clears his throat and looks away. "I think the pretense is over. No one's watching."

His words hang in the air, and for a split second, a pang of disappointment ripples through my chest. The pretense is over—no more fake relationships. But then, why does my heart still race? Why does the room feel smaller with Vatok in it?

I nod, trying to keep my voice steady. "Yeah, the pretense is over. We don't have an audience here. Just you, me, and the empty glasses on the table."

Vatok's gaze returns to mine, and there's a vulnerability in his eyes that I haven't seen before. "Just us," he repeats, his voice a low rumble.

The silence that follows is different this time. It's no longer the comfortable quiet of two beings who don't know what to say. Instead, it's charged with the weight of unspoken thoughts and feelings that seem to dance just beneath the surface, threatening to break free at any moment.

I clear my throat. "I'm not sure whether others will be that easily convinced."

"That we are supposed to be mates?"

"Yes. I mean... things could have gone wrong."

"I can be in the bar more to make sure you'll be fine."

I blink at his quick suggestion, which seems to be fast coming from him.

He shrugs and adds. "But if you don't want that, I can understand too."

"You can always be in the bar regardless. And you don't get to think that you may distract me."

He chuckles and moves a hand to my chin, but he stops and awkwardly takes his hand to his belt, fixing the buckle. "I know you're good at your job."

The air between feels heavier than the last again. Vatok's hand hovers near his belt and the awkward moment passes as he regains his composure. I can't help but feel a twinge of amusement at his discomfort; it's endearing to see this strong, stoic kot'oll caught off guard.

"I don't doubt your abilities. But I also don't want you to feel like you have to handle everything alone."

His words resonate with me, touching a part of my heart that I've kept guarded for so long. I've always prided myself on being independent, on not needing anyone. But the idea of having Vatok around, not just as a pretend mate but as a... companion, stirs something within me.

I offer him a small smile. "I appreciate that. More than you know."

He nods, his gaze lingering on my face as if he's recording every detail to memory. We sit in silence for another moment. I think... now that I'm safely at home and I've given him water, there's not a lot of reason for him to remain here. I wasn't planning to get him here and... spend a night with him.

The thought sends tingles through my body. When I imagine things he can do to me with those arms and muscles, it is... tempting at least.

But he doesn't seem like that kind of male.

I clear my throat. "Tell me, what should I do to thank you?"

He frowns. "What do you mean? You don't have to thank me. I was just doing what any honorable male would do."

Ah, this is Vatok being Vatok to the finest, so uptight and serious.

I can't help but let out a soft chuckle at his earnestness. "Vatok, you've been... well, you've gone above and beyond. I mean, you put up with my bar shenanigans, you've been my knight in shining armor with the... less savory suitors, and you've even managed to make me laugh. That's worth something."

His bronze eyes meet mine, and there's a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "I suppose I did enjoy the... shenanigans. And your laughter is something I find myself looking forward to."

That catches me off guard, and I feel a flush creeping up my cheeks. I'm not sure how to respond, so I take a sip of my water, stalling for time. The liquid is cool, but it does nothing to dampen the warmth spreading through me.

He stifles a yawn. "Sorry, I don't mean to imply that being with you here in this fine place is boring. It has been a long day."

Is it time for him to leave? Just like that?

There's no official reason for him to stay, but I want him to stay. Do I... ask him to stay, just like that? And... why? Just because I want that?

The words stumble out before I can stop them. "You don't have to leave yet." My heart pounds as I realize what I've just said. "I mean, unless you want to. I know it's late, but..."

Vatok's eyes lock with mine, and the intensity in them makes my breath catch. One of his hands moves to rest on the couch cushion between us, close enough that I can feel its warmth but not quite touching me. "Julie..." The way he says my name sends shivers down my spine. "What do you mean?"

I wet my lips, noticing how his gaze follows the movement. "I'm not entirely sure. I just know that I'm not ready for this evening to end. Whatever this is."

He shifts closer, and all four of his arms create a cocoon of warmth around me, though he's still not quite touching me. "Are you suggesting for us to practice this pretending better? Just in case," he murmurs, his voice deeper than before.

"Hm... Maybe we should."

The space between us crackles with electricity, and I find myself leaning forward, drawn to him like a magnet. His breath fans across my face, warm and sweet. One of his hands finally, finally comes up to cup my cheek, and I lean into his touch.

"I should warn you. I'm not very good at casual."

The confession makes my heart skip a beat, even though it may be part of an act. "Good," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. "Neither am I."

This time, when his eyes drop to my lips. He leans in, and I meet him halfway, our lips coming together in a kiss that starts soft but quickly deepens with all the tension that's been building between us all night.

His other hands find their way to my waist, my back, my hair, and I melt into his embrace.

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Chapter 6

Julie

My cheeks are burning, but that's no hotter than how his hands roam my body. He gasps as our lips part briefly. "I... I hope I didn't overstep."

I shake my head. "No, you didn't."

I hug him, but he is such a big guy that I can't even wrap my arms around him completely.

The heat between us intensifies, and I know that this is the moment we've both been waiting for.

I pull back just enough to look into Vatok's eyes. "I want this. I want you." I clear my throat. "It's all for getting better at the pretense, my mate."

There's an echo in my chest as the words roll off my tongue. It feels wrong, a bit too overboard for me to say that when we're supposed to be faking it, but in some sense, it feels right.

Vatok's eyes darken. He pulls me over onto his lap and sits back on the couch himself. I wrap my legs around his waist, leaning closer to him, and taste his lips again.

I run my hands over Vatok's muscular back, pulling him closer still as our bodies

sway in rhythm with the passion consuming us.

Vatok breaks the kiss, trailing a series of kisses down my neck.

I moan softly, my hands sliding down to reach his cock. He has a huge one and that makes my heart race. His pants don't do a thing to stop his heat from getting to me.

Maybe this isn't a good idea. With his size... I don't know how I can take him, but I want this. "I want you inside me, but you're a bit too scary."

"You're the one on my lap. Just do it at your pace."

"Sound like a deal, huh?" I fish out his cock. It is a veiny one, pulsing with heat and... seemingly getting harder and larger.

His grin widens. "Only because it's true. But enough of this. We've got a mission to complete."

I raise an eyebrow. Is he faking the faking part? Or is it that, for Officer Vatok, everything's a mission?

He moans with a grin. "I like your hand."

"That can't hold you completely?"

"What can I say? That my cock is pretty awesome?"

I can't help but laugh at his audacity. "You really know how to talk yourself up."

He says, "To get to know each other better, and no one will see through us. To make you safe in the bar." He's talking about what we agreed to do together, but at the same

time, it feels like both of us are... fooling ourselves in some way.

Regardless, the buzz in my pussy gets harder and harder to ignore. Even though his size may hurt at first, I want to give this a try.

I nod, my heart pounding in my chest. "Alright, my mate. Let's do this."

As I straddle him, our eyes locked, the intensity of our connection is electric like a current is flowing between us. I lean forward, my lips meeting his once more, our tongues dancing in a fiery ballet.

As we kiss, I slowly lower myself onto his cock. I gasp when he stretches me, so much so... I'm dripping wet and his cock doesn't hurt like I imagined it will. Each inch that gets into me is pure bliss, and I want nothing more than to continue enjoying the pleasure. I clench my teeth and wrap my arms around his neck, holding tight as I begin to rise and fall in rhythm with him. He grips my waist, his fingers digging into my skin as he thrusts into me, filling me completely with every stroke.

Our eyes stay locked as we move in unison, the intensity of the experience building between us. My lungs burn as I gasp and moan, my heart beating wildly in my chest. "Oh, Vatok," I gasp, my voice breathless and urgent. "You feel amazing!"

His eyes darken with desire. "As do you. You are so good at this."

His words send shivers through me. He keeps me steady on his lap with his hands on my waist, at the same time, he cups my cheeks with his two other hands. His cock twitches and gets even stronger. "Julie... Somehow, I could have never imagined this."

I arch my back, my hips pulsing against his as the blissful sensation grows and grows. "Yes!" I cry out, my mind on the brink of my release. "I'm... Oh god, I'm almost...!"

The heat of Vatok's cock pulsing inside me is so different from what I've experienced. Each thrust sends waves of pleasure radiating through my body. The tension builds to an almost unbearable level. My moans grow louder, uncontrollable as the sensations overwhelm me. I cling to him for support, buried in his masculine embrace. His hands roam my body, caressing every curve and contour, and I melt into his touch, craving more.

I wrap my legs tighter around his waist, urging him deeper. "Take me!"

"Why do you feel this good?" he grunts, his movements becoming erratic. "Your tight little pussy is sucking me in."

"Don't stop!" I gasp, teetering on the edge of an orgasm. "I'm so close! Make me come, please!"

With one final deep, powerful thrust, he plunges into my deepest spot, hitting that sweet spot that sends me spiraling over the edge. My orgasm crashes over me like a tidal wave, and I scream his name. Wave after wave of white-hot pleasure courses through me. I shudder in his strong arms, completely surrendering myself to the intoxicating pleasure.

Vatok stiffens, his breath hitching as he joins me in my climax. He throws his head back and lets out a deep, guttural moan, his cock pulsing and throbbing inside me.

His hot cum fills me, in that moment, there's nothing but raw bliss. I don't want to care whether this is the right thing to do anymore. It's just some fucking around, what can go wrong anyway?

He holds my chin and he strokes my back and my sides. "I want to say something, but I'm not that good at flirting."

I laugh at that. "I think you're fine, not too bad."

He lifts me and stands. "I think you should get some rest."

I moan when his cock's still inside me, hitting me as he moves. "Mm..."

He carries me effortlessly, with extra hands to take our cups of water as he heads to my room. I cling to him, still lost in the afterglow. Staying in his arms feels safe. He lays me down on the soft sheets of my bed, his gaze lingering on my face, tracing the contours of my features with an intensity that makes my heart flutter.

"You look even more beautiful when you're flushed with satisfaction." He brushes a strand of hair away from my face.

I smile at him, my fingers tracing the outlines of his muscles. "You're not so bad yourself."

He chuckles. "I'll take that as a compliment." He flexes his arms. "This is the body for protecting... others."

Was he going to say that he'd be protecting his mate with those arms? I know I'm stretching that, but... Maybe I want to be that mate.

Vatok withdraws from me gently, and there's a twinge of loss in me as he does. But he quickly dispels any sense of emptiness by lying beside me, gathering me in his arms so my head rests on his chest. His heart beats a steady rhythm beneath my ear, a comforting reminder of the life that flows through him.

He asks, "Do you want me to hold you like this?"

"Don't be silly and stop your dumb questions." I wrap myself closer to him.

Something must be wrong with me, but I want this more than I can imagine.

"Good." He pats my back, stroking me as if he's trying to get me sleeping.

We lie there in silence, the only sounds the soft whisper of our breathing and the distant hum of the city outside. His fingers draw lazy patterns on my back, sending pleasant shivers down my spine. I close my eyes, savoring the closeness, the intimacy of the moment.

He pulls the blanket and covers us. "Sadly, I'm a bit too tired to shower. Do you mind a smelly kot'oll?"

I laugh. "I'm smelly too."

"I could have shown you how to clean your hair and body at the same time." He knows how to be funny in the most unexpected way.

"Oh, I bet you can clean both of us at the same time, big guy."

He yawns with his eyes getting smaller and smaller. "I bet I can do that, and..."

"Alarm for your shift tomorrow?"

He blinks. "Right..." He stares afar. "But I don't want to find my phone." He pulls me close. "Now, I wish I were one of those with tentacles." He gestures his arm at the door. "With long tentacles, I suppose."

I stroke his stretched arm. "I like these arms though."

The arm drops. I shiver and snap my head at him.

Well... I guess he falls asleep without a warning. Silly Vatok.

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Chapter 7

Vatok

I shudder and my eyes open on their own. The ceiling is foreign. Where am I?

Something shifts at my side, in one of my arms. I blink and look at that hairy ball of... hair...

Ah, right. Now I remember.

This is Julie sleeping by my side, who I... fucked last night and...

A surge of heat brews in my stomach again and my cock twitches, wanting something more with her again. This is such a crazy feeling. It feels like I'm going insane, but I may not be against that, which makes it worse.

I carefully pull my arm away from her. If I remember correctly, I have a shift to... attend to.

I resist the urge to hop out of bed and run to check the time. She probably doesn't need to wake up as early as me...

Wait... What time is it?

There's a buzz in the living room. Is that a bomb?

I roll my eyes at myself. Why would there be a bomb in her home?

Out in the living room, it's my phone buzzing because of the alarm. I have it set a month at a time, the moment when I receive the shift schedule, so I should be fine even though I fell asleep without checking to make sure the alarm is set correctly. I do that every night even though I've never made a mistake setting that up.

I stifle a yawn as I check the time. It is the right time to be getting ready for the day. I turn around to look in the direction of her room. She's probably still sleeping. Even though I want to bid her goodbye before I leave, I don't think that's important enough to wake her. maybe I'll just leave her a note.

I rummage through my pockets, but there's nothing I can use. I'm not in my uniform after all. On the messy coffee table, there's a ripped envelope, which has a surface for writing.

This will have to do.

I grab a pen on the edge of the coffee table, which is set against a timetable with marks on it. It looks to be a schedule, maybe it's for her job. Regardless, I find a pen and that's what I need, nothing else.

"Julie - Had to leave for my shift. Thank you for... everything. Take care. - V"

I stare at the words, feeling they're inadequate. Too formal? Too casual? What exactly are we to each other now? Last night was... intense. More than just physical. But we're supposed to be pretending, aren't we?

My hand hovers over the note, tempted to add more, but I resist.

I should keep it simple. Professional. Even though nothing feels simple or

professional about this situation.

I place the note on her phone, which is tossed to the side on the couch, where she'll see it. Different from starting my day at home, it will probably take longer to head to the office. Last night, I didn't pay attention to where I ended up, which is messy as a police officer, even though my shift was over.

Maybe deep down, I've never thought of Julie as someone who may be planning to hurt me, so my subconscious didn't feel the need to remain alert. As I dress, my mind keeps drifting back to her sleeping form, how peaceful she looked curled against me. How right it felt.

Focus, Vatok. You have a job to do.

I'm about to head out when I pause and look at the envelope again. Maybe I should leave her my number, just in case she needs her "mate" to bail her out. However, I doubt I can do much when I am at work. I scribble my number regardless.

She's still quiet in her room, which may or may not be good news.

I stand at her door, my hand on the knob, torn between leaving quietly and checking on her one last time. Professional instincts tell me to go, but something else, something more personal, makes me hesitate.

Finally, I crack the door open just enough to peek inside. The morning light filters through her curtains, casting a soft glow on her sleeping form. Her hair is spread across the pillow, and her breathing is deep and peaceful. For a moment, I allow myself to imagine what it would be like to wake up to this sight every morning, not as part of some pretense, but as her real mate.

The thought catches me off guard. Why have I started thinking like this?

I shake my head and close the door softly. Those aren't appropriate thoughts. She asked for help from me, not to be my mate. I was the one who showed up and was handy for her to get away from the creeper.

Speaking of which, if I run into that annoying creeper again, I'll beat him up. I can grab the tentacles with one hand, and punch his gut with the other, all while I twist both of his hands with my remaining two hands.

But I'm a police officer and shouldn't do that, even when my shift is over, that's not how the rules go in the city.

I shake my head as if that'll help clear my mind. It's time to go if I don't want to end up late.

The morning air is crisp as I step outside Julie's apartment building. The city is just beginning to wake up, with various species starting their daily commutes. I check my location - I'm about fifteen minutes further from the station than usual. Nothing too bad, but I'll need to drive faster.

As I drive to work, my mind keeps wandering back to last night. The way she felt in my arms, her scent, her laugh...

I almost bump into another spaceship when it stops for a signal, which my driving panel screams at me and the auto system halts the spaceship on my behalf.

I groan and shake my head. This isn't like me at all. I'm usually hyper-aware of my surroundings and I've never driven like this.

It must be Julie's fault, her bad driving skill is getting to me.

Speaking of which, since I drove her back, or say, she drove my spaceship back to

her place, and I'm driving it away, she'll be left with nothing to drive to places... I shrug. There's a high chance she can summon hers back to her apartment anyway. She may not have the best parking skills, but she should be good enough for the basic operations.

At the station, I change into my uniform, carefully adjusting each sleeve over my four arms. The silver fabric feels cool against my skin, helping to ground me back in reality. Officer Vatok, traffic department. That's who I need to be right now.

"You're looking different today," Zrek, a fellow team member comments as he passes by my locker. His antennae twitch with curiosity. "Something happened?"

"Just a long night." I try to keep my voice neutral. The last thing I need is workplace gossip.

"Must have been some night. You're actually smiling."

Am I? I quickly school my features back to their usual professional expression. "Just focused on today's patrol route."

But as I head out to my assigned sector, Julie's words from last night echo in my head: "My mate." Even though it was part of our pretense, something about how she said it felt... real.

I shake my head again. I have tickets to write and traffic to direct. This isn't the time for daydreaming about a human bartender who's only pretending to be interested in me.

Right?

The morning drags on as I settle into my usual routine. Monitor traffic flow, note

violations, and maintain order. Tasks usually require my full attention, but today my mind keeps drifting.

I'm in my patrol vehicle, parked strategically at an intersection known for speeders when a flashy sports model zooms past. The scanner shows it's going well above the limit. I activate my lights and pursue, but my thoughts are elsewhere. Would Julie like this kind of high-speed chase? Would she laugh at how serious I get about traffic violations?

I shake my head. Focus.

The speeder pulls over without incident. As I approach the vehicle, in it is a Zylaxian, their crystalline form shimmering in the morning light.

"License and registration," I say, my voice carrying the authority that comes naturally after years on the job.

"Officer, I was barely over—"

"You were doing twice the limit," I cut in, my arms crossed. "In a school zone."

As I scan the spaceship and tap to input data for the ticket, I can't help but think about how Julie would handle this situation. She'd probably make some clever joke about crystal beings needing to slow down before they shatter.

A smile tugs at my lips, and the Zylaxian looks at me strangely.

"Is something amusing, Officer?"

I quickly compose myself. "No. Here's your citation. Drive safely."

Back in my vehicle, I try to focus on the task at hand. But memories of last night keep surfacing — her warmth, her scent, the way she fit so perfectly in my arms...

"Unit 247, respond to a multiple vehicle collision on Stellar Boulevard," dispatch crackles through my earbuds.

Finally, something to properly distract me.

"Unit 247 responding," I reply, grateful for the interruption of my wandering thoughts.

But even as I head to the scene, I wonder if Julie will use my number. Will she call? What should I even say?

Focus, Vatok. Lives could be at stake.

I need to get my head straight before someone gets hurt because I can't stop thinking about a certain human bartender with a mischievous smile and the softest skin I've ever felt. I'm a competent officer, nothing gets to distract me even if they are perfect for me and beautiful.

Definitely not.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:28 am

Chapter 8

Julie

"Hello, Julie! You're here with a friend, huh?"

I nod as another volunteer, Aldriana, in the shelter comes over the counter and greets us. She is also a human. She is an older woman who has already retired and she is here a lot. I say, "Yes, he'll be joining me today."

The shelter is a sprawling facility that buzzes with energy. It's meticulously organized, with all kinds of animals enjoying their stay. I want to pat every single one of them. There are luminescent jelly-like beings that squish and bounce in their enclosures, while fluffy, furry things with extra eyes peer out from their corners, curious at me.

As I lead Vatok deeper into the shelter, his four arms shift from side to side, as if he's unsure where best to put them. He scans the room, taking in the sight of wiggly tails and perky antennae, reminding me of a wary officer assessing a suspicious scene ready to unfold.

"Don't you like it here?" I'm practically bouncing on my heels, unable to contain my excitement. It's a haven for animals. "You're going to love it, I promise!"

Vatok lowers his head slightly, tilting it to one side as he observes a massive, fluffy creature. "I can see you love this place."

"I do, I'm here every week. I wish I could be here more, but you know the nature of my job."

He muses. "I suppose so."

We are finally at the counter. I shake hands with Aldriana. "I'm so happy to see you here. Anyone else in this time slot?"

She shakes her head. "it's just you and me, and now, with your friend too."

I elbow Vatok, who fixes his hair, but probably was trying to fix his cap, which he doesn't have. "Then I'm glad he's here. If we finish everything quickly, there'll be more time to play."

"Nice!"

Vatok grins, looking handsome as always. "Nice to meet you, I'm Vatok and I'm glad to be here."

I pat Vatok's arm. "Just tell him what to do. I think he'll be helpful with moving things around, something like that."

He nods with a smile so wide that his eyes almost disappear. Is he a big animal fan? I don't think so, but he seems to be so happy, so different from his usual self. I sniff at him, trying to be subtle with that.

He isn't drunk, but...

He pats his chest. "Yes, just tell me what to do."

Aldriana smiles and looks at both of us with a knowing eye. "Sure. If you don't mind,

would you help me with moving some of the donated food for the animals? I was going to do it myself, but I think you can do it easier than I'd manage."

A stream of heat brews in my cheeks. Are we that obvious? Vatok looks at me, too, probably of the same mind. I shrug. "Good, I'll check the cages."

While they are called cages, those are where the animals sleep and feel safe. Everyone has their own spot and there's plenty of room for them.

Aldriana says, "The zebaba you brought in a while ago is with the dogs in the back room."

"Is he doing fine?"

"As fine as he can be." Her voice is fading as she is probably inside the storage room, but the smile in her words makes it to me regardless.

Oh... I can't wait to meet the poor little guy again.

And... he reminds me of how Vatok and I met outside of the bar for the first time and how... Now I wonder if that makes for a good impression or not. From the warmth in my stomach, as I think about him, I guess it's fine.

Aldriana and Vatok disappear into the storage room, giving me a moment to breathe in the joyful atmosphere of the shelter. The air is filled with soft barks, chirps, and the occasional splat of something jelly-like hitting the floor, causing me to giggle at the sight of an excitable luminescent creature bouncing across the tiles, content on making a mess. This place really does make me feel alive.

I walk past the partition boards that keep the animals away from each other, making mental notes on which sections need a refill of food and water. The animal hops onto

the fences, some with their tongues out to greet me. I pat them and stroke their soft fur and oftentimes, their scales.

There are clink clanks in the storage room, where Vatok's in. Is he destroying things inside? He's a big guy and if I remember right, the storage room is a small place with narrow corridors between rows and rows of shelves. Is there enough room for his arms?

“Are you okay back there?” I call out teasingly.

“I’m fine,” he replies, though the slight tremor in his voice suggests otherwise. I head over to see him carrying an oversized fluffy creature. This one looks like an alien pom-pom. Vatok’s gaze flickers between the creature and the nearby cabinets filled with pet supplies.

“Just... trying to figure out how to hold this. I think this isn't supposed to be in the back. This should be... with its kind.”

The creature wriggles in his embrace, and for a split second, I can see the slight panic in his eyes as his four arms flail, desperate to keep the furry mass intact. Choking back laughter, I rush over to help him.

“Here, let me take its front legs,” I say, snatching the creature as Vatok regains his balance. The fluffball seems delighted by the attention and immediately starts licking my face, its wet tongue leaving squishy marks all over my cheek.

Vatok watches, amusement dancing in his eyes. “I thought they were supposed to be well-behaved.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “What can I say? Animals have a knack for chaos.”

With me holding the excited fluff, Vatok tentatively reaches for the large bag of kibble on the shelf behind him, but as he shifts, his elbow nudges an array of squeaky toys that are stacked on the edge. The moment they begin to teeter, I watch in horror as one particularly bright pink toy bounces from the pile and lands squarely on his foot.

“Ah!” He yelps, and his foot jerks on instinct. In an instant, the squeaky toy activates, emitting a series of shrill, high-pitched squeaks that echo off the walls of the storage room like an alarm signal. The fluffball in my arms goes into a frenzy, wriggling so hard that I nearly lose my grip.

He leaps from my arms with more enthusiasm than I thought possible, rushing toward the source of the sound, which in this case, is Vatok.

“What? No! Come back!” I shout, trying to snag the creature again, but he's too busy bouncing around Vatok's legs, yipping joyfully at the super squeaky toy like it's the best thing since cocktail was invented.

The noise sends a ripple of excitement throughout the shelter. Though there are fences, those aren't that strong, and when the animals are all going wild... From every corner, drowsy animals join the chaos, their curious eyes fixating on Vatok in a frenzy of enthusiasm. A couple of jelly-like beings wiggle out of their area, bouncing like gelatinous spheres in a race to join the squeak parade.

Vatok tries to jump out of the way as the animals hurry to the toy, but his arms bump against the tray, sending more squeaky toys onto the floor.

Now the animals are even more excited. They surround Vatok who's in the center with toys scattered around him.

“Um, help!” Vatok's voice comically mixes with the symphony of squeaks and

howls. He tries to sidestep but ends up tripping over a small, lively dog that seems to have been waiting for this exact moment.

As he tumbles backward, I can't help but burst into laughter, my usually serious kot'oll flailing with amusement like a fish out of water only amplifying the silliness.

"Hold on!" I rush forward, grabbing a furball just as it launches itself into the air, ready to take Vatok down. In my haste, I stumble too and we both end up collapsing onto a pile of soft blankets which are at the door of the storage room. These were probably donated by someone, still waiting to be sorted into the storage room. Now that we've stumbled and moved, we aren't as close to the toys as before. The toys are now surrounded by a whirlwind of dogs, fluff, and jelly-like creatures all clamoring to join the fun.

I can't contain my laughter as Vatok groans beside me, wide-eyed but eventually breaking into a chuckle himself. "This was not part of our duty. I hope I didn't mess up much."

I wiggle my way out from under the tangle of blankets, brushing stray hairs from my face. "Oh, absolutely not part of the task," I manage between fits of laughter, trying to catch my breath. The sight of Vatok, sprawled on the floor, surrounded by an enthusiastic mass of critters, is one for the books.

"Just how exactly do I get myself into these situations?" Vatok shakes his head, attempting to untangle his arms from a particularly excitable jelly-like being that has taken a liking to his ankle. The poor creature wobbles, almost toppling over in delight.

"Maybe it's your magnetic charm." I pat the fluffball next to me, getting her to leave. She bounds off to join the party around the toys, giving us some room to breathe.

“Magnetic charm? I don’t think that’s what started the toy.” He tries to maintain his composure as a small dog-like creature nips playfully at the hem of his pants.

"Regardless, the animals love you."

"No, it's about the toys."

Just then, the fluffball decides to jump back onto Vatok’s lap, even as the toys are calming down and so are the animals. Vatok's brows furrow in mock exasperation.

I laugh and pat that one too. "It's not just about the toys."

Aldriana reappears at the doorway, arms crossed gently, a broad smile spreading across her face at the sight. “I see you two have made fast friends!”

“Is this part of the volunteering thing? Am I banned from the shelter?” Vatok asks, half-serious as he bobs and weaves among the flurry of fluff and slime. “I hope not. But I might need some more serious instruction.”

“I think that was a one-off incident,” Aldriana assures him, her eyes sparkling with delight. “But hey, it’s all about building connections, right?”

My giggles continue as I take in the utterly chaotic scene. Just moments ago, this place was a structured haven for the animals, but now it’s a delightful disaster. Toy squeaks echo off the walls, and a cacophony of barks, chirps, and splats produces a symphony that vibrates through the very air of the shelter.

Creatures scurry about, their short legs racing to claim a spot among the chaos. A particularly excitable luminescent jelly-like creature rolls across the floor, leaving a trail of glowing goo that glimmers like morning dew. Nearby, a handful of small, furry beings are playfully tumbling into each other, their fluffy tails flicking in pure

joy as they chase after a shiny, rolling ball that adds to the madness.

A few partition boards are pushed over, falling to the side, making everything seem even more chaotic. These animals are such balls of energy. Though this is far from organized, it's pleasant to look at.

Vatok's four arms awkwardly brace themselves against the endless giggles from the swarming animals. "I think this shouldn't be here, but I don't think they can follow instructions, not like beings who are driving in the sky," he muses, chuckling even as he strokes the creature that flops onto his lap, with fur tickling his skin.

I get off the blankets. "Let's get onto the actual tasks."

He nods and nudges the animal to leave him alone before he can stand. He straightens his clothes, fixes his hair, and his belt, all at the same time. "Okay, let's get going. I hope I didn't set us back in the schedule."

"There's a schedule, but it's not that straight after all."

Aldriana claps her hands, a twinkle in her eye as she surveys the aftermath. "Alright! With a little help, we can have this place back in shape in no time."

A renewed surge of energy in my veins, the enthusiastic banter with Vatok fueling my excitement. "Let's divide and conquer! I'll handle feeding the jelly creatures, and Vatok can manage the fluffballs."

"Wait, you mean these?" He gestures to the messy scene.

"Yes! Those adorable bundles. They tend to get a little rowdy, but I think they're just excited to meet you."

“Well then, let’s see if they can keep up with my ‘magnetic charm.’”

As we whip the shelter back into shape, we gleefully compare notes on the various animals. Vatok leans down to help the small jelly creature that’s stuck on its back, its translucent body shimmering under the shelter lights.

“Are you alright there?” he asks, concern softening his expression.

“See? You’ve got natural instincts!” I say as I scoop up the squirming jelly with both hands, sending sparks of laughter rattling in the air. “And now you’re officially a part of the shelter team!”

Every so often, Vatok lets out a chuckle as another fluffball jumps onto him, clearly enjoying his presence. “I wonder if I should rethink my career choices. This seems like much more fun.”

“Right? It’s like a comedy central.” I kneel to refill a jelly creature’s bowl. “Here you go, squishy friend. Time for your breakfast!”

Watching Vatok crouch low to take care of a stubborn little fluff, his four arms stretching out in attempts to pat everyone, sparks a warmth that blossoms in my chest. I’ve seen glimpses of this side in the bar—his sense of humor tempered with the iron-strong facade of a police officer—but here, amid the joyful noise of the shelter, there’s joy radiating from him that makes my heart flutter.

Could I really be falling for him?

I shake my head as if to dispel the thought, but my pulse quickens and an undeniable thrill lights up my insides whenever we share a laugh, whenever his molten bronze eyes lock onto mine for just a moment longer than necessary. It’s like a spark has ignited that I can’t seem to extinguish.

“Look out!” he shouts playfully as a zebaba makes a daring leap toward my face. I duck just in time, laughter erupting uncontrollably.

“I’ll save you.” He gestures dramatically, losing his balance briefly before righting himself, his smile a beacon of warmth.

“You should definitely add that to your officer skills list—‘savior of cute beings’,” I laugh, wiping away a tear from the corner of my eye.

But the thought that he might just be playing along lingers in my mind, swirling amidst my budding feelings. Is it even fair to entertain this attraction?

With that small uncertainty looming over our spontaneous camaraderie, I throw myself into the task at hand as a distraction. “Alright, you furry troublemaker, time for your bath!”

Vatok stumbles toward me, the zebaba is following him everywhere by now. "This is such a trip."

My phone buzzes and I check on it. "Dammit... It's almost time for my shift in the bar."

He looks out the window. The afternoon is almost over and the sky is painted with orange and purple. "So... time in the shelter is over, huh?"

"We can be here next time. Aldriana and the others can always use help."

He tilts his head to the side, seemingly thinking over something. He has four zebabas in his arms, one arm per zebaba. At least we know what he's here for, otherwise, he may look like he's trying to sneak these home. "I suppose."

We pack up and wave goodbye to Aldriana, who will be staying until closing time. As we head outside and the wind outside kisses my face, I can't help but wonder... Vatok...

He lets out a breath while I sigh. He asks, "Is everything fine? Are you tired?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine. It's just..."

"Coming down from the high?"

I don't think that's the case, but I don't know what that is. "Maybe."

"You seem to thrive in chaos, Julie. Perhaps that's why this place suits you, just like the bar." There's a hint of admiration in his tone that makes my heart flutter.

"Chaos fuels my creativity."

"Quite the adventure," he chuckles, shaking his head as if still trying to process the frenzy we just escaped. There's a softness about him now, one that draws me closer. "I'm not sure how I ended up in the middle of a fluffy tornado."

"Admit it, you loved every moment," I nudge him playfully. "Especially when you fell on those blankets."

He groans dramatically, but there's laughter dancing in his eyes. "If that makes me a softie, then I wholeheartedly accept."

As we stroll side by side, I catch the curious looks of several passersby. Some humans glance at us with confusion, others contain amused smiles. Vatok is an imposing figure next to me—four arms, tall stature, and confidence that commands attention. I can't help but beam with pride, feeling strangely lucky to be walking

beside him.

“Are we... a sight?” I venture, my voice laced with curiosity.

He raises an eyebrow at me, trying to suppress a smirk. “You might say that. But I'd think they wonder whether it's the evil kot'oll putting his hand on a beautiful woman.”

"Geez, do you look like a bad guy?"

"Or maybe a human that's being escorted."

“Well, not everyone gets to have a fabulous police officer guiding them through a fluffy animal storm.”

“Or a bartender who charms the entire galaxy. We might be quite the dynamic duo.”

Is that the case?

A comfortable silence envelops us, punctuated only by the sounds of the city coming alive beneath the twinkling stars. It feels natural walking with Vatok, almost as if we've done it so many times that... Except...

I don't know anymore.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:28 am

Chapter 9

Vatok

Being with Julie more is great, but...

I open my eyes to chuck down another mug of coffee. I think something's wrong with my eyelids; they keep closing on me.

A fellow team member elbows my side. "Are you fine? You seem to be falling asleep."

I stifle a yawn. "I'm fine."

"You haven't been on your A-game recently."

I shake my head. "No, everything's the same."

He watches me for another moment before he leaves for his shift. There is still some time before my shift starts. Maybe I can take a nap.

No, no naps are allowed even before my shift officially starts. When I'm in the office, I'm still at work and should... remain... awake... and...

I blink heavily, attempting to shake off the exhaustion that clings to me like a sticky web. The remnants of last night's joy at Julie's bar still flutter at the edges of my mind, but my body is proving uncooperative. I stretch my arms out, feeling the

tension snap like a rubber band, registering the pull of muscles that loom with fatigue.

“Get it together, Vatok,” I mutter to myself, leaning back in my chair, trying to catch a whiff of the bitter coffee that’s supposed to fuel my day. Instead, it leaves me with more of a bitter aftertaste.

The station is busy—alerts pinging on the comms, fellow officers scuttling around with urgency, a symphony of shouts and barks buzzing like flies in my head. The chaos mirrors my experience at the shelter and the bar—that joyful whirlwind—but this is noticeably more chaotic, and the stakes feel higher.

With a sigh, I pull myself to my feet. Maybe a walk will clear my head. The bright lights and sterile scent of the station wash over me as I move through the bustle.

As I step outside, the cool evening air greets me, stirring something dormant within. I take a moment to breathe, letting the crispness ground me. The city's neon skyline glimmers like gemstones against the star-studded backdrop, inviting me into the rhythm of night—a rhythm that somehow seems more alive than the day.

“Vatok!” a voice calls out, interrupting my solitude. I turn to see Ral, my boss, hands on his hips, eyebrow arched with concern. “You look like you've seen better days. Are you alright?”

“Just had a rough night.” I force a grin that feels more like a grimace. “Nothing I can't handle.”

Ral narrows his eyes, unconvinced. “You do know that if you’re off your game, it’s not just an inconvenience. It could lead to accidents. We can't afford mistakes.”

“Thanks for the concern. I’ll pull it together,” I assure him, the weight of his words settling on my already heavy heart.

But deep down, I know it isn't merely a lack of sleep. Maybe I've been distracted by Julie's beautiful face and the chaos she can create, which all makes me smile. And... I wish I could be with her instead of on my shift. Who knows what can happen in the bar right now? Is she safe?

He watches me for another second before he says, "Rumor's that you've been in the bar street a lot lately."

My heart skips a beat. "I'm only there when my shifts are over."

"I don't mean to say you're slacking off, but... Do you think there's a reason for your... performance lately?"

I swallow. Recently, unless I have an evening shift, I'd be in the bar with Julie, making sure no one bothers her. I'd stay there until she can leave work and I drive her home. And when I don't have evening shifts, it means I have early morning ones, so...

"No, captain, I just didn't have a good night yesterday."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Are you sure about that? As the leader of the team, I have to remind you that our job is risky and you need to be fully alert in order to protect yourself and those we serve, also the innocent beings in the city, and also our loved ones, and also..."

I nod and nod, pretending to be listening. While Ral is a good boss, he tends to go on and on and on and on some more... This won't be easy when I'm tired before the day begins.

Eventually, he's done with his speech. He looks me up and down. "So, do you understand? I want to make sure the team is well. And I don't remember having to give you this speech like ever. You've been a good performer."

"I'm still a good performer, don't worry about that."

He lifts his brows and doesn't seem to be convinced. "I'm going to keep a close eye on you, Vatok."

The way he says my name sends a shiver down my spine. Now, I'm alert and awake. I salute him. "I understand, captain. I'll be off to my shift. It's about time to take off."

He nods and rests his hand behind his waist, heading back into the building.

I shove my hands into my pockets, pacing the narrow concrete path outside the parking lot. I can't let my feelings for Julie affect my work. I've always been dedicated and disciplined. I'm one of the top officers in traffic control, known for my meticulous attention to detail and swift reactions. Yet here I am, feeling like a mess because of a smile, a laugh, and that first kiss that lingers on my lips.

"Pull yourself together," I mutter, vaguely aware that I'm speaking aloud to no one. The cool wind rushes past, but it does nothing to cool the heat gathering at the back of my neck as troubling thoughts spiral around.

Making it worse, she and I aren't even mates. We may be friends, and that's about it. Am I doing too much? Going too much out of my way to help her?

But I don't mind helping her and I want to help her, yet...

I eye the path in the sky and the spaceships that travel on the paths, making sure everything's in order. Dozens of flickering lights compete for attention—each spaceship a different hue, slicing through the sky, almost like in the bar. It's intoxicating and chaotic. Yet, watching that keeps me calm. While my honor requires focus, I can't help but wonder how Julie is doing. Could she be holding her own with those relentless suitors who have a zero sense of no?

Just then, a blaring horn yanks me from my musings. I glance towards the crosswalk where the lights have changed to allow for another direction of passage, only for a spaceship to zoom dangerously close in the reverse direction, nearly colliding against the one who's doing the right thing. My instincts kick in. Without thinking, I spring into action, my four arms moving fluidly as I position myself to direct traffic, wearing my expression of authority.

“Hey!” I shout, waving the instruction baton with blinking lights. “Slow it down! You’ve got no idea who’s behind you!”

The flyer screeches to a halt, skidding sideways in a shower of sparks. My muscles engage fully, adrenaline pumping through my veins as I steer my patrolling ship toward the offending spaceship.

“You trying to get yourself killed? You have to obey traffic laws. This is a busy road!”

“Sorry, officer! We didn’t see you. It just—”

“Doesn’t matter; that’s not an excuse! If you want to fly around recklessly, do it somewhere else! Your license!”

The driver fumbles, hands trembling as he produces his identification, clearly shaken by the close encounter. I take a step closer, the glare in my eyes reflecting the urgency of the situation. A deep breath settles my mind for a moment, allowing my instincts to take the lead.

“Name,” I demand, scanning the contested airspace for other potential hazards.

“Uh, Zandar, sir. I was just—”

“Just what? No one gives a flying star about your excuses! What’s flying through that head of yours?” I take a moment to steady my breath and firm my posture. Anger alone doesn’t solve anything.

I check Zandar's license against the record with my machine. "Your record looks clean, I'll issue you a warning this time." I hand the license back stiffly. The driver squints at me, mouth hanging open as if having trouble processing the relief wash over him.

“Thank you, sir! I swear it won’t happen again!”

“Make it so, Zandar. Focus on the road.” I watch as he nervously nods, then darts away, eager to put distance between us.

Except I may be the one who can't focus on my job. Am I trying too hard with Julie? Digging my heels in too deep?

As Zandar takes off into the bustling sky, I can't shake off the weight in my chest. The momentary rush of adrenaline fades, only to be replaced with the nagging feeling that I've been holding onto too many distractions lately.

What does that mean though? That beings have been following the rules? Out of nowhere?

Pacing the edge of the street, the rhythmic hum of the city wraps around me like a comforting blanket. The glow of nearby star drones adds to the chaos of my thoughts, dancing in opposition to the stark reality of my demanding job.

I can’t help but run a hand through my hair, feeling the weight of the decisions I’ve made lately. Have I truly let my personal life intertwine with my professional duties? Moments with Julie, the laughter, and the delightful mayhem of our encounters linger

in my mind like a sweet, intoxicating melody that refuses to fade.

But uncertainty chokes me. I'm supposed to be a steady pillar of order; instead, I'm wobbling like a malfunctioning starship. I can't afford to keep slipping up, especially when my role requires every ounce of my attention.

A distant sound pulls me from my reverie. A series of loud crashes echoes down the street. I blink, suddenly aware. "What now?" I whisper, turning to see a flash of lights in the distance, followed by the outline of multiple ships swerving erratically.

Without a second thought, I head toward the location, swift and determined. Four arms can maneuver more effectively, and I'm thankful for it as I wearily navigate the chaos ahead.

As I approach, the shapes clarify. Two vehicles are entangled at an intersection, sparks flying where a wing got caught on another ship. My instincts take over. I stride forward, the glaring light blaring from my officer badge reflecting off the metal surrounding me.

"Alright, everyone back!" I command, assessing the scene quicker than the thought itself.

Drivers and onlookers begin to back away, giving way for me to get to the two drivers who are about to punch each other.

I ask, "What happened here?" I walk around the crashed spaceships, assessing the damage; both to the ships and the egos involved.

Both parties begin to bicker, their voices rising amid the bustle, neither willing to concede an inch.

"He was in my lane!" one shouts.

"No! You're the one who didn't signal!" the other retorts, flailing wildly.

"Silence!" I boom above the din, instinct kicking in once more. "Both of you are reckless. It looks like neither of you was paying attention. We have procedures for this. You need to follow them. And," I glance toward the curious crowd trying to peek in, "no spectators."

Stepping into the fray, I use my communicator to call for backup. "This is Vatok, I need a tow unit at North Crescent. We have an accident."

Maybe this is my world and what I should be focusing on... even though being with Julie is pleasant. Maybe I've been creeping her out anyway. Maybe she asked for help for that one time, not forever.

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Chapter 10

Julie

I sit back on the couch, letting out a breath as it finally feels like the day is over. It has been a long one. "Vatok... Are you here?"

He isn't in the living room, but he may be in the bedroom. I miss him. He's a strong guy, he can just carry me to him instead of otherwise.

The apartment feels unusually quiet, each tick of the wall clock echoing like a reminder of my loneliness. I pad softly down the dim hallway, my heart picking up a little at the thought of just seeing him. "Vatok?"

As I approach the bedroom door, I half-expect to see him lounging on the bed, his broad frame sinking into the blankets. Instead, the room is shadowed, the curtains drawn tightly, leaving only a sliver of dusk-colored light to spill across the floor. I hesitate before peeking in, feeling like an intruder in a space where I should feel safest.

There he is, sitting on the edge of the bed, his head bowed as if he's contemplating the weight of the world.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, my voice nearly swallowed by the air around us.

He glances up, his eyes tired but glimmering with something unreadable. "I just need a moment. It's been... a lot."

I can't help but notice how his shoulders slump, the very essence of his usually commanding presence dimming. My heart aches. This isn't the strong, resilient Vatok I know. Something has to be wrong, really wrong. Is that with his job?

I step closer. "I had a rough day too. Tell me what's on your mind?"

But instead of opening up, he shifts slightly, as if my words had pushed him back further into his thoughts.

His silence feels like a wall, and for the first time, I can't quite reach him. The playful echo of our laughter from earlier in the week feels like a distant memory, one that I grasp but cannot hold.

I sit by his side and wrap my arms around him. I enjoy my time with him, even when none of us talk. It happens sometimes, when our days can be rough, and there's no telling what will happen every single day. But tonight, the peace we usually find in shared silence dances on the edge of discomfort. I lean against him, resting my head on his shoulder, hoping to draw him out of his brooding. "Remember that time when I didn't park well?"

He chuckles softly, a half-hearted one. The warmth of his body next to mine gives me a flicker of hope, but the heaviness lingers.

He has been this way recently. Maybe work has been rough on him and he gets tired. I just wish I could help.

"Vatok, you know you can talk to me about anything, right? I'm here."

He shifts, his hand resting over my own as if he's searching for warmth in my touch. "I don't want to burden you. You've had a long day. You don't need my rants."

“Everyone needs to rant sometimes.” I squeeze his hand. My heart hammers with concern.

He closes his eyes briefly, a soft sigh escaping his lips, and at that moment, I catch a glimpse of the turmoil swirling beneath his surface. “It’s... complicated.”

“Step by step. What’s weighing you down?”

He shakes his head. "I'm fine."

Except there's no way he's fine.

I sigh. Maybe I have to be the one talking first. "You know? Today in the bar, there were those creepers too. Not as many as before, when we are meant to be together and been showing together quite some of the time."

He flinches. "Still?" he groans, sounding more frustrated than he should. If there even is an acceptable level of annoyance, he should feel over this.

"It feels like it's never-ending, regardless. I think we've been pretty convincing."

"Some beings know no boundaries." That's what he said, but it feels like there's something behind those words.

He yawns and lies on the bed. "I have an early shift tomorrow."

"Okay..." I join him on the bed, staring at the ceiling. "Can I just tell you one thing?"

He nods. "Yes, just so you know. I care about you a lot." He squeezes my hand and I don't doubt him.

"But sometimes it feels like you're slipping away," I murmur, the words bittersweet on my tongue. "I see things change, and I can't help but wonder if I'm losing you."

He shifts slightly, turning to face me, his brow furrowing as he processes my words. "I'm not going anywhere, Julie. I promise." His voice is steadier now, yet the shadows linger in his eyes. "Life just has a way of piling it on, you know?"

"I do know. But I want to share that weight with you. It doesn't have to be just your burden to bear." The sincerity in my tone hangs in the air, urging him to open up. I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, searching his gaze for understanding.

He studies my eyes for a long moment as if weighing my offer against a scale only he can see. "You deserve so much more."

"How am I supposed to know what to do if I don't know what happened? I just wanted to help you like how you're helping me."

He blinks and something seems to pass his mind. He rolls to face the other side of the bed. "It's getting late. I have to sleep. I'll be there with you on your shift too. We'll make sure the creepy ones stay away from you."

I reach for his shoulder but pull back before I touch him. "Okay... Thank you for being here with me."

He yawns. "Is that the thing you want to talk about?"

"Like... Kind of? It's mainly just beings trying their silly pick-up line on me."

He hums, the vibration from his chest making its way to me. I want to hug him, but maybe he really needs sleep. "That's because you're amazing. Everyone wants..." he yawns, "a chance with you. Don't worry, I won't stop helping you until they leave you

alone." He sounds... tired. There's not a hint of enthusiasm in his tone.

My heart skips a beat. Is that a reference to how... He's only here so that we can show whoever thinks they have a chance with me that we are really dating each other and I'm not looking for a mate. So... "I... Thank you for the help."

He rolls around to face me with a smile. It's a tired and weak smile, but it is a smile regardless. He leans closer. "Is this what humans do? Or mates do?" He pecks a kiss on my forehead. "Night."

"Night."

He closes his eyes and seemingly falls asleep at once. I love watching his handsome face but at the same time... There is so much left unsaid. Something that...

I take a breath, taking in his scent, but even that's not enough to calm me.

When have I been that concerned over what others think? Vatok isn't just a random being, yet...

Am I overthinking it? He could have been just tired, like he said, with nothing else on the line, yet...

There's a knot in my stomach and that doesn't sit well at all.

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Chapter 11

Julie

The bar hums alive the later it gets in the evening. Today, Vatok isn't here with me. There are patrons around the bar counter, waiting for their drinks. I keep serving their orders, but without Vatok around, something feels off. It has been a while since we started pretending to be mates and it has been good, except... sometimes, it still feels wrong in some way.

The familiar blend of laughter and distant chatter amplifies in Vatok's absence, which doesn't sit right with me. I wipe my brow, feeling the warmth of the bustling crowd on my skin while the air is thick with the sweet and spicy aroma of ingredients for different drinks mingling together.

I stare at the bottles sitting in front of me, stealing the moment of the empty counter to...

Is Vatok fine?

I know his job is demanding, but he seems to be getting more tired recently. Is everything still good?

That night... Since the night, when he was too tired to talk to me or stay with me, it feels like something isn't right anymore. But he isn't telling me anything.

Now that I think about it... He and I... Even though we stay together now, is that...

real?

I know he's real. I can hug him and feel his warmth. His... thick cock is real too, yet...

For him, is everything fake?

I swallow when my throat tightens at the thought. Our relationship's meant to be fake. Maybe he remembers that better than me. Sometimes, I no longer know what's real and what's not.

Was the kiss we shared when we left for our respective work real? Was the peck on the forehead before bed real?

Is everything fake, like how it's supposed to be?

But...

I take a breath. There's a time and place to be thinking about that, which isn't now.

Not to mention, there's no reason I have to think about what's in his mind that much. Even though what we have between us is muddy, it doesn't get to interfere with my work. I can function perfectly fine regardless.

Or... that's supposed to be the case.

I tilt my head back for a brief moment, allowing the energy of the room to wash over me. I've been fine even before Vatok and I get close with each other and there's no reason for me to be slacking off just because he isn't around.

Even though I like the guy, I can't let him have such power over me.

“Two Galactic Colas and a Nebula Lemonade!” I call out, sliding the drinks down the counter towards a table of giggling winged ones who are energetically debating the best planet to vacation on. Their cheers ring in my ears, and I give them a grateful smile, even when the weight of the night starts pulling at my eyelids.

As I pour another drink, a more persistent patron sidles up to me, leaning in too close with a smirk that sends a shiver down my spine. “So, Julie, how about I take you out for a drink sometime? Just the two of us? I know all the best spots in the galaxy.”

My pulse quickens, frustration bubbling just beneath the surface. “Thanks, but I’m with someone already. Don’t want to make him mad.”

His smirk falters, but he leans even closer, oblivious to the spark of annoyance flaring in my chest. “Oh really? I don’t see him around here. Are you sure he’s not just another one of those ‘party boys’ who won’t appreciate the finer things in life?”

I roll my eyes, plastering a charming smile on my face despite the irritation. “Trust me, my guy sure knows how to enjoy a night out. He’d likely put you in your place before you even had a chance to finish that drink.” I grab a cocktail shaker, shaking my head as I add a colorful swirl to the mix. “Maybe someone else will be interested in you; I’ve got work to do.”

He huffs, but steps back, clearly not enjoying the lack of attention. As he disappears into the crowd, I let out a sigh of relief, shaking off the tension that had begun to creep up my spine.

But the moment of victory is short-lived. The bar continues to thrum with life, laughter, and chatter, yet my heart feels strangely unsettled. I can’t help but glance at the entrance, hoping to see that familiar outline of Vatok cutting through the chaos. Maybe it’s more than just the fun times he brings; his presence is a comfort against the tide of unwanted advances and the general absurdity of the evening.

But I'm not supposed to do that. I don't want to rely on him for my sense of safety. That one time I asked him to pretend to be my mate is meant to be... a one-time thing. It was for the convenience, yet...

I really should put myself together and deal with creepers with my own hands. Or at times, with the help of the bouncer, who is a strong guy too.

I pour a Nebula Punch and set it in front of a small, multi-horned being who gives a genuine grin in return. Even though some patrons are creeps, most of them are nice beings who are just here to have fun with their friends.

As I try to focus on the positive interactions, I find my mind drifting again, replaying the moments Vatok and I shared. It feels like our relationship has turned into something more, something real, but...

Maybe he has been playing along. A handsome one like him who has a good and well-respected job won't care about someone like me.

Even though I like working here, being a bartender isn't the most respected role. Beings think that someone like me has shady business somewhere. Or I'm just here to flirt with everyone taking a seat on the stools, never serious about anything.

But I don't. While I enjoy chatting and banter, I'm not very flirtatious.

"Hi, Julie, how are you?"

I grit my teeth when I realize Targoth is here again. With the creepy grin on his face, he hasn't learned his lesson. Maybe he's here as soon as he figured out that Vatok isn't around. I plaster on my professional smile, reminding myself that this is part of the job. "I'm great, Targoth! What can I get for you tonight?" My tone is light, but internally I'm bracing for his classic attempts to charm me.

He leans on the bar, his scales shimmering under the neon lights. "How about that drink I suggested the other night? Something special?"

"Sure, I can whip you up something unique." How do I keep the conversation moving without inviting more of his unwelcome advances? I turn to the shelves, reaching for a bottle of Zalorian spice-infused liquor while glancing toward the entrance, half-hoping to catch a glimpse of Vatok walking in. Though I know he's not going to be here when his shift will stretch all the way through the evening.

"You know," Targoth continues, "if you'd just give me a chance, I could show you the very best that the universe has to offer. Forget about that kot'oll you think is so great. I could treat you much better."

I set the bottle down a little harder than intended. "Targoth, listen. I'm not interested, okay? You're nice and all, but I like my current situation just fine." I straighten up, trying to project confidence despite the creeping discomfort in my stomach.

He smirks, leaning closer, "But what does he really offer? A boring routine? Rules, regulations—"

"My relationship isn't your business."

His expression falters for just a moment before he quickly masks it with his usual smirk. "You think you know him, but what do you really know?"

"More than you think," I shoot back. "Unlike some patrons, he actually respects me."

Targoth's brow furrows slightly, his bravado wavering. "Is that so? Respect doesn't fill your stomach or get you the best seats at the Nightglow Festival."

Vatok's never going to one of those; he doesn't feel like the kind of being who loves

noisy places. The irony stings, but I won't let him rattle me. "And a bad attitude certainly won't endear you to anyone either. If you don't mind, I have patrons who appreciate my time. I'd rather not waste it on someone who can't take 'no' for an answer." I turn my back and focus on pouring another drink, willing my unease to seep away with the steady flow of the bright, glittering liquid.

I shoot the bouncer a look. He is a big nekrozzro with horns and scales, not to mention strong arms. He catches my gaze and nods, getting ready in case I need more help.

Targoth looks around, seemingly sensing the change in the air. "Fine, just know that I'll be around." He takes his drink and leaves me alone, which I hope will last.

I keep my eyes fixed on the counter, forcing myself to breathe steadily. The laughter and chatter of the bar swirl around, creating an illusion of comfort, but without Vatok's imposing presence nearby, the weight of the evening presses down harder on my shoulders.

The crowd of patrons ebbs and flows, and I finally take a moment to regroup as I serve a couple of friendly patrons at the far end. They're genuine, laughing and enjoying each other's company; the type of beings who remind me why I love this job despite the drama.

I lean in, pouring them each a Nebula Fizz, enjoying the lightness of the moment wash over me. "So, what are your plans tonight? Any adventures on the horizon?" I ask, prompting their eager tales about a recent trip to Utta, an exotic planet shimmering with ambitious nightlife and strange culinary delights.

As they share stories that evoke warmth, there's a bittersweet twinge. My mind drifts back to Vatok, to his gentle smirk and the way his eyes light up when we banter. Does he feel the same pull? These thoughts grow heavier with each passing moment

that Targoth's smirking face lingers in my mind.

Maybe I shouldn't waste Vatok's time. He's probably around because he's a nice guy who truly wanted to help and make sure I'll be fine. I'm stronger than needing protection left and right. He doesn't have to be here when he can be out there getting to know a female of his choice. I...

Even though I'd want to give our relationship a real try, maybe I shouldn't. We shouldn't.

The evening is long. When I can finally catch my breath, my shift is almost over. I take one last glance around the bar, surveying the remnants of the night: crumpled napkins, half-empty glasses, and laughter that now echoes faintly in my ears. The weight of the day settles on my shoulders, making it tempting to head home early. I lean back on my stool, allowing my tired body to relax for a moment.

But my phone buzzes, jolting me from my thoughts.

"Julie." Vatok's voice comes, deep and stern. "I hope I'm not interrupting. I... wanted to check in."

"Hey, Vatok. Not at all, I was just winding down for the night."

His tone sends a swirl in my stomach, and I sit a bit straighter on my stool. It feels like something bad's about to happen.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about something," he continues, and a knot forms in my stomach. "With work being so demanding lately... and all the crazy shifts, I think it's best if we... adjust how we interact for a while."

"Adjust? What do you mean?" I don't like that word.

“Look, it’s not that I don’t enjoy our time together.” He pauses, the brief moment of silence heavy on my shoulders. “But I need to focus on my responsibilities. More importantly, you deserve someone who will love you. I can’t always be around you, and for you to still find that someone.”

A chill runs down my spine, and my heart drops. “Hey... I...”

“I think we are too different. Like... It’s not supposed to be how it currently is, right?”

The words twist like a knife in my gut. “But we’ve been having fun, right?” I strive to add a note of hopefulness, but the tremor in my voice betrays me.

“It has been, but... feelings can complicate everything. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

I look around the bar, even as tears threaten to burst out of me. I hope no one sees this and thinks that I’m breaking up with Vatok, whatever that means when the two of us technically have never been dating.

“Okay,” I finally manage to say, my voice barely a whisper. “Thanks for your help that day. It means a lot.”

I don’t need him.

I’d been fine before we pretended to be mates.

I don’t need him.

I don’t need anyone to be fine.

I grit my teeth, but bitterness wells in my stomach. Am I mad at him?

Except I don't even have ground to stand on to be mad.

There's a painful silence between us, stretching longer than I want it to. My heart races, pounding loudly in my ears as I stare at the bar's warped surface, its sheen reflecting the chaos of my internal struggle. Each word he said settles like stones in my stomach, heavy and unyielding.

"Julie," there's a tightness in his voice that further twists the knife lodged in my gut. "If I'd been clearer before—"

"No, it's fine. I understand. You're busy, and we... we were just pretending, after all. It was meant for that one time anyway."

I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting against the bubbling tears in me. It gets hard to even remain seated on the stool without hunching over and cry.

I can't let him drag this out any longer. "Look, I gotta go. My shift just ended and I need to clean up." I cut him off before he can respond with anything that might hurt more than it already has. "Take care, Vatok."

Before he can reply, I end the call.

Targoth's shadow looms again, this time with a knowing look that leaves me cold. My heart still thrums with leftover emotion, and I lock eyes with him, refusing to let him think he can inflict his neediness on me. "Targoth, I'm not in the mood. Whatever you want, it's not happening."

His peculiar grin falters slightly, replaced with a confused tilt of his head. "Didn't catch you in a good moment tonight, huh? I can see that."

"Not even close. Seriously, just back off."

He leans in closer, uninvited, even as the bar's atmosphere continues to buzz around us. "Maybe you just need someone who can really—"

"Not interested!" I snap. "Do you not understand the word 'no'?"

He straightens his posture, momentarily taken aback. "Okay, okay! Just trying to brighten your evening."

"Brighten it? Targoth, if you truly wanted to brighten anyone's evening, you would've noticed that I'm perfectly fine on my own. I don't need a clown act."

"Is that... is that jealousy I'm sensing?" His expression shifts to amusement, a flicker of mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Jealousy? Please, you're not worth that." I turn away from him, forcing myself to take a deep, calming breath.

He shrugs. "I suppose you can keep fooling yourself until you admit it to yourself. You deserve someone better."

I hiss at him, but he's leaving and won't see my glare. I do deserve better, it's not hard to find someone better than his ass.

I just hope...

Vatok's a good guy, but maybe he isn't for me after all.

Julie... You can do this on your own. It'll be like before, you're going to be fine.

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Chapter 12

Vatok

I head home, my home, not Julie's, and not the housing units provided by the police team. Nothing has been right after I made the call to Julie. Did I make the wrong decision? I was just trying to tell her that it was about time for our pretense to be over, which she agreed to. That was what we agreed to in the beginning anyway, even though there wasn't a chance to make the fine terms clear when we started the pretense.

I knock on the door and Mother opens it. She grins as she sees me, but the smile soon falters. "Vatok... Is everything fine?"

"What's wrong?"

"You look..." She feels my two lower arms with hers while she pats my head and my stomach. "Have you been eating? Maybe the police team has been too concerned about eating healthy. Here, you need some real food."

I force a smile. "Do I look that bad?"

Regardless, we get into the house. It smells like home. Father's in the kitchen preparing food. Sometimes, I wish I could spend more time here with them. Technically, I could, but...

Julie...

I know I shouldn't keep thinking about her when there had been nothing between us, yet... She somehow tugs at my heart, still. Our time away from each other isn't helping. I still haven't forgotten about her.

Grihul, my brother, is on the couch. He's the reason I'm here for the evening. He works on another planet, and though it's not that far away, he doesn't get to be here a lot. He turns from the television to me and he soon frowns like Mother did. Do I look that bad?

He clears his throat. "You look like a walking zombie."

"What's a zombie?"

"Like... something that's not dead, but not alive, well... I'm not sure. Those are in the human movies. They walk like they don't have a soul."

I snort. "And you've been watching those?"

Kendra, Grihul's mate, who is a human female, comes around with two mugs. "Oh, you're here. Sorry, I didn't see you when I went for drinks."

I shrug. "It's okay. I'll get mine later."

A drink... Though a mug is very different from a glass like the one in Julie's bar, it reminds me of her and that sucks...

I plunge onto the couch, letting out a breath.

Kendra sits by Grihul's side, handing him his drink. She asks, "Is everything fine? You look... concerning. No more directing traffic for you?"

I shake my head. "It's the same old. I'm still in the traffic department. How about you?"

Kendra is also a police officer, but on another planet, the same one Grihul works and lives on. She says, "Same for me too. Working in the back office, putting together pieces of cases to find out who may be the criminal, that kind of thing."

I nod, not paying too much attention. Maybe I've been putting in too much time on work and extra shifts lately that I'm still not getting enough sleep. "I think this is just a phase. I'll get over it."

"Just remember to take a break. You can't pour from an empty cup. While we aren't in the exact same line of work, burning out never helps."

A thought struck me. "Maybe that's why I've been feeling..." I trail off, unable to articulate the chaotic blend of feelings brewing within me.

"Feeling what?" Grihul asks.

"Like..." I pause again, weighing my words. Should I tell them any of this? "I don't know, just... different, I guess. As if something is off."

"Is it the job? Or something else?" Kendra tilts her head to the side with curiosity dancing in her eyes. It feels like I'm getting questioned, even though she means well. I think that has to do with how we are both police officers, we kind of talk that way without intending it.

But could I speak truthfully about my entanglement with Julie without sounding foolish?

"Just... work-related stress, mostly." I shrug, brushing off the intensity of my feelings,

even though the name lingers on the tip of my tongue.

Grihul scowls. "Look, I'm not a police officer, but I know you enough to know that you're hiding things from us."

Kendra smacks Grihul's thigh and shoots him a look. "It's okay." She turns to me. "You can tell us if you want to. Just take care, okay?"

I'm about to say something when the doorbell rings. Grihul stands. "Maybe it's Telke and Winnie." He calls to the kitchen. "I'll get the door."

Telke's my other brother, who's always happy and a wild ball of energy. Coincidence or not, also has a human mate.

Now, there is only Kendra and me on the couch. Like Julie, she's also a human, does that mean I can ask her about... my issue with Julie? Will Kendra know whether I've made a wrong decision?

But my whole family are kot'olls, and I can't figure out what's in the head of my brothers most of the time, so who's to say that just because they are humans, they'll understand each other? Kendra doesn't even live on this planet, nor does she know Julie.

I shudder when Kendra clicks her tongue. I lift my brows in question. She says, "I have a hunch on what's going on with you."

Is that a challenge? "Fancy a guess? Though I won't confirm or deny your guesses."

She laughs. "Sounds like you're really a police officer. But seriously, maybe it has to do with relationships, huh? With someone you care a lot about?"

I clear my throat. "What's with that baseless guess?"

"I thought you were to neither confirm nor deny."

I roll my eyes with a huff. "I want to know why the guess."

Grihul is busy chatting with Telke, or say, Telke's busy talking and that should keep Grihul away for a bit longer. Maybe I don't mind Kendra knowing, but not my other brothers, for unknown reasons.

Kendra says, "I've never been good at relationships either. But, at times, you just have to give it a go, okay?"

I narrow my eyes on her. Now that she has her mate, she thinks that she knows everything about relationships, huh? Not to mention she and Grihul had a super bumpy beginning that drove me mad at times. But... Kendra's a good being at heart.

She shrugs with a victory smile as if she thinks that she's right about her guesses. "You're a big guy, you know what to do."

I should. But do I?

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Chapter 13

Julie

Am I fine?

I stare at the afternoon sky, not knowing where to go after my weekly animal shelter visit.

Actually, that's not hard to figure out. I don't have to go to my shift today, I swapped with someone else so that... I can just head home and take a rest.

In the sky, there are warm hues of orange and purple across the horizon. The world seems to glow, but the light feels distant, almost mocking in its beauty. The coolness of the air contrasts sharply with the warmth emanating from the fading sunlight.

Vatok was only here with me that one time, but it feels like he has been here and he isn't. If I close my eyes, I can almost picture him here, leaning against the counter, a half-smile creeping onto his lips as he uses all four arms to lift the animals and play with them.

The shelter's gardens overflow with wildflowers, their heads bobbing in the soft wind. I find an empty bench beneath a large tree, its crown gently shifts with the wind, inviting me to sit and simply breathe. I do. Dropping my head back against the bench, I close my eyes and listen to the soft rustling of the leaves.

For just a moment, it feels like I can be fine again, that I just need to be patient with

myself.

Vatok and I... I was just delusional, thinking that if we didn't talk about it, our fake relationship would become a real one. But the truth is, I can't ignore the tug in my chest that pulls me toward thoughts of him. There was something between us, however fleeting. When did feelings become so complicated? The seconds stretch into echoes of laughter I can almost hear, memories of banters over glasses of cocktails, and the unspoken warmth that existed in the air whenever he was near.

After that phone call, he didn't show up in the bar, which I expected. It would just be awkward and I doubt that would be better than his absence in terms of keeping weird patrons away from me. Those never cared. maybe I should learn not to let them get to me either. Then... I won't need Vatok around.

But I want him around...

I open my eyes and gaze at the horizon, but the vibrant colors no longer seem to hold the same allure. Instead, they remind me of longing—a yearning for a connection that feels both exhilarating and suffocating.

I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the scent of grass and blooming flowers, trying to ground myself. Shaking my head, I remind myself that our time together was built on pretenses, elaborate enough to fool others, but brittle beneath the surface. Maybe I did fool myself at times too.

Just as my thoughts whirl, a bark from the shelter calls me back to the present. A scruffy zebaba races across the yard, tail wagging furiously as he chases after a butterfly. His joy is infectious, lifting a corner of my mouth.

Yet, he reminds me of Vatok too. I'm not sure whether I should welcome the reminder.

My thoughts drift back to him. What was he feeling? Did he think about me too? The knot in my stomach tightens at the thought. Maybe the key isn't to convince him of my feelings, but to understand my own. What's he doing? On another shift?

I can't help a smile when I think about how I lifted a zebaba at his face and the little guy licked him. Maybe he was laughing at my parking skills when I was in a hurry to save the little guy.

I get off the bench. Maybe I can drive around and that may help with my mood. My spaceship isn't far away after all. It's waiting for me in the parking lot down the street.

Driving, huh?

Now that seems to remind me of Vatok's silly smile when he insisted on driving me home every day when we were closer. He had been doing his regular shifts, then being with me through my shifts, and bringing me home afterward. So much so... There were times when he fell asleep in the bar and I got to peck a kiss on his forehead without him even knowing.

Wait...

My hand stops right before I start the engine of my spaceship. Is that the reason he said we can't meet each other like before? That what he has been doing for me is a bit too much on him?

My heartbeat races at that, but what good does that bring now that we've agreed to separate?

Maybe that's something I'll never figure out.

I start the spaceship. I can use some fresh air. Getting on the road, I drift along, going

through the quiet streets. As long as I stay out of the sky, things are slower and more relaxing.

As I drive through the winding streets, my thoughts swirl like the galaxies swirling above us. Each mundane turn brings fragments of memories I wish I could forget—but more than that, they tug at my heart with an intricate dance of regret and yearning. The gentle hum of the engine should be soothing, but it's drowned out by the lingering echo of Vatok's laughter ringing in my head.

Am I in the wrong? Or is this how it is going to be regardless?

Maybe he and I can never be together and he made the call to cut it before I could get even deeper into the mess and be hurt even more.

With every pause at a traffic light, I let my mind drift back to that day—the chaotic delight of rescuing that little zebaba both a distraction from the reality of my feelings and a catalyst to everything that unfolded. I couldn't stop the way my heart raced when Vatok leaned closer, the way his four arms moved with such grace that the world felt suspended. The image of his amused smirk, those bronze eyes glistening with mischief, makes a warmth flush through me... Everything with him was good...

I wasn't trying, but I ended up arriving at the very spot where I clumsily parked my spaceship, which led to running into Vatok.

The street feels strangely alive as if the universe had conspired to bring me back here. The bushes at the corner sway gently, playful reminders of that mischievous day. I slide out of the spaceship, my feet grounding me against the cool pavement, a sense of nostalgia wrapping around me like a comfortable blanket.

Except, Vatok and I are never going to...

Standing there, I let the memories envelop me. I can almost hear him reprimanding me for how badly I parked the spaceship and how he scowled when the zebaba licked his face.

Maybe I should leave before I upset myself even more. There's no turning back. My relationship with him was bound to fail anyway. Not to mention there has been no relationship to start with, at least not the kind I imagined.

I turn around, but there's a shadow hovering over me. I halt but still slam into that someone. "I'm sorry!"

"Julie..."

My breath hitches as... Vatok shows up right in front of me. I force a smile. "It's you... What gives?"

He watches me with sadness in his eyes. "That's my question for you too."

He's in his uniform, so that means he's on shift.

I glance behind his shoulder, which is challenging when he is far taller than me. "So... Did I park well this time around?"

He returns a weak smile. "I suppose so."

"Are you here for work? For... talk?"

He swallows, and so do I... I should have known that meeting him again was going to be awkward, yet... it feels like that's something we have to go through, eventually, now.

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Chapter 14

Vatok

As I stand before her, the familiar pang of longing hits me, sharp as a static shock. I grit my teeth, stopping myself from meaningless words that may only worsen the moment. Julie's the same as I remembered, except she doesn't have the energy she always seems to hold.

Sometimes, I envy humans. They only have two hands to pay attention to and make sure they don't do weird things, while I have four hands to be mindful of.

I take a breath, fighting to get some air into my lungs despite the storm of questions swirling in the air between us. I didn't expect to run into her even though I remember this street. Or... Maybe I subconsciously wanted to be here. I picked this zone to patrol. Here is where I ran into her, that may be the first time we met outside of the bar when I'm not a patron there and she's not a bartender.

“Julie...” My voice comes out hoarse, which may be partly a reflection on how my days have been meh, to say the least since we ended what we may have. I want to be steady; traits I’ve mastered as an officer. Yet, facing her, I feel like a rookie at his first training session. It’s infuriating how easily she turns my world upside down.

She offers a tentative smile. “What gives?”

The air grows thick, saturated with unsaid words. I can’t bring myself to tell her that I almost lost my way in my own thoughts while going over my patrol route, triggered

by every street corner echoing with her laughter. “That’s my question for you, too.” My voice inadvertently bears a note of seriousness, the weight of our last conversation still pressing upon me.

In the back of my mind, lingering traces of our last interactions remind me of both the distance we agreed upon and the undeniable pull that draws us back together. This street, this moment... The memories lacing it are heavy, sweet, and terrifying. My professional demeanor clashes violently with the emotions bubbling just beneath my skin.

I take a breath, letting the cool air rush in to steady my racing heart. “I’m on patrol, but...”

“But what?” she asks.

I glance around, checking for passersby.

I suppose I have a moment. Talking to her about our relationship deserves more than a moment, but maybe that's all I can afford, at least for now. “But... let’s not make this a habit,” I finally manage to say, a half-hearted attempt at reclaiming my control, though I know my resolve is crumbling.

Julie’s smile falters slightly, the brightness dimmed by the weight of my words. “Look,” she continues, her tone shifting, softening. “We agreed that we were just meant to be pretending, but I can’t keep that going after I saw what we could have. You felt it too. Didn’t you? There were times when I wasn’t sure what was real anymore.”

“Of course, I felt it. But I worry it’s just... complications waiting to happen. You deserve someone who can match your energy, and I—”

“Are you afraid of what could be, or is this just an excuse to push away the connection we had? I know it all started as a fake one, but our connection... Are you sure that it remained fake?” The fiery determination in her eyes dispels the chill of earlier uncertainty, igniting a warmth within me.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I spread my arms to the side. “Look, I... I’m not that good as a mate. As you can see, I can’t be there with you when you need me. And...”

A beat of silence stretches between us. Slowly, she moves closer, the warmth of her presence wrapping around me like a soft embrace. “Are you thinking that you need to be with me all the time? Every single second?”

“Isn’t that what mates do for each other? I promised to help and protect you, yet...”

“Yet what?” There’s a fierce spark in her eyes, a reminder of the passion that once danced between us like a humming engine.

“I don’t know if I can handle that. What if I fail you? What if I can’t be there and something happens? I’d be such a bad mate. It’s exhausting just... being this torn.” My hands clench into fists at my sides as I acknowledge the fear creeping beneath my skin. This is worse than being an officer who is tasked with protecting others. This is Julie and she feels different. “And I don’t know whether you mean it or not. Or maybe we were still pretending, but... I mean, I can feel our connection and... something like that.”

She muses. “I can see that. I do think we’ve gone a lot further than pretending to be mates. Also, just so you know, even after we become mates, or you find someone else, you won’t and don’t have to be with them all the time. One would wonder how others have mates who work a different job, huh?”

I blink at that. Logically, I know she’s right, but that doesn’t sit well with me.

“I know they can. But this... with us, it’s different. I don’t want to be the reason something goes wrong for you. Just imagining you meeting those creepy ones because I couldn’t be there... Maybe there’ll be someone who can be there for you more.”

She is right in front of me. I miss her soft body in my arms. I want to hug her, but that can’t be the right thing to do. My arms itch to hug her, yet I fight to keep them by my side. I fix my hair, belt, baton, and watch.

Julie’s gaze softens. "Look, you don't need to be with me through my shifts. You're making it hard on yourself. I know you want to help me, but even just existing for two beings' worth of working hours can't work in the long term. Even on your shifts, it will eventually end. You're making everything too consuming for your own good."

Is that the case?

I rub my eyes as tiredness creeps up at me. Maybe that means taking extra shifts just so I can keep my mind busy isn't the right thing to do either. My boss didn't let me take up everything either, which I didn't argue with.

She comes over and hugs me. I grab her at once, wrapping my arms around her waist, and pull her head to my chest, not wanting to waste the moment. She lets out a soft moan and pats my back. "I miss this. It's not all or nothing, Vatok. In the bar, I have the bouncer there to help if something really bad happens. And I can have you in my mind to help even though you can't be there with me through every shift. Imagine before I asked for help, huh? The creepers remain and we can only do our best."

"Does that mean I should have never helped? The result seems to be the same."

She pulls back from my chest and hisses at me, sending my inside tumbling. "Stop the silliness. I was trying to handle that differently, which didn't turn out to be driving

away everything annoying. but now here we are, with a chance to give our relationship a real try."

I watch her, even though my guts scream at me to give us a try, and my arms twitch to hold her, I don't know... "Julie, I really care about you and I think you should be with a better male than me."

She scowls. "I don't understand you. Just because you think that you can't be there with me every single second of the day, you decided you will not even be in a second of my life? Your ass didn't even have the courage to talk to me face to face, arms to arms."

I swallow. Now that she puts it this way... It sounds like I did make a mistake.

I remain quiet as my thoughts get noisy. I want to be with her but at the same time... Even though she said that it's impossible to fail her, it still feels like I may not be the right being for her.

She sighs. "Does that mean you don't want to try? I miss the way we connected, the way you understood me in a way no one else has. It wasn't just some fleeting moment. I think we're stronger than the odds stacked against us. Don't you see that?"

"I do want to try, but I can't help but fear the potential fallout. I feel like I'm trying to balance everything without falling apart."

Julie's expression softens. "You've thought that I'm crazy, right? How about this? We'll just jump and see where we land. No one's dying. And... I miss our time together, even though it won't be every single second of the day. Trust me a bit more. I can handle myself without you, big guy. Don't think of yourself as a super being."

I take a breath again. This time, I think I'm ready. Maybe she has a point. Our

relationship may fail, but if I don't give it a try, I'd always think about the what-ifs.

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Chapter 15

Julie

So... I watch Vatok for another moment. He looks at me too, with his eyes that are so sharp and intense that they may pierce through me. "Vatok..." I murmur, my voice steady yet laced with hesitation.

He holds me in his four arms, but he's still not saying a thing.

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of what I'm about to say. "I think... I think that even when we try to avoid it, there's something real between us. It might be reckless, it might be chaotic, but it'll probably be worth it." I put up a smile, trying to loosen up the tension. "You know I'm all about the chaos and you enjoy our time together."

His gaze shifts to the street, a faint hint of vulnerability cracking through his stoic exterior.

He looks down at my hand resting on him, then back at my eyes, a lingering moment that stretches, inviting connection. I hope he sees that I'm not frightened of what we could become, only excited for the possibilities that lie ahead.

He clears his throat. "I don't want this to be just some impulse." He lifts his two upper arms and stretches them into the sky. "I want this to be serious and real."

"Okay, what do you have in mind?"

His words hang in the air, charged with a gravity that both comforts and unnerves me.

I take a step back, letting our bodies part just enough so I can gauge his expression without the overwhelming pull of his embrace. It is too tempting to lose myself in his hugs.

He continues, "I want us to explore this... whatever this is. But I need to know you're in it because you want to, not because I may be able to help, not because I look intimidating, only because you want to give our relationship a try."

I chuckle at that. "You can't scare me away with four arms." I pat his arm. "I've thought about this a lot. I'm ready for real. I've felt it for a while, and I can't pretend anymore. I think I'm not completely innocent either. I really did become kind of dependent on you to feel safe in the bar, which I think gave you pressure to be there with me too."

I stand with my chest up. "But I've realized that now. We can be together, and you can come to the bar when you have the time for that, like how it used to be. And most of the time, you can get off work and head home like most of the other officers."

"Yes, I think that will work." He pulls me to him again, leaning so closely to me that our lips almost touch. "Let's be mates, at least give that a try."

"Good. Think about the things and chores I can get you to do with those arms."

He smirks. "There are far better things for me to do with these than chores." He wiggles all his fingers. "Look, I can—"

There's a beep and I jump.

He groans and pulls out his phone. Maybe it's his boss calling.

He talks to the phone. "Yes, yes. I'm checking the street and all is well. Don't worry about that... No... I'm not in danger. I... No! I'm not slacking off. I'm on my A-game." He points a finger into the air, gesturing for me to follow him. I do that. I want to stay with him for a bit longer, especially when that stupid call ruined our moment.

Maybe he has a tracker on him and would lead to phone calls if he remains in a spot for too long. Makes sense when he can run into danger. Speaking of which, maybe he is the one with someone who needs more help than me. The annoying patrons only talk and bug me, but bad beings on his patrol route may hurt him.

Yet... there are two guns on his waist and he will still have extra arms for the baton and something more. I guess he's perfect for the job regardless.

It takes a while before he's done with the call. He looks at me with a frown, which is probably lingering from the call. "Look, I got to go. Don't you have work today?"

I shake my head. "No, today's petting-a-zebaba day."

He smiles. "I see. Maybe you should go home and look tasty for me when my shift is over."

"Ah, feeling naughty already, huh?"

He tips his cap and lifts my chin. "I miss you and I think you've told me that you miss me too."

"I do."

"Yes, good, my perfect mate."

And just like that, the heaviness from earlier dissipates, replaced by sparks of playful

banter that dance between us. His gaze grows soft, and I'm reminded just how easily he can transition from a serious officer to my mate who takes care of me.

“Perfect, huh?” I tease, raising an eyebrow. “That’s setting the bar pretty high.”

“Not in my world. In my world, it's already perfect just to have you with me.”

Heat rises in my cheeks, fighting a playful grin. Vatok always has a way with words, even though he doesn't think he's good at that. I say, “Flattery will get you everywhere. I'll wait for you at home.”

He nods. "Let's seal the deal."

I think he hints at a round of intense fucking. Maybe it's a thing for kot'olls, which I'm never going to complain about. There seems to be a spark in my pussy and I can't wait to be with him and enjoy him.

We exchange a final gaze and hug before he has to be on his way. While I'd love to have him with me every moment, it shouldn't mean he should get fired so that he has the time to stay with me."

I watch his back as he leaves, going on to hunt the next spaceship that's parked ugly. I think I miss him already.

Chapter 16

Vatok

I think Julie is never going to stop being a distraction.

I chuckle at that idea as I patrol down the streets. Tonight should be just another patrol, but the streets lack the usual mundane appeal. It's as if every corner I round holds whispers of her presence, the memory of her pressing against me as we promise each other to give our relationship a real try.

And she'll look tasty on the bed for me.

I wave my upper arms in the air when no one's watching. I want to get home now, without a single second of delay. But work won't allow that.

She should have waited to tell me something that important. Now, I can't stop thinking about that. While I like my job and patrolling around is soothing in its own way, I'd rather be with her.

Took me long enough to admit to that.

Shaking my head, I refocus. Being a cop requires dedication, attention to detail, and a solid resolve to not let distractions interfere with my duties. Yet, as I glance up at the stars glimmering through the velvet sky, it's hard to ignore the lure of what lies beyond my job.

The sound of a spaceship zooming by breaks my train of thought, reminding me of my duty. I clench my jaw, steeling myself against the memories. No time to get caught in those thoughts. Not now.

As I navigate the streets, my mind drifts back to the moments we shared, magnifying how much she truly means to me. The laughter, the teases, everything that felt chaotic yet perfect had transformed into clarity now. A part of me wonders if I'm ready to embrace this new step, but the hesitancy clings to my resolve.

I steer my skater robot, making sure I look through every corner of the streets. But at a turn, I look behind me. It feels like someone's following me. My arms twitch and the tension in me spikes. It feels like something bad's going to happen, but I have no clue. Maybe I'm too sensitive. There are passersby in the streets, but none are paying attention to me. Even if they are, that's not that strange, given my uniform and the skater robot.

I check the map that denotes my patrol zone and keep going. On the street, with the usual suspects and poor parking practices, I pull out my machine to start scanning. Sometimes, I wonder why beings never learn a lesson.

The silver spaceship I just scanned has been caught parking in an inappropriate location multiple times, but it didn't stop the owner from parking badly yet again.

I'm about to jot down the details when a commotion erupts behind me, drawing my attention. The sound of hurried footsteps and the swish of fabric creates an atmosphere tinged with unease, interrupting my routine with an alarming intensity. My instincts kick in, honed from years on the job. I shift my focus, scanning the area for the source of the disturbance.

A figure darts between the shadows, a hood pulled tightly over their head. My heart races, adrenaline surging through my veins at the sight of them. I reach for my

communicator, preparing to alert my fellow officers, but a flicker of doubt stops me. What if it's nothing? Just a harmless passerby? Yet, the quickening pace of their movements and the glances over their shoulder set off every alarm in my head.

“Hey! Stop right there!” I point my machine at them, even though it isn't threatening on its own.

The figure hesitates, glancing back at me. For a split second, I catch a glimpse of their face, pale and pinched with fear, and then they bolt down a side alley, vanishing into darkness.

Without thinking, I spring into action, my years of training kicking in. “Stop for inspection!” I tap the skater robot and speed my way toward where the being ran.

The alley twists sharply, echoing with the sound of scurrying feet against the pavement. With my heart thudding in my chest, I round the corner, hoping to cut them off. I set the robot to give bright light, shining through the alley. It announces my arrival, but it lowers the risk of someone jumping out of the shadow. It's not a thing when there's no shadow to jump out from.

“Come out! You can't escape!” As I dash deeper into the alley, the tension in the air grows thicker, amplifying the rapid rhythm of my heartbeat. Shadows flicker and pulse around me, the echoes of our surroundings lost in the adrenaline surging through my limbs.

“Stop! This is your last chance!” I call again. It's infuriating how they think they can outrun a skater robot; I won't let them get away—not when something feels off, so dangerously off.

My skater robot glides ahead, illuminating spaces in the darkness. I catch a flicker of movement to my left and pivot sharply. The being stops right before they bump into

the skater robot. I hiss at them. "What are you doing?"

The figure hesitates, the shadows clinging to them like a second skin. "J-Just passing through!" they stammer, their voice shaking.

The immediate inclination is to seize them, to demand answers. The urgency in their breath, the way their fingers fidget nervously against their sides, suggests there's more to this story than a simple stroll. As the skater robot's light casts a glow on their features, I take a moment to assess.

There's a distinct glint of something metallic peeking from beneath their clothing—my instincts tighten like a coil. "What's under your shirt? Show me your hands!"

The being's gaze darts around, panic rippling across their expression. "I swear, I'm not a threat!"

Someone else shouts from behind me. "That's him, officer! The thief!"

Now that makes sense. I point at the hooded being with my baton. "So, what have you done?"

I tap on my phone to call for support. Even though I'm a police officer myself, I'm not tasked to catch thieves. The team who are doing that should handle this.

The being groans. "I've told you this is a misunderstanding."

"No, it isn't. You took a shopper's stuff and ran." The being shows up to my side, a safe distance away.

Hm... I think I recognize him. I've seen this young male before, but I forgot where

and how.

He looks at me. "Officer, you should search him."

The supposed thief shakes his head. "No, there's no reason to."

The patrolling team arrives and they soon take over, putting the suspicious being into their patrolling spaceship.

I fold my arms as I return my baton to my belt.

The one I may have recognized leaves with the patrolling team. It still feels like I know him. How, though?

He gives me a nod as he goes into the patrol ship. Is that for helping to chase down the thief? Or is that for something else?

I resume my own patrol. There'll be time to think...

Wait... Now I remember. That's one of the employees in Efaze's grocery store. Efaze is my elder brother, so I do go to the store at times and have met the male. No wonder he looks familiar.

I'm not that deep into the family business, if I can call it that. Efaze is the one taking over the store from my parents. The rest of us have other jobs. I guess I'm happy I helped Efaze by chasing down the suspicious being.

But... I check my watch. My shift is still not over yet. Time seems to be lagging and it feels so wrong. I want to be with Julie already. Is she already waiting? Is she impatient like me?

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Chapter 17

Julie

I sit on my couch with my feet up on the coffee table. Knowing Vatok will be here after his shift is over makes for good motivation to tidy up. There was a short period of time when he stayed with me most of the time, and I tidied up too, but since we had the small fallout, my place can use another round of tidying up.

What's he up to by now?

I stare at the clock, counting the minutes. From those days prior, I've recited the time slots for his shifts. Maybe we should have figured that out. If we admit to our feelings sooner rather than later, maybe we'd save each other plenty of headaches and heartbroken days.

I fix my ponytail, trying to focus on the present instead.

Now, I just have to wait for him to be back home. I want to hug him and tell him that everything's good now. I don't understand why a big guy like him has that little confidence in himself, but that reminds me of my early days in the bar, starting my job.

I think back to those chaotic nights, the clamor of laughter and clinking glasses echoing around me, the fluorescent lights casting a harsh glow on everyone's faces. I remember the awkwardness of the first customer who dared to approach me. A wild mix of nerves and excitement coursed through my veins even when I thought about it.

It took weeks before I felt at ease, learning to navigate the ebb and flow of the bar like a dancer on a crowded floor. Vatok wasn't there then, not yet part of my vivid tapestry of memories.

Or maybe he was there, on and off. He just wasn't the most attention-grabbing.

I frown and search my memory. How was I able to not notice a big kot'oll like him? And a handsome one?

As the clock ticks, I pull myself back to today. I stand and head to the kitchen, wiping crumbs off the counter and stacking the forgotten dishes. The rhythmic clink of ceramic against ceramic is oddly comforting, a gentle reminder of the days and nights that we spent together. The way he laughs at my terrible jokes, his brows furrow in concentration when he's deep in thought, and how he listens, really listens, when I talk about the absurdities of my day and silly patrons.

There's hope in the air, that electric anticipation as I imagine him walking through the door, the crinkle of his eyes when he smiles, the warmth of his embrace that feels like home.

I glance at the clock again, willing time to move faster.

There's no reason for me to be nervous about waiting for him. Yet...

I've never liked cleaning, let alone cleaning out of boredom. But I have to be doing something before I'll drive myself crazy thinking about him. Even with the cleaning, my mind is still noisier than I'd like.

I put on some music, cranking up the volume to drown out my spinning thoughts. I can't help but smile, picturing Vatok dancing alongside me, his towering form moving clumsily as he tries to figure out where to put his arms.

But I'm supposed to put on the music so that I'm not thinking about him for a brief moment. He refuses to leave my mind. How rude.

What would it be like to wake up next to him every morning? That's going to happen, right?

The thought quickens my pulse, and I allow myself a moment of daydreaming, painting vivid scenarios of breakfast conversations filled with laughter, of lazy afternoons spent in the comfort of each other's presence.

The music shifts to a slower tune, pulling me back to the reality of waiting. The soft notes reverberate through the air, echoing the fluttering in my heart. My thoughts shift to Vatok's soft yet hesitant expressions, his playful banter, and the way he sometimes seems almost vulnerable. It surprises me how much I care for him, how easily he's become intertwined with my day-to-day existence, like the pieces of music surrounding me.

Before I know it, the door clicks open, and the familiar sound of his heavy footsteps wades. My heart races, flipping between excitement and nervousness.

"Julie?" his voice calls, resonant and soothing. My breath hitches at the sight of him framed by the door. His hair is slightly disheveled from hours of work yet striking as ever.

"There you are." I beam as I rush to meet him, wrapping my arms around him in a heartfelt embrace. I cling to him like a koala grabbing a tree. And he really is the big and strong guy who's like a tree that will protect me. His warmth envelops me, and I breathe him in. "You have no idea how much I missed you."

Vatok pulls me closer, his strong arms wrapping around me. "You have no idea how much I missed you, either. You didn't have a shift to work. It was so hard to stay

focused." He pats my back, holds my cheeks, and still keeps an arm around me.

His lips press into my hair, as I rest my face on his chest. My fingers gently stroke his back. I want to feel him, more of him, everything.

"I missed you so much," he murmurs, his voice a deep rumble against my ear. His grip tightens slightly, as if afraid to let me go. I lean into him, my body responding to the intensity of his touch with a rush of heat. Being so close to him, it feels like I can finally breathe for the first time in weeks. He hugs me so tightly that my feet leave the floor. The slight problem with being with a tall and big kot'oll.

As the silence stretches between us, I get lost in his intoxicating scent, in the way his body molds to mine like two puzzle pieces from other worlds. The hug lingers until I pat him for him to pull back. Not like hugging a human who will get tired. Vatok's a big guy and he can hold me up forever. For him, I'm lightweight.

He chuckles. "How are you doing? Gotten bored?"

My heart skips a beat at the realization of... "Fuck... You must be hungry after your shift. I should have prepared something for you, yet..." I turn to the kitchen. At least I can cook him noodles or something. That's nothing like the precious and serious food I should have prepared for such a special day, but...

He pulls me back to him. "I'd prefer having my food on my bed."

His husky, dark voice sends shivers down my spine, buzzing its way to my pussy. I purr. "Am I the food?"

He runs his hand over my body. "Yes. You don't have actual food for me after all, so I'll have to take this."

"Sounds like such a compromise, huh?"

He laughs. I love the hearty vibration in his chest that makes it to me, warming me from the inside.

"Indeed, a compromise." He traces the curve of my waist. "One that I hesitate to call such, for it is better than anything I could ever dream to taste." The heat in his gaze is palpable, his eyes darkening with an intensity I've never seen before. He smacks me lightheaded with his words. The room is suddenly too hot, my skin tingling where he touches.

His hand glides over the small of my back, pressing me closer against him. I gasp as the weight of his body presses against me. My knees wobble under the sheer magnitude of the sensation. I'm so tiny in comparison, my curves molding into the hard planes of his chest. He's so warm, so solid.

His lips brush against my neck, feather-light touches that set my nerves alight. Vatok's hand reaches up to... my hair, gently tugging. My fingers clench against the fabric of his clothes, my nails raking over the muscles I can feel beneath.

"Julie," his voice is a low growl, a sound that sends energy spreading through my veins. "I want you. I want you in ways I've never thought possible."

"Please."

Vatok's hands move up to my lower back before slipping down to my ass, kneading the curves there. I moan. My heart pounds as his touch sends sparks down my body.

"Is that what you want?" Vatok's voice is a wicked taunt in my ear. "My mate." He rocks his hips into mine, his thick cock grinding against my thigh, igniting a fire within me. "To feel me inside you, for us to seal the deal?"

"Yes, please. I've been wanting this. Now there doesn't need to be doubts anymore. I'll know for sure that this is real." I arch my back, craving more of his touch.

"I like how that sounds. Real. You and me. Mates."

I nod. There are still things to be sorted out, but that can wait. As someone who works in a bar, I know for sure that if there's a will, there'll be a way.

Vatok's fingers slide across my skin, trailing from my collarbone down to the waistband of my shorts. I inhale his scent, musky with a hint of something uniquely Vatok. "Touch me," I whisper. "I want to feel all of you."

He picks me up with two hands, then moves the other to get my phone and his phone out of the pockets. "We'll have no distraction at all. Just the two of us."

It surely is handy with four arms.

He goes to the room with me steadily in his arms. I wrap mine around his chest. I want this. I don't even remember how much I actually missed him until now. It makes no sense to want someone this much. Maybe it's for his handsome face, or the hidden softness under the menace muscular build.

He says, "I think this is called a takeaway meal."

I laugh at that. "Silly Vatok."

"Aren't we both?"

He puts me on my bed and joins me on it. I sit up and get rid of his belt. "I don't think this is needed."

"Not sure if I'm supposed to be this excited." He quirks an eyebrow, his laugh rumbling against my chest.

I toss his belt to the side. It's just a regular belt, not the one he has on during his patrol, so it doesn't matter if the thing lands on the floor with a low thud. "Same for me."

I reach for the front of his pants, my fingers running over the thick, hard bulge. Vatok inhales sharply. "Julie..." The urge in his voice is barely contained, a low growl in the pit of his stomach.

"Someone's not that patient, huh?" Though I can't wait to feel him either. I want to grab him and ride his cock already, but maybe I should wait to make this even better.

"I've never been." He flips me over, putting me on the bed on my stomach. "I don't want to wait. It has taken us so long before we're finally mates for real."

"Hey!" I laugh and moan at the same time as he wraps his arms around me, locking my hands to my side while he strips me naked. "This is cheating!"

"What? To make my dinner naked?"

I wriggle under his strong body, but that's not very useful when it comes to getting out of his strong embrace. But it surely is working when he groans.

He hisses with a hint of a smile. "Stop rubbing against my cock with your ass."

"Are you complaining?" I shrug and get out of my clothes as he tugs on them. I move my ass, even more, rubbing against his thick cock. "Do you not like this?"

He cups my boobs and spreads my legs. "I like that. I like this too." He rubs the tip of

his cock against my entrance. I'm already soaking wet. He knows how to mess with me. It feels like I'm exploding from the inside.

"Vatok..."

He laughs. "Maybe you're the one who's impatient."

"Yes, so fuck me already."

"Deal."

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Chapter 18

Vatok

I hold Julie in my arms, pressing against her back with my chest. Part of me doesn't like how I have to be careful so I won't crush her with my weight. I just want to hold her closer, tighter.

There has to be something wrong with me. I can usually keep my calm and cool whatever happens. But when she's involved, I can't control myself.

My cock twitches. "I want you, my mate."

"Yes, we've been talking about that for longer than a minute, big guy."

I push my tip into her tight pussy. I never understand how she's able to take my cock into her when she's more than a few sizes smaller than me. But I'm not going to question a thing when she moans and arches her back for more.

Her slick walls grip me. Every muscle in my body clenches in response, the pleasure threatening to overwhelm me the moment I plunge into her tight heat.

She shudders. Did I go too fast for her? My cock twitches, getting even harder. It almost hurt. I feel like an animal and I need to do something to get the steam off me, otherwise...

I suck in a breath, trying to calm my nerves. Even though my own lust is torture, I

don't want to hurt her, especially with that tight pussy.

"Are you all right?" I mutter, fighting to keep my voice steady. The concern is genuine, but the trembling of my limbs betrays my restraint as I slide deeper.

"Yes..." Julie gasps, her nails digging into the bed. "Don't stop."

And so I don't. My hips rock in a steady rhythm, each powerful thrust eliciting breathless moans from both of us. I take my time, enough how her body squeezes my cock, milking me, giving me more and more pleasure.

I can't get enough of her. I want to claim her, possess her, make her mine completely. Maybe I should have understood that earlier and asked her about our relationship like an actual male. At least she didn't mind when I was strict with myself and not the best with words.

Not like her, who's a natural with her words.

"Julie... you are incredible." I nibble on her shoulder. I slide my hands to her boobs, squeezing her, enjoying the softness.

She wriggles, trying to get more from me. "Faster."

"How's this?" My cock jerks deep inside her, spurred on by her needy pleas.

"Mmm, yes!" A moan escapes Julie as I pick up speed. My thrusts become more aggressive and so do her moans, sounding unbearable. "I'm glad we're here again."

"With you pinned under my body? Yes, I'm glad too. And I can say that I'm satisfied with the food you've prepared for me."

She laughs and the vibration from her chest gets to me, warming me up, and making me thrust even harder into her. I can't stop. I have to keep going. This isn't the first time we have sex together, but this burns me with another sense of urgency.

Julie's laughter morphs into a deep moan as I thrust harder, my hips slapping against her soft flesh. Her body trembles beneath me, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. "Vatok... you're amazing," she manages to tease between moans.

"Only for you, my mate," I growl, leaning down to nip at her earlobe. Her scent envelops me, a sweet, intoxicating aroma that drives me wild. I can feel her heart racing, her pulse quickening as I continue to plunge into her depths.

She reaches back, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer. "More," she demands, her voice a breathy whisper. "I want all of you, Vatok."

I oblige, my hands roaming over her body, exploring every curve, every sensitive spot. I feel her boobs, my thumbs circling her hardened nipples, drawing out a gasp from deep within her. My lower hands grip her ass, steadying her as I pick up speed, our bodies moving in sync like a well-rehearsed dance.

Her walls clench around me, her body responding to my every touch, my every thrust. Pleasure surges through me, threatening to consume me, but I hold back, wanting to prolong this moment for as long as possible.

"You feel so good," she moans, her body writhing beneath me. "I can't get enough of you. I've missed this... missed us."

"We're together now. And I intend to make up for the lost time."

She shivers at my touch, her skin breaking out in goosebumps. "Is that a promise?" She teases, looking back at me with a playful smile.

"A solemn vow," I reply, my voice serious despite the smirk tugging at my lips. I slow down my thrusts, drawing out a groan from her.

"Vatok..." she warns, her voice laced with need. "Don't tease me."

"But you love it when I do."

"Maybe I do. But right now, I just want you to fuck me like you mean it."

I growl at her demand, my hands tightening on her hips. "With pleasure."

I increase my pace, my cock slamming into her with renewed vigor. Her moans grow louder, more insistent, filling the room. I lean over her, my chest pressing against her back, my lips finding the sensitive spot on her neck. I nibble, marking her as mine, while she shudders beneath me.

"Yes, yes, yes!" she chants, her body coiling with tension as she nears her climax. I can feel her getting closer, her inner walls fluttering around me, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

I reach around, my fingers finding her clit and circling it. She cries out, her body shudders as her orgasm crashes over her. Her pussy clenches around me, squeezing me so hard that it is tempting to just fill her up.

"Julie..."

She laughs despite still panting. "You can fill me up if you want."

"Yes, I want that. Have to make you my mate."

"Do it! I want you! Be my mate and never leave me."

She makes me a monster. I thrust deep into her one last time, my cock pulsing as I fill her with my cum. "Yes, mine."

She moans again, her tight pussy squeezing at me. I pinch her nipples and rub her clit, all while I can still hold her throat. She's going to moan that it's unfair to have more hands than her, but she knows she loves this.

"Vatok...! Who would have guessed... I think you know how to use those hands a bit too well."

"I sure do. I'm a kot'oll, after all."

We collapse onto the bed together, our bodies still entwined, our breaths mingling as we come down from our shared high. I hold her close, my arms wrapped tightly around her, never wanting to let her go.

She turns her head to look at me, her eyes soft and content. "That was... wow."

I chuckle, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. "Agreed."

We lie there for a moment, basking in the afterglow, our bodies still pressed together. Eventually, Julie shifts, turning to face me fully. Her fingers trace my chest, her eyes never leaving mine.

"You know, I never thought we'd end up here," she admits, a soft smile playing on her lips. "But I'm glad we did."

I capture her hand in mine, bringing it to my lips to kiss her fingertips. "As am I."

She grins, a playful spark in her eyes. "Right, just as a reminder. While I said you should never leave me, I don't mean physically every single second, so much so you

can't even work your own job."

A stream of heat reaches my cheek. "I get it now. You don't have to repeat that. And I know that you can hold your own in the bar."

She nods as her grin grows even wider. I love that. If letting her tease me means that I can see that smile, I don't mind her poking at me a bit more.

She says, "So, what now, Officer?"

I can't help but smile back at her, my body still throbbing with the remnants of our shared pleasure. "Now, we enjoy this moment, and then... We see where we end up."

Julie's eyes sparkle with mischief. "Oh, you mean like more mind-blowing sex?"

I chuckle, capturing her hand and bringing it to my lips again. "That's certainly part of it. But I also mean exploring who we are together, beyond just the chaos of our lives. It's not just about the wild nights. It's about building something real."

Julie's lips curl into a smile, and she leans in to press a soft kiss to my mouth. "I want that too. I want to know the real you, not just the tough, stoic officer who walks into my bar."

I cup her face in my hands, feeling a surge of emotion that I can't quite name. "We'll build our relationship together, one step at a time. No rules, no expectations—just us."

She laughs, a sound that warms my heart. "No rules? That's going to be a challenge for you."

I feign offense, raising an eyebrow. "Are you doubting my ability to adapt, Ms.

Bartender?"

Her laughter grows, and she rolls on top of me, straddling my hips. "Oh, I have no doubt about your adaptability, Mr. Four-Arms."

I can't help but chuckle at her playful jab. "Well, Ms. Bartender, I guess you'll just have to wait and see how adaptable I can be."

"I look forward to it, Vatok. I really do."

Her lips find mine again, this time in a deeper, more passionate kiss. I let my hands explore her back, her sides, her thighs, appreciating every curve, every line of her body.

As we pull away, breathless and grinning, a sense of contentment wash over me. This is what I've been missing—not just the physical intimacy, but the emotional connection, the playful banter, the shared laughter.

Epilogue

Julie

I fold my arms as I watch Vatok staring at the bottles of wine, with a piece of paper in his hand that has information about what to add to make different cocktails. His brows are furrowed as he tries to identify the words on the bottles. Some are printed in artistic fonts that aren't very legible in the dimmer light of the bar.

I clear my throat after he spends another minute, not starting a thing. "Mr. Officer, the patrons are waiting and the orders are piling up. Are we starting already?"

Vatok turns to me. "Look, I'm watching for the big picture. It's about all the drinks I'll be mixing for the night, not just the order right in front of me."

The few patrons who are my friends at the bar counter chuckle. Vatok shoots them a glance, but they burst out laughing.

Vatok groans, but a smile lingers on his handsome face. He said that I should take a day off on my birthday, but since I didn't call for a day off, he said he'd be the substitute.

I try to stifle a laugh, but it bubbles up anyway. "You know, Vatok, bartending isn't quite like directing traffic. Sometimes you just have to dive in and handle one thing at a time."

He huffs, but there's a playful glint in his eyes. "After I figure out the system, it'll be

faster for the whole evening."

I lean against the counter, a grin spreading across my face. I can't say he's wrong. All the bottles and tools that I'll need are arranged in a way that I know in my heart, which lets me mix and get drinks ready without even reading a label. But for Vatok, it probably looks like chaos. "I suppose it's okay. Take your time. I was hoping you'd be mixing drinks quicker with all those arms."

He huffs as the patrons laugh. "Hey! Don't insult my arms. Wait until I get things going! You should have arranged these in order. It's not fair to have to be checking like this."

"Life's not always fair, Vatok. Besides, they know it's your first time behind the counter. They're just here to have fun and watch you squirm a bit."

He raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. "Squirm? I do not squirm, Julie. I am a kot'oll officer."

The patrons chuckle again, and I can't help but join in. Vatok might be out of his element, but he's taking it like a champ.

I say, "Let's give my method a try. Start with one bottle, okay?"

He scans the shelves, his four arms moving with a grace that is almost hypnotic. Despite his initial frustration, he finds the bottle and sets it on the counter. I step closer, our shoulders almost touching.

"First, we need to measure out two parts of Sakanol. Remember, precision is key in mixing drinks, just like in your traffic regulations." I hand him the measuring cup, watching as he carefully pours the liquid. I don't have to do that myself anymore after countless drinks, but for the sake of the patrons, Vatok should start with small steps.

"Now, add one part of this," I say, handing him a bottle of exotic fruit juice. "It's called a Zorian Nectar. It's sweet and tangy, perfect for balancing the strong taste of Sakanol."

He adds the juice, checking against the piece of paper. "I've never seen you do this."

"You don't see that anymore. Sadly, you weren't there when I first started."

"Hm... Precision like traffic, like parking spaceships, I suppose."

I roll my eyes. There are things that he'll never stop teasing me about too, so much for blaming me for everything.

As he finishes adding all the parts, I hand him a shaker. "Now, shake it up. Think of it as a dance. Let the ingredients mingle and create something new."

He raises an eyebrow at me, a playful smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. "A dance? I thought dancing was not in my protocol."

I laugh, nudging him gently. "Well, consider this a revision of your standard operating procedures. Besides, it's just a shaker."

He shakes the drink, his movements becoming more fluid. When he's done, he pours the mixture into a glass and hands it to me with a questioning look. "Do you think you should try it before we serve it?"

The patron chuckles. "Give it to me. Maybe this will be the next gimmick for the bar — the blind bag cocktail." I take the glass from Vatok and hand it to the eager patron, who takes a sip and grins. "Not bad. Not bad at all!" The patrons cheer, and Vatok's chest swells with pride, a smile spreading across his face.

I lean into him, nudging his side. "See? You're a natural. Now, let's see if you can

keep up with the next round."

He playfully nudges me back, his four arms moving with newfound confidence as he starts preparing the next drink. "Bring it on. I'm ready."

The night continues with laughter and cheers, Vatok slowly finding his rhythm behind the bar. He mixes drinks with careful precision, his initial frustration melting away into determined focus. The patrons are loving every moment of it, and so am I.

It doesn't take long before he knows where the bottles are. He has an arm around my waist, one holding up the paper with the recipes, the other two searching for bottles and mixing drinks.

I can't stop laughing while I enjoy his warmth. Even the patrons are enjoying this.

He grunts as he slings another drink down the counter. "What's with that? You know, there's no other being who can be as perfect as me when it comes to serving drinks." He flexes his two arms that aren't mixing drinks while still holding me. "Even you can't mix drinks while hugging me. Come on."

"Yeah, yeah, you're so perfect for the job, huh? Almost putting me out of a job now." I laugh while the others at the counter boo.

Vatok leans in closer, his arms wrapping around me tighter. "I never thought I'd be on this side of the counter. But it's kind of... fun." His eyes sparkle with surprise and a hint of mischief.

I chuckle, my heart swelling with a mix of warmth and amusement. "I told you. Sometimes, a little chaos is good for the soul. And you, Officer Vatok, are doing a stellar job."

"I have a good teacher."

As the night goes on, the crowd grows more animated, egging Vatok on to try more adventurous mixes. And to my surprise—and his own—he starts to relish the challenge. His four arms are in constant motion, pouring, mixing, and shaking with a fluidity that almost rivals me.

A patron calls out, "How about an Interstellar Splasher?"

Vatok raises an eyebrow, feigning intense contemplation. "That is a serious request. But let's see if we can make some magic happen."

With a playful glint in his molten bronze eyes, he starts preparing the drink. I watch with pride as he expertly combines the exotic liquors and alien fruits, creating a vivid concoction that glows under the neon lights. When he hands it to the patron, the bar erupts in cheers.

The entire bar echoes with laughter and toasts, the atmosphere charged with the joy of shared celebration. Vatok, who initially seemed so out of place, now commands the attention of the crowd with his wit and newfound skill.

I watch him, enjoying the night to the fullest. I swear I catch a glimpse of Targoth here and there, but he knows better by now.

Maybe it has to do with a change in the air, but somehow, he understands that Vatok and I are together by now and there's no chance for him anymore as if there was ever a chance. Even though Vatok isn't in the bar with me all the time, his presence is enough to keep weird and rude beings away from me. I still don't understand, but who am I to complain after all?

Vatok takes a breath when the counter is empty, which may last barely a second before the next batch of patrons come along, seeing the empty counter. "This is pretty tiring, but fun, regardless."

I pat his chest. "I hope you haven't forgotten about our actual celebration for my birthday."

He pecks a kiss on my forehead. "How would I forget about the visit to the animal shelter?"

"And we shall see what you can do with your arms there. Hopefully, no squeaky toys are involved this time around."

He grunts and rolls his eyes. "Come on... The animals just love me. Don't be jealous."

I smack his chest, but I can't deny that. The animals really love him. Maybe because he's good at picking them up and giving them solid hugs that I can't when I'm not as strong. I laugh, "Fine, fine, you win. But only with the hugs, not the squeaky toys." I wink at him, enjoying the playful banter that has become such a natural part of our dynamic.

He puts the bottles and shaker to the side and holds my hands, both of them. The smile fades away, and he watches me with an intense gaze. "You've brought a new perspective to my life, Julie. Something I didn't even know I needed."

My heart skips a beat. "Getting serious out of nowhere, huh?"

He blinks. "Is that wrong?"

"No, not at all."

Sometimes, he does spell out his feelings. Maybe it is more natural for him. Next time, I'll teach him about the meanings behind the drinks. Then he may come up with something to wow me, which hopefully doesn't involve ten drinks in a row just so he can tell me everything he wants to mention because he thinks that a single drink isn't enough.

He smiles, his eyes softening as he holds my gaze. "Good. Because I need you to know how much you mean to me. Before you, everything was about rules, order, and maintaining control. But you've shown me the beauty in chaos, the joy in spontaneity, and the warmth in connection."

I squeeze his hands, feeling a lump form in my throat. "You've changed my life, too. You've shown me that it's okay to lean on someone, to trust, and to let love in. You've been my rock, my partner, and my best friend."

A slow smile spreads across his face, and he leans in, pressing his forehead against mine. "I love you, Julie. With every fiber of my being, with every beat of my heart, and all my arms, I love you."

Tears well up in my eyes, but they're tears of happiness. "I love you too, Vatok. More than words can express."

The patrons around us erupt in cheers and whistles, bringing us back to the present moment. We laugh, pulling away from each other just enough to acknowledge the crowd. Vatok raises two of his arms in the air, a triumphant gesture that sends the bar into another round of cheers.

Maybe Vatok and I, who seem to be coming from different worlds, have finally found each other and will never get tired of telling each other how much we love each other.